

**Briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East,  
including the Palestinian question**

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Thank you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to brief the Council. Let me straightaway express my profound admiration for what Karen Abu-Zayd and her UNRWA colleagues were able to achieve in the recent fighting, in extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances.

Mr. President, I visited the occupied Palestinian territory, Israel and Egypt from 21 to 25 January to discuss the way forward with Palestinian Authority Representatives, the Israeli Government and representatives of Israeli and Palestinian civil society, and in Cairo, with Mrs. Mubarak in her capacity as President of the Egyptian Red Crescent, government representatives, and the League of Arab States.

I visited Gaza itself five days after the cease fires, with the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Robert Serry, to launch the humanitarian needs assessment. I expected a distressing situation, but was nevertheless shocked by the degree of human suffering and destruction I saw. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, whose figures have not been seriously challenged, around 1,300 Palestinians were killed, and more than 5,300 were injured. 34 % of these were children. In short, 1 out of 215 Gazans was either killed or injured during the three weeks of this conflict.

While some areas I saw were relatively untouched, in others virtually every building was destroyed or full of holes. Many thousands of people saw their homes destroyed, with thousands more badly damaged – 21,000 altogether, according to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics. At the height of the fighting, over 50,000 people were displaced in UNRWA structures, with tens of thousands more sheltering with families and friends. Widespread destruction was caused to Gaza's economic and civil infrastructure. I saw an entire industrial and residential area in East Jabalia which had been

systematically bulldozed, an area of at least one square kilometer; one of the best schools in Gaza reduced to rubble; and much of the Al Quds hospital in Gaza City burned out. The ICRC reports that in Jabalia, between one and two thousand households are now living in the rubble of their houses. Damage to power, water, sanitation, medical, education and agricultural infrastructure was widely visible. I saw a flood of sewage coming from one bomb – damaged major pipe, forming a lake on residential and agricultural land though thankfully this has now been fixed.

Conversations with a range of Gazans brought out the psychological trauma, as civilians cowered for three weeks, with nowhere safe in Gaza and nowhere to flee to, and parents became horribly aware of their inability to protect their children.

In addition to UNRWA, I want to recognize the extraordinary efforts of Gazan medical teams and first responders and the national and international staff of other UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross and Crescent Movement, despite tremendous risks. Thirteen local medical staff and six UN staff were killed. Thirty four health facilities were damaged or destroyed. Aid workers and premises came under direct fire on too many occasions. I saw the UNRWA compound warehouse still smouldering, and the OCHA office in the UNSCO compound, where my own staff used to work, damaged beyond use.

Mr. President, the reckless and cynical use of civilian installations by Hamas, and the indiscriminate firing of rockets against civilian populations, are clear violations of international humanitarian law. However, even taking into account Israel's security concern to protect its own civilian population, it is clear that there are major questions to be asked about the failure of the Israeli Defense Force to protect effectively civilians and humanitarian workers in Gaza. Given the scale and nature of the damage and loss of life, there are also obvious concerns about a lack of wider respect for international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of distinction and proportionality. There must be accountability.

But it is also important, at this moment, to look forward to what must be done to bring urgent relief. After eighteen months of closure, which steadily weakened health, livelihoods and infrastructure, the humanitarian situation in Gaza before 27 December was already very worrying. My own observation and preliminary findings of the assessment suggest that a

massive humanitarian effort is now needed in areas such as food security, nutrition, water and sanitation, shelter, essential repairs of power, roads and other basic infrastructure, rebuilding the health system, rubble removal, unexploded ordnance and psychosocial care. As one example, 1.3 million Gazans, in almost 90% of the population, now need food aid.

I will launch a Flash Appeal on 2 February a prioritized plan for urgent needs. I hope at least part of the generosity we saw during the fighting in provision of food and medical supplies, and large pledges for future reconstruction, can be channeled into flexible financial contributions to this multilateral appeal. But two basic conditions need to be met.

The first is much freer access for goods and staff. Israel allowed increased shipments of some basic commodities during the fighting, and has continued this since. On good days, 120 truckloads of goods get into Gaza. But the normal daily requirement, including commercial traffic, is a minimum of 500. Many humanitarian workers, including most International NGOs, continue to be refused entry. Moreover, returning to the kind of access restrictions which were in force before the hostilities will be neither acceptable nor workable. If aid workers continue to face rigid limits on their ability to move in and out of Gaza; and if essential items such as construction materials, water pipes, electrical wires and transformers, key equipment and spare parts continue to be effectively banned, or only allowed in infrequently after endless haggling, the lives of the Gazan people cannot significantly improve. The power plant needs almost 500,000 litres of fuel per day to operate normally. Even under today's regimes, the average flow is less than half that. We already see relief goods piling up in Egypt for lack of ready access. And the wider problems of the fragile situation were illustrated today. Following an incident in South Gaza when an Israeli patrol was attacked and a farmer killed, all Gaza crossings were shut down. This stopped today's aid shipments going in, and stranded part of our assessment team.

Commercial goods must also be allowed in, and out, and most urgently the cash needed for normal activity. Gazans do not want or deserve to be ever more dependent on aid. They must be able to work and trade, to rebuild their economy, to use their manifest skills, energy and talent, and to create hope for the future, not the despair that can only breed more violence and extremism.

There are important principles at stake here too, as the Security Council itself clearly recognized in Resolution 1860, which paid particular attention to the unimpeded provision and distribution of humanitarian assistance. Free and full access for goods and humanitarian staff is something we have battled long and hard for in other contexts, such as Darfur and Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis. Moreover, Israel has a particular responsibility as the occupying power in this context, because of its control of Gaza's borders, to respect the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law. It is therefore critical that new steps are taken immediately by the Israeli authorities to move quickly to the sustained re-opening of crossing points on the basis of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access. Many countries support this. The crossings need to be opened up not because Hamas want it or might benefit from it, but because the Gazans need it.

The Israeli Minister of Social Welfare, Isaac Herzog, who coordinates Israel's facilitation of humanitarian assistance, assured me of the Israeli government's commitment to work with the UN agencies and the rest of the humanitarian community to provide emergency assistance to the people of Gaza. We have agreed to put in place new coordination arrangements to this end. However, the minister also suggested that many categories of items capable of dual use will raise continuing security concerns.

Let me emphasise again here the unacceptability of the status quo ante, with a limited trickle of items into Gaza continuing the effective collective punishment of the civilian population – and the resultant counter productive reliance on tunnels for daily essentials, and further build up of frustration and anger. Israel's security worries are understood, but I am confident that the passage of goods can be arranged in a way that will meet reasonable security concerns.

Mr. President, the second condition for a successful emergency relief operation is that it does not become entangled in all the political disputes around Gaza. We must be able to work effectively with the Israeli authorities, cooperate closely with the Palestinian Authority, and deal practically with those in control on the ground, without any of the parties trying to exert political control over humanitarian operations. I was encouraged that Prime Minister Fayyad made it clear that meeting immediate needs should be kept separate from the politics, and that the United Nations and its partners had a unique role to play in this respect.

Clearly the best context for the facilitation of relief and recovery activities, and the only reliable basis for long-term reconstruction, is Palestinian reconciliation, which the United Nations strongly supports, as the Secretary-General has made clear. In the meantime, the United Nations will be working closely with the Palestinian Authority in planning for longer term recovery and reconstruction.

Mr. President, after my first visit to the area, I warned of the growing disconnect between the situation on the ground, particularly but not only in Gaza, and the peace process.

A year later, the people of Gaza have continued to exist in what is effectively a giant open-air prison, without normality or dignity. Their lives have been put at risk recklessly by indiscriminate rocket attacks from their midst, which have also killed, injured and traumatized Israeli civilians in Southern Israel. They have now endured a terrifying assault, and must live with its devastating aftermath.

This is not sustainable or acceptable. It can only lead to more despair, suffering, death and destruction in the coming years, and perhaps fatally undermine the two-state solution we all seek. It must therefore be in the long term interests of all parties, including Israel, to ease conditions for the people of Gaza, by opening the crossings, facilitating the provision of assistance, and allowing them to live, work and hope again.

Thank you Mr. President.