NICKOLAY MLADENOV

SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

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

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(AS DELIVERED)

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

I brief you today as critical intra-Palestinian talks are scheduled to open in Cairo tomorrow. The United Nations, the Middle East Quartet and the international community continue our support for Egyptian efforts to sustainably implement the recent intra-Palestinian agreement and return Gaza under the control of the legitimate Palestinian Authority.

Mr. President,

By signing the Cairo agreement on 12 October, Palestinians embarked on a long road that could lead to reconciliation. First, however, they must solve the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and return the Strip under the full civilian and security control of the Palestinian Authority. If success is to be achieved the failed policies of the past must be avoided, security for Palestinians and Israelis must be preserved, and all sides must be willing to compromise in the interests of peace.

Let me start with the good news.

On November 1st we witnessed a landmark step as the Palestinian Authority regained control over Gaza crossings. And for the first time in more than a decade, on 18 November, the Rafah crossing opened under PA control. The handover has eased access at the crossings for Palestinians with permits and ended illegal taxation imposed by Hamas at the crossings since June 2007.

This handover, if translated into the full civilian and security control by the Palestinian Authority of Gaza, could be a step towards the normalization of movement in and out of the Strip.

Another important step happened on November 2nd when the Palestinian committee tasked with rationalizing and integrating Gaza's public sector, held its first meeting.

Meanwhile, the transfer of responsibility at Gaza-based public institutions is slowly proceeding. As well Ministers of Education, Health, Transport and Environment, among others, as well as technical teams from ministries in Ramallah, have travelled to Gaza to begin restoring Government control. Some 150 PA-employed teachers have returned to work for the first time since 2007. A ten-day registration period for all PA employees in

Gaza began on 12 November, to determine staffing numbers, based on an evaluation of qualifications against needs. The process is proceeding in an organized manner. Some ministries with low numbers of employees have already accomplished the task and the others are expected to finish within the set time-frame.

I encourage all sides to use tomorrow's Cairo meeting to reinforce their commitment to a gradual process of implementing the Cairo agreement, and to ensure that positive momentum is sustained through upholding commitments and ensuring follow-up.

Mr. President,

Regrettably there are also some not-so-good news. Despite progress in implementing the Cairo agreement, Gaza residents have not seen any improvements to their daily lives.

The lack of electricity has been devastating for basic services. Power outages of 18 to 20 hours a day continue; most of the population has access to piped water for only 3-5 hours every five days; untreated sewage continues to flow into the Mediterranean Sea at catastrophic levels; 45 per cent of essential drugs and medical supplies have now reached zero stock in Gaza.

Only the most critical health, water and sanitation facilities are functioning thanks to donor-funded emergency fuel distributed by the United Nations.

As the Palestinian Government seeks to return to Gaza, it should take immediate action to reverse measures that add to the burden of Palestinians living there.

The UN 2017 Gaza Humanitarian Appeal called for $25 million in new funding to meet the most critical priorities – $10.8 million remains unmet. I urge donors to support this appeal to save lives.

Last week Norway, as Co-Chair of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), convened a donor meeting in Ramallah to discuss how to support returning Gaza under PA control.

The discussion focused on three themes. First, the need to immediately alleviate the humanitarian situation on the ground, namely, by increasing electricity supply to at least pre-crisis levels, and accelerating the delivery of projects that have direct impact on the lives of Gaza's residents. The Quartet Envoys have already tasked the Office of the Quartet with producing a list of projects that can be expedited. I encourage donors to do the same. These actions are necessary to sustain support for the Cairo-led process on the ground.

Second, the donors also discussed the need to see a realistic plan by the Palestinian Authority on how it intends to take up its responsibilities in Gaza, which the international community can support financially and technically.

Thirdly, our common goal remains the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza. Difficult issues, including security and putting all weapons under Government control, rule of law and the functioning of the judiciary, civil service reform and other complicated challenges, will have to be dealt with in step-by-step manner.

Mr. President,

Turning to broader dynamics on the ground, I welcome the restoration of full security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, publicly announced on 8 November. This is a positive as coordination is critical to the security of Israelis and Palestinians alike.

In a very worrying development, on 30 October the Israeli Defense Forces uncovered yet another tunnel that extended from Gaza into Israel. During the operation, at least 12 Palestinian militants were killed underground.

According to statements by a spokesperson for Islamic Jihad, the group's aim in constructing the tunnel was to "kidnap Israeli soldiers" and it also stated that it will continue to pursue this goal.

Mr. President,

I call on the international community to join the UN in condemning the continued construction of tunnels and such reckless statements. At a time when Palestinians in Gaza – who have lived with closures for a decade, who have survived three conflicts, and have had to struggle to merely exist – are seeing hope for the future, such actions and statements risk a dangerous escalation that could destroy the prospects for intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

In other developments, on 31 October, a 25-year-old Palestinian man was shot dead by Israeli Security Forces while in his car near a West Bank settlement. The Israeli authorities launched an investigation after an initial IDF probe indicated that the driver did not appear to have been attempting a vehicular attack when he was killed.

On 17 November, two Israelis were injured in a ramming attack in the West Bank; the Palestinian driver was shot and injured also by the security forces.

Violence and incitement remain one of the hallmarks of the conflict and need to be addressed in order to rebuild trust between both sides.

Mr. President,

Turning to the question of settlements, Israeli planning authorities approved building permits for at least 418 housing units in the East Jerusalem settlements of Gilo and Ramat Shlomo. They also issued a conditional approval of 178 housing units in the settlement of Nof Zion located in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Jabel Mukaber.

On November 10th, the Israeli Prime Minister pledged to advance $226 million for the construction of infrastructure in the occupied West Bank that improves the connectivity of settlements to Israel potentially facilitating their expansion.

The UN considers all settlement activities illegal under international law. They constitute a substantial obstacle to peace and should cease.

Legislative action that undermines the viability of the two-state solution also continues, as the Knesset considers a legislative amendment that would require a majority of 80 out of 120 members for any transfer of territory currently included in Israel-defined municipal boundaries of Jerusalem to a “foreign entity”.

Against this background, Israeli authorities demolished or seized 30 Palestinian structures, displacing 53 persons, including 31 children across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Three Bedouin herding communities in Area C, including Ein al Hilwe, Um al Jmal, and Jabal al Baba, are at risk of having a total of 520 structures demolished after receiving “removal of property” orders in recent weeks.

Of particular concern are donor-funded structures serving as schools threatened with demolition.

Mr. President,

Turning very briefly to Lebanon, Prime Minister Hariri’s resignation, while on a trip to Saudi Arabia on 4 November, shocked Lebanon and the region. While new uncertainties have arisen, the people of Lebanon have united behind President Aoun’s call for Hariri to return. Following the Secretary-General’s statement of 5 November, international statements of support for Lebanon’s security, stability, sovereignty and independence has been issued at the highest levels. Prime Minister Hariri is now in Paris and expected to return to Lebanon this week.

Officer-in-Charge of the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, my colleague Philippe Lazzarini, is scheduled to brief the Council on 29 November.

The security situation on the Golan remains of concern. Fighting between the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and armed groups, as well as between different armed groups, in parts of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side continued. In recent weeks, there were reported incidents of spillover fire from the Bravo to the Alpha side and retaliatory fire across the ceasefire line. These developments undermine the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement and have the potential to escalate tensions and jeopardize the long-standing ceasefire between Israel and Syria.

Mr. President,

Let me close with a few observations on Palestinian unity efforts.

I again commend Egypt for its leadership throughout the process.

Many previous attempts to bridge the Palestinian divide have failed. We cannot allow this current effort to become another missed opportunity.

From the outset, I have consistently engaged with Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, the region and all stakeholders. Everyone understands that failure today will destroy hope for the foreseeable future. That division damages the Palestinian cause for statehood.

Two million Palestinians in Gaza have high hopes that the Government's return will improve their lives. After living in abject misery under Hamas control and locked in by the closures, their situation is close to exploding.

With all the difficulties inherent in the Egyptian-led process and concerns about the timing and modalities of the Palestinian Authority's assumption of full civilian and security control of Gaza, the process must not be allowed to fail. If it does, it will most likely result in another devastating conflict. Whether that conflict would be triggered by a meltdown of law and order in Gaza, by the reckless action of extremists or by strategic choice the result will be the same – devastation and suffering for all. This cycle must be avoided at all costs.

All of us, especially Palestinian leaders, Israel and the international community, have an important responsibility to advance the peace efforts. In this context, I am concerned about the implications of the latest developments related to the PLO representative office in the US. Only through constructive dialogue can we hope to advance peace and I call on all parties to remain engaged in the peace efforts.

I believe and hope that a genuine change in Gaza, including full security control by the Palestinian Authority, would contribute to restoring confidence in the feasibility of a comprehensive peace agreement. This is a Palestinian-owned process. All Palestinian factions must seize this opportunity to open a new page for their people.

Thank you.