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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

18 March 2014

Madam President,

1. We meet today against the backdrop of last week's dangerous escalation in Gaza and Israel, which concluded with a fragile calm. This latest upsurge serves to underscore that the status quo is not sustainable. Eight months since the resumption of talks between Israelis and Palestinians, US-led efforts to present a basis for continued negotiations are ongoing. We are yet again approaching some decisive timelines. Leaders on both sides are confronted with difficult decisions. Public support for peace among Israelis and among Palestinians, both in the West Bank and Gaza, will be tested.
2. The international community's commitment to engage in these efforts on the basis of existing principles has remained steadfast. On 3 and 17 March, the US President met respectively with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian President Abbas in Washington. Secretary Kerry met with President Abbas in Washington DC on 16 March and with the King of Jordan in the first week of March. In late February and earlier this month, Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Cameron made visits to Israel and Palestine and impressed upon their interlocutors the importance of progress on the peace track. Meeting in Cairo on 9 March, the Foreign Ministers of the Arab League reinforced their position that all final status issues be addressed in line with principles outlined in relevant Security Council resolutions, and the Arab Peace Initiative. Quartet Envoys also continued their internal consultations as well as separately with the parties.
3. We have stressed before the importance of tangible steps to improve socioeconomic conditions on the ground, which must go hand in hand, and reinforce, the political process. The need for urgent progress in this regard was acknowledged at a conference in Prague on 8-9 March, jointly organized by the Quartet representative and the US Secretary of State, bringing together some 100 international businesspeople, Palestinian Authority officials and key figures in the Palestinian private sector. Early estimates suggest that economic activity weakened in 2013 in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The IMF projects only a 2.5 per cent increase in real GDP in 2014, well below the growth needed to absorb new job seekers. Unemployment reached 23.4 per cent last year – the highest level since 2010.
4. In February, the Palestinian Cabinet approved a \$4.2 billion budget for 2014, reflecting a 9 per cent increase from 2013. The 2014 budget presents a current deficit of \$1.3 billion and development financing needs of \$333 million.

Madam President,

5. Worrying trends continued in the West Bank. Israeli Security Forces carried out 292 search and arrest operations. Three Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli forces: a Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) activist killed on 27 February in Birzeit, near Ramallah; a civilian Jordanian citizen killed at the Allenby crossing with Jordan on 10 March; and a Palestinian civilian killed that same day near the illegal settlement outpost of Givat Assaf near Ramallah. Subsequent to Prime Minister Netanyahu's expression of regret to King Abdullah of Jordan last week, Israeli President Shimon Peres offered his deepest condolences and regret to Jordan on behalf of Israel over last week's shooting at Allenby crossing. We continue to urge investigations into all such incidents, and note that agreement has been reached to establish a joint Israeli-Jordanian investigation into the Allenby Bridge shooting.

6. A total of 325 Palestinians were arrested, including an alleged al-Qassam Brigades leader in Hebron on 4 March, and 128 Palestinians were injured. An Israeli soldier was also injured. Clashes also continued in and around refugee camps, in particular in Al Jalazun camp near Ramallah, as well as during demonstrations against the barrier.

7. Palestinian security forces defused five unexploded ordinances in different parts of the West Bank between 3 and 6 March. On 5 March, they reportedly took into custody and handed over to Israeli Security Forces an Israeli settler detained by Palestinian farmers while uprooting olive trees near Nablus.

8. Settler attacks resulted in eight Palestinians injured, including two children. On 2 March, a settler vehicle reportedly fatally struck a 66-year-old Palestinian near Ramallah. Settler attacks also resulted in damage to Palestinian property. Some 390 trees and saplings were reportedly vandalized, including some 180 olive trees uprooted near Qalqiliya on 2 March. On 26 February Palestinian stone and Molotov cocktail throwing attacks resulted in injuries to three settlers near Nablus, and material damage to vehicles, including to the vehicle of an Israeli Knesset member near Nablus on 9 March.

9. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics informed on 3 March that construction in the settlements more than doubled in 2013 compared to 2012. We are also concerned regarding any movement toward approval of settlement projects in East Jerusalem. Continued settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territory is contrary to international law and an obstacle to peace.

10. Demolitions continued at a lower scale compared to the previous reporting period. Eight structures, including five residences, were demolished in East Jerusalem, displacing 23 people, including 12 children. We are concerned that in late February, the Israeli authorities issued stop work orders against 18 residential and livelihood-related structures in the Bedouin community of Jabal al Baba, funded by international donors to support the vulnerable community. Over 85 per cent of the residents in this area are refugees. We reiterate the importance of Palestinian access to a fair planning and zoning system.

11. Tensions continued to increase with respect to the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif. A debate on whether to extend Israeli sovereignty over Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif on 25 February in the Israeli Knesset plenary, which concluded without action, was followed by clashes on the ground and by strong Palestinian and Jordanian opposition. We call on all parties to show utmost restraint regarding the holy compound. Provocative acts from any quarter must cease and the sanctity of holy sites of all faiths must be fully respected. The Secretary-General underscores that incitement, whatever its source, poisons the atmosphere for peace. He calls upon Israeli and Palestinian leaders to exercise their responsibilities in halting incitement.

12. We remain concerned about the health of eight Palestinian prisoners on ongoing hunger strike protesting their administrative detention, five of them currently in Israeli hospitals. Administrative detainees should be either charged or released. We have also seen reports that additional Palestinian prisoners and detainees, who had previously announced the start of a hunger strike to begin today, have called off that strike.

Madam President,

13. Turning to Gaza, the underpinnings of the ceasefire understanding continued to be undermined. As mentioned earlier, a dangerous escalation of violence took place between 11 and 13 March. More than 70 rockets and five mortar shells were indiscriminately fired toward Israel, the majority claimed by Islamic Jihad. Over 50 landed in Israeli, fortunately without resulting in injuries. Israel conducted fifteen airstrikes into Gaza in March, resulting in the death of five militants reportedly affiliated with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and injuries to five Palestinian civilians. A 57-year-old Palestinian woman was shot dead by Israeli forces on 28 February during a protest in the vicinity of the border fence, and another two Palestinian civilians were injured in similar circumstances. The Secretary-General strongly condemned the multiple rocket-firing into Israel and called on all actors to exercise maximum restraint. He also deplores the loss of civilian life, under any circumstances.

14. On 5 March, Israeli naval forces intercepted a ship in the Red Sea allegedly transporting arms from Iran to the Gaza Strip. The cargo included 40 rockets (type M-302) with a range of up to 160 kilometres as well as 181 mortar shells and some 400,000 7.62-calibre rounds. We condemn all illegal weapons smuggling and call for the full implementation of resolutions 1850 and 1860. If the allegations of arms shipments from Iran are true, this also appears to be a violation of Security Council Resolution 1747 (2007).

15. At the same time, the economic and humanitarian situation continued to worsen in the context of a tightened access regime and violence both severely affecting the lives of the population in Gaza. Compounding an already dire electricity situation, the near shutdown of Gaza's only power plant was averted by another last minute Qatari contribution of another USD 32 million to procure industrial fuel for the plant. The Qatari contribution is expected to enable the Gaza Power Plant to continue generating some 55MW daily for an additional three months. The current situation highlights the need to advance a sustainable structural solution to Gaza's energy problems.

16. Gaza's unemployment rate is 38.5%. Extremely limited movement in and out of Gaza from Erez and Rafah crossings continues to afflict the civilian population, including patients

awaiting medical treatment. Recurrent drug and medical equipment shortages are affecting the Gaza medical system, further increasing the number of patients seeking referral outside for medical conditions that could have been treated inside Gaza were supplies available. Around USD 250,000 per month would be required to cover the cost of these critical medical supplies. The United Nations is seeking donors' assistance to establish this emergency medical safety net while urging the Palestinian Authority and the *de facto* authorities in Gaza to develop a structural solution to this problem.

17. Meanwhile, work on previously commenced UN projects has not resumed as originally agreed to with the Israeli authorities and about 15 projects worth USD 14 million remain stalled. Another 42 projects valued at around USD 96 million are still awaiting Israeli approval.

18. We fully recognize the complex security dimension of the situation in Gaza, however the price should not be paid by the people of Gaza. In the context of deteriorating humanitarian and development conditions, the United Nations finds it increasingly difficult to provide assistance to the population of Gaza while restrictions on access, including for UN operations, persist and have even increased. We would like to call the attention of the Council to this unsustainable situation in the Strip and appeal to all parties concerned to contribute to alleviating the deteriorating conditions of the civilian population.

Madam President,

19. You were extensively briefed on Syria last week from Joint Special Representative Brahimi. The Secretary-General and Mr. Brahimi also briefed the General Assembly so I will not repeat their clear messages. The situation on the Golan remains volatile with heavy clashes between the Syrian armed forces and members of the armed opposition. Shelling continued primarily in the southern part of the area of separation and the area of limitation adjacent to it. In a recent development on 5 March, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) fired 17 tank rounds towards the village of New Hamadiyah in the northern part of the area of separation. The IDF informed UNDOF that it had taken the action in response to persons placing an unknown "object" at the technical fence, west of the ceasefire line. I also note there were news reports as we were entering the Council that additional clashes injured three Israeli soldiers near Majdal Shams. The upcoming Report of the Secretary-General and subsequent briefing to the Council by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations will provide details of the situation on the Golan.

Madam President,

20. In Lebanon, the Government formed on 15 February submitted its Ministerial policy statement to Parliament and is awaiting a vote of confidence due on 20 March. I am encouraged by the Government's focus on matters such as: respect for United Nations resolutions - including resolution 1701; following up the work of the International Support Group for Lebanon; support for decisions taken under Lebanon's National Dialogue, and recognition of the importance of securing Lebanon's borders, improving security and preparing for the Presidential election process which is due to start on 25 March and take place by 25 May. It remains important that all parties in Lebanon continue to work together in the same spirit under which the new

Government was formed in order to tackle the very significant security and humanitarian challenges the country faces.

21. On 22 February, a Jabhat al Nusra suicide bomber detonated a car bomb at a Lebanese Armed Forces checkpoint in the Bekaa town of Hermel, killing three people including two soldiers. On 16 March another suicide bomber detonated a car bomb in the town of Nabi Othman in the eastern area of Baalbek, killing four and injuring at least ten. Clashes in Tripoli between the predominantly Alawite area of Jabel Mohsen and Sunni neighbourhood of Bab al Tabbaneh broke out once again on 13 March leading to 12 deaths and tens of injuries. Rockets fired into the Bekaa and Syrian Airforce strikes have continued, causing a number of deaths, injuries and material damage in Lebanese towns and villages including Arsal, Labwe and Brittal. We are very concerned about the impact on Lebanon of the fighting on the Syrian side of the border and remind Syrian authorities of the need for full respect of Lebanon's sovereignty.

22. In a letter dated 27 February, the Lebanese authorities said that on 24 February an Israeli military aircraft violated Lebanese airspace, raiding the outskirts of Janta town and firing several missiles within Lebanese territory, in violation of resolution 1701. On 14 March, there were reports of a roadside bomb ambush against Israeli soldiers in the Shebaa Farms area; the Israel Defence Forces reportedly fired a number of artillery rounds across the Blue Line in retaliation for the attack. A UNIFIL investigation is under way. We urge all parties to fully respect the Blue Line, and to refrain from any action that would constitute a violation of relevant resolutions.

23. On 5 March, the Government of France hosted a ministerial meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon in Paris that was attended by President Sleiman and President Hollande. The meeting reaffirmed the international community's commitment to Lebanon's stability and security, including support to its State institutions and policy of disassociation; reviewed progress made on the Group's support agenda for refugees, the Government and the Lebanese Armed Forces; and the meeting called for greater international assistance going forward. Additional contributions were made to the joint UN-World Bank Multi-Donor Trust Fund for Lebanon. The Government of Italy announced its intention to host a senior officials' meeting in Rome on 10 April in preparation for a higher-level conference in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces.

24. The recent escalation in security incidents along Lebanon's eastern border with Syria is affecting humanitarian access. As the conflict in Syria enters its fourth year, Lebanon struggles with its impact, including the presence of a refugee population from Syria nearing one million in need of protection and assistance. The United Nations is engaging with the newly formed Government to help coordinate the urgent humanitarian needs of refugees, as well as consolidate support for the Government's national response through its roadmap for stabilization.

In conclusion, Madam President,

25. Last week, with the situation in Gaza, we came very close to the brink of another crisis in an already volatile region. We should take this as yet another reminder of the need to work together to restore prospects for a durable regional peace. The Middle East still faces an unpredictable future with multiple sources of uncertainty. What is certain though is that the

Arab-Israeli conflict cannot be ignored in shaping this future constructively. The Secretary-General remains convinced that a solution of the Palestinian-Israeli issue, in the form of a negotiated two-state solution, is the best contribution we can make at this time to regional stability.