

MR. ROBERT H. SERRY
UN SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

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

17 September 2009

Mr. President,

1. Before I brief the Council on developments in the Middle East over the past month, allow me to share a personal experience. Last week, I attended the Palestine-Jordan soccer match in Hebron, in the company of the Palestinian Prime Minister, the Governor and the Mayor. Despite all the problems of the unresolved conflict and occupation, which are on painful display in parts of Hebron, so much of what I witnessed that evening filled me with hope. The Palestinian security forces provided exemplary public security. The Palestinian flag flew proudly. The Palestinian people, in their thousands, cheered the home side to an honorable draw with their neighbour, Jordan, whose very presence was symbolically powerful.
2. Today, we have a Palestinian Authority that is more than a partner for peace – we have a player, ready to meet its responsibilities, determined to insist on its rights, and desperately in need of support and enablement – from Israel, from the region, from the world. The Palestinian government is resolved to complete preparation for statehood in less than two years. I am convinced they can do it, if indeed they haven't already. In a few short years from now, any one of our national teams could play soccer against Palestine – not in Area A of the Palestinian Authority, but in a contiguous State of Palestine, a full and sovereign member state of the United Nations, living side-by-side with the State of Israel in peace. We all know the obstacles to this goal, and they can at times seem overwhelming. But it *can* be achieved, and it simply *must* be. The failure to do so would, I believe, deepen the conflict to a point from which it will be very difficult to recover, with profound and lasting consequences.
3. That is why the current moment is so important, and why all parties must cease finding excuses and rise to their responsibilities. United States Envoy Mitchell is in the region as part of continuing efforts towards the early resumption and conclusion of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. These efforts are at a critical stage, and have our strong support. We take this opportunity to remind the Council of the commitments made by the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization to the Quartet in November 2008, which formed the basis of Security Council resolution 1850. We believe that any resumed negotiations should build on that work; that robust third-party support will be helpful to the parties; and that the end goal of a two State solution based on the 1967 lines and the resolution of all core issues can and must emerge quickly and meaningfully.
4. But for negotiations to be enabled, it is critical that the parties commit to and implement their Roadmap obligations. In this regard, continued Israeli settlement activity remains a

source of deep concern. In addition to ongoing construction, Israeli Defense Minister Barak authorized on 7 September the construction of a further 455 housing units in several settlements in the West Bank, including around Jerusalem and in the Jordan Valley. Moreover, the Israel Lands Administration accepted bids on 8 September for the construction of 486 apartments in the settlement of Pisga'at Zeev in East Jerusalem.

5. The Secretary-General issued a statement on 9 September stressing the illegality of settlement activity and calling on Israel to implement its obligations under the Roadmap to freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth, and dismantle outposts erected since March 2001, as called for by the Quartet. We also reiterate the Quartet's call for a cessation of provocative actions in Jerusalem, including demolitions and evictions.
6. Members of the Council will recall the Quartet's support for dialogue among all States in the region in the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative, and we hope that countries in the region stand ready to take positive steps towards Israel if indeed negotiations resume based on implementation of Roadmap obligations. We also strongly re-emphasise the importance of fostering peaceful coexistence throughout the region through the conclusion of peace agreements between Israel and Syria and Israel and Lebanon on the basis of Security Council resolutions, in a manner that is mutually reinforcing with efforts to establish the State of Palestine. In addition, we would urge intensified support to the Palestinian Authority as a point of common regional action.
7. As I indicated in my introduction, the Palestinian Authority has announced on 25 August its agenda to complete the building of institutions of a state apparatus within the coming two years, to form the basis for the creation of an internationally-recognized Palestinian State. This agenda of self-empowerment, reflected in concrete security and economic improvements on the ground and more ambitious plans for the period ahead, will be a powerful complement to a renewed political process, and must be enabled and supported. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting on 22 September will be an opportunity for renewed commitment in this regard.
8. During the reporting period, the Palestinian Authority continued to ensure law and order in West Bank cities and towns. The trend of reduced Israeli military operations evident since June 2009 continued. However, between 20 August and 15 September, 50 Palestinians were injured and three were killed in actions by the Israeli Defense Forces in the West Bank, among them a 15 year-old boy. OCHA recorded 35 settler attacks on Palestinians, some of which occurred in the context of the so-called "price-tag" policy where settlers attack Palestinian communities to resist any attempts to remove settlement outposts.
9. Overall, OCHA reports that 619 obstacles to movement remain in place in the West Bank, including 69 permanently staffed checkpoints. However, Israeli government steps to ease closure measures reported in recent briefings have seen a qualitative improvement in movement and access. During the reporting period, Israel eased the operation of a checkpoint that should improve access to the Jordan Valley. Yesterday, Israel announced that it would begin the removal of 100 earth mounds in several West Bank cities, and UN

staff have witnessed actions being taken in this regard, although most of these obstacles are not included in official UN counting. We strongly encourage the Government of Israel to build on these positive steps with more far-reaching measures consistent with its policy of facilitating increased movement and economic activity. In this context, we remain concerned that Israel has not approved the minimum required frequency for the Wataniya mobile telephone operator, which would allow commercial viability. This is essential for the Palestinian economy and for PA revenues.

10. The Palestinian Authority has continued its reform and fiscal stimulus efforts. The economy grew by 5.4% in the second quarter of 2009, as compared with the same period in 2008. However, shortfalls in meeting recurrent budgetary needs persist. Timely donor support is vital to maintain the liquidity of the Palestinian Authority and help it avoid borrowing from domestic banks and enable it to sustain its reform agenda.

Mr. President,

11. There have also been important political steps on the Palestinian side under the leadership of President Abbas. On 26 August, the Palestinian National Council – the PLO's legislative body – met in Ramallah, the first such meeting since 1988. Six new members were elected to the PLO Executive Committee.

12. President Abbas has indicated his intention, in accordance with Palestinian law, to decree Presidential and legislative elections to be held in the West Bank and Gaza at the expiry of the term of the current Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2010. Hamas has however stated that it will not permit the holding of elections in Gaza before an agreement on national unity is reached.

13. On 10 September, Egypt presented a comprehensive proposal to resolve the outstanding issues dividing the Palestinians, building on seven rounds of dialogue since the early months of this year, and based on the holding of elections in the first half of 2010. We reiterate our call for reunification of Gaza and the West Bank as called for by the Quartet, and urge all factions to engage positively in internal dialogue under Egyptian auspices.

Mr. President,

14. The situation in Gaza remains unsustainable, and not in the interests of anyone concerned. Security Council resolution 1860 contains the elements of a more strategic approach, but key elements remain unfulfilled. As efforts are made to re-launch a meaningful political process, the situation in Gaza cannot be left to further deteriorate and unravel.

15. There is an uneasy informal calm, but it is inherently fragile and violent incidents continue. During the reporting period, 2 rockets and 11 mortars were fired from Gaza, and there were 18 IDF shallow incursions and 3 air strikes, as well as several incidents where the IDF opened fire on Palestinian fishermen. Six Palestinians were killed – two of them children – and 16 injured, while one IDF soldier was injured by a mortar. We continue to call for an end to violence and for full respect by all parties of international law.

16. We note with grave concern that, according to a statement by Hamas leader Khaled Mashal on 10 September, Hamas continues to buy, manufacture and smuggle weapons to Gaza. Extreme radical groups are also active in Gaza. Hamas reportedly arrested some 160 supporters of the radical group “Jund Ansar Allah” in the last days of August after explosives were laid near a key Hamas security installation; some have been recently released.
17. Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit remains in captivity after almost 39 months. We continue to call for access to be granted to him and for his release. Discussions are continuing with a view to securing his release and that of a number of the nearly 10,000 Palestinians currently in detention in Israel.
18. Due to Israel’s blockade, no Palestinian exports were permitted during the reporting period, and there has been no significant improvement in the inadequate levels of access reported in previous briefings. Food and medical supplies make up the bulk of imports. As stressed in a recent report of the Humanitarian Coordinator, immediate humanitarian needs include agricultural inputs, water and sanitation equipment, material for shelter repair, and education material. The urgent entry of these items must be facilitated by the Israeli authorities. The longer-term consequences of the blockade are deeply worrying, in terms of deteriorating public infrastructure, environmental degradation, destruction of livelihoods and incubation of despair and frustration among a population half of whom are children.
19. As the Council is aware, in early June the Secretary-General presented Israel with a proposal for UN-led civilian reconstruction activities in Gaza, beginning with suspended projects comprising housing, medical clinics and schools. The proposal is fully supported by the Palestinian Authority and the Quartet. I have had extensive and constructive high-level discussions with the Israeli government on this proposal. A UN working-level negotiating team, comprising UNSCO, UNDP and UNRWA, has had constant and positive dialogue with Israeli officials on the technical details, including the UN’s monitoring and verification procedures. The UN has left no reasonable stone unturned in this matter.
20. However, I must inform the Council that we have not received a positive response from Israel. This is deeply regrettable. The government cites the continued detention of Gilad Shalit as the key obstacle to allowing even limited civilian reconstruction. I reiterate our call on the Government of Israel to allow without delay the entry of material into Gaza to make a meaningful start in addressing the massive civilian recovery needs.
21. More positively, Israel has announced approval of three UN water and sanitation projects, drawn from a list proposed some fifteen months ago by the Secretary General to the previous Israeli government. As highlighted in a recent report of the UN Environment Programme, underground water supplies in Gaza, upon which 1.5 million Palestinians depend for agriculture and drinking water, are in danger of collapse. Some 80 million litres of untreated and partially treated sewage is discharged into the sea daily, with

potentially grave public health and environment consequences for Gaza, and also southern Israel and Egypt. The approvals given for the three UN projects, as well as to the World Bank for work on a sewage project in north Gaza, can only be a beginning: a considerable scaling up will be required if urgent water and sanitation needs are to be met.

22. Finally, the report of the Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza conflict mandated by the Human Rights Council and headed by Justice Richard Goldstone was released on 15 September. The Mission was tasked to “investigate all violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law that might have been committed at any time in the context of military operations that were conducted in Gaza during the period from 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, whether before, during or after”. The report will be formally presented to the Human Rights Council on 29 September.

Mr. President,

23. I turn briefly to Lebanon. Three months after the parliamentary elections of 7 June, efforts to form a government reached a new standstill on 10 September, when Prime Minister-Designate Saad Hariri stepped down after the opposition rejected his Cabinet proposal. On 14 and 15 September, President Sleiman conducted a new round of consultations with all parliamentary blocs. As a result of these consultations, he reappointed Mr. Hariri as Prime Minister-Designate, and tasked him to form a government. The Secretary-General hopes that the Lebanese continue working towards the goal of a unity cabinet. Allow me to add that it is important to form a Government speedily in order to ensure that the gains for stability in Lebanon achieved through the elections are not eroded by a prolongation of the current political stalemate.

24. Turning to southern Lebanon, on 11 September, two rockets were launched against Israel from the area of Al-Qulaylah. Israel retaliated by firing 12 artillery shells. The firing of the rockets constitutes a clear violation of resolution 1701. UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces have intensified joint operational activities. UNIFIL shared the investigation report into the Khirbat Silim incident with the parties on 11 September. Israeli air violations continued on a daily basis.

Mr. President,

25. I am in close touch with my Quartet colleagues regarding the efforts to create conditions for resumed negotiations and secure the required commitments under the Roadmap; the important statebuilding efforts of the Palestinian Authority; the unsustainable situation in Gaza including the efforts of the United Nations to begin civilian reconstruction; and the broader regional dimensions. There is unity of purpose on all these issues, and a determination to focus all political energies on conflict resolution in the crucial few years ahead. There is an important opportunity to lay the basis for progress as leaders gather for the opening of the General Assembly next week, and Quartet Principals will meet on 24 September. It is above all for the parties to take responsibility and seize this opportunity. Now is the time to make the commitments necessary to relaunch negotiations, and to see them through to a two State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the region.