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

Friday, 21 July 2006

As the Council is aware, I led a mission dispatched by the Secretary-General to the Middle East late last week to explore ways of defusing the crisis in the region. I am pleased to be here today with the other members of my team, Mr. Alvaro de Soto and Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, to report.

Before briefing the Council on our mission, it is my duty first to provide a Secretariat overview of developments since the last monthly briefing to the Security Council by my colleague, Mr. Ibrahim Gambari.

Efforts of mediators to obtain the release of the Israeli soldier captured on 25 June have been unsuccessful to date. Israel's military operation to secure his return and to prevent rocket attacks from Gaza continues. In the course of this operation, the Israeli air force has fired missiles from the air at alleged militants in cars and into residential buildings where they were said to be sheltering. Installations that service the civilian population, including the main power plant and bridges, have been damaged or destroyed by bombardment. Israeli Defence Force tanks also took positions more than one kilometre into the northern, central and southern Strip. The violence is continuing. Today, a family of five was killed when an Israeli tank fired at a house in Gaza, which is at least the second time in the reporting period that many members of a family have been killed.

The Prime Minister's office and the buildings of the Palestinian Authority's Foreign, Interior and National Economy Ministries have been hit by Israeli missiles. In addition, 64 Palestinian Authority officials, including 8 ministers and 21 legislators, have been arrested.

During the reporting period, Palestinian militants fired over 200 rockets from Gaza into southern Israel, striking a number of population centres, including a schoolyard in central Ashkelon.

At least 147 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza and the West Bank, at least 15 of whom were children. More than 450 Palestinians have been injured, at least half of them children. Five Israelis have been killed and at least 25 injured by Palestinian militants, including in rocket attacks.

On the humanitarian front, Israel's destruction of parts of the Gaza power station has left 1.4 million Palestinians without electricity for between 12 and 18 hours a day and has left

municipalities reliant on generators. Water is now rationed at each of the districts, and public health is already suffering, with indications of insufficient access to clean drinking water. Significant destruction was caused to public and private infrastructure, agricultural land and crops.

Access into and out of Gaza continues to be severely restricted. Rafah, the only exit for Palestinians, reopened for arrivals on 18 July, having been closed since 25 June. On 15 July, between 1,000 and 5,000 Palestinians who had been stranded in and near the terminal were able to enter the Gaza Strip through a hole that was blown in the fence by unidentified militants. Karny Crossing has been regularly opened from 12 July onwards for limited periods during the day and for imports only. There have been no goods exported from Gaza since 25 June. Access of United Nations staff to the Gaza Strip is also heavily restricted.

Meanwhile, a temporary international mechanism is being developed. The second window, which provides fuel support costs for the Gaza power plant and other facilities, started on 11 July with the first transfer by the European Union of 300,000 litres of fuel for hospital generators in Gaza.

Last Friday, at a donor meeting in Geneva on the humanitarian situation, many donors said that they would make significant contributions to the revised, consolidated appeal, especially to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

I should add that, on 27 June, Fatah and Hamas reached an agreement on a revised version of the so-called Prisoners' Document on which to base the National Unity Government and reform of the Palestine Liberation Organization. During our meeting with him on 18 July, President Abbas stated that efforts to put in place such a Government are on hold due to the crisis.

I will not report in any detail on the situation in Lebanon and Israel in view of the regular briefings the Council is receiving and the briefing by the Secretary-General yesterday. Suffice it to say that, as of yesterday evening, the conflict had claimed the lives of over 300 Lebanese and 34 Israelis, while injuring over 500 Lebanese and approximately 200 Israelis.

The United Nations has dispatched experts to Lebanon to support the Government and agencies already on the ground in addressing the humanitarian needs of the Lebanese, particularly those in the south, who have been most affected. In extremely difficult circumstances, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon has established joint coordination centres in two locations. However, it has had severe restrictions imposed on its freedom of movement due to the intense fighting that continues and lack of safe passage. The destruction of important roads and bridges in southern Lebanon has made access extremely difficult, if not impossible, in certain cases. It is urgent that the Israeli Government extend its full cooperation by immediately ensuring humanitarian access to those in need.

That concludes the brief overview of monthly developments. I come now to my mission.

I first want to thank the Governments of the United Kingdom and Spain for their generous support of the mission, without which it would not have been possible to cover the ground we did in such a short time.

Upon arrival in Cairo on 14 July, the team met with the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as the personal envoy of the President of the Palestinian Authority and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States. I would like to extend my gratitude to all these leaders for their graciousness in receiving me and the members of my team.

The mission proceeded on 16 July to Beirut via Cyprus, where it had the opportunity to consult en route with the European High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. In Beirut, the mission met twice, on 16 and 17 July, with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri. Both the Prime Minister and the Speaker expressed great pain and frustration over the scope of Israel's military actions in Lebanon, which they said were causing misery to the ordinary people of the country and inflicting serious damage on Lebanon's infrastructure and future economic capacity. Both were almost incredulous that Israel would carry out actions that would, in their view, inevitably help Hezbollah in the long run by increasing misery and radicalizing public opinion. Both pressed for an immediate ceasefire and for action from the international community to assist in achieving it.

Prime Minister Siniora said that as things stood he was not in a position to negotiate a ceasefire himself, as he had no involvement in the initiation or continuation of Hezbollah's attacks, which his Government had disavowed.

Prime Minister Siniora reaffirmed his support for the full implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions. He stressed that Israel's activities were making it more difficult for the Government of Lebanon to act to implement them and to have a Lebanese consensus behind doing so.

The mission left Beirut on 17 July for Israel, where it met the next day with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Vice-Prime Minister Peres and a number of other senior officials. All interlocutors stressed Hezbollah's responsibility for initiating the conflict, as well as its continuing terror attacks against Israeli population centres by long-range rockets. They also said that Hezbollah was financed, armed and supported by Syria and Iran.

They made clear that Israel had decided that military operations would continue until Hezbollah was seriously weakened; this was not, as in the past, a response to a particular incident — the abduction of the two soldiers — but was a definitive response to an unacceptable strategy. They made clear that Israel had decided that military operations would continue until Hezbollah was seriously weakened; this was not, as in the past, a response to a particular incident — the abduction of the two soldiers — but was a

definitive response to an unacceptable strategic threat posed by Hezbollah and a message to Iran and Syria that threats by proxies would no longer be tolerated. It was stated that the Israeli captives must be unconditionally released and that, this time, Israel was not prepared to negotiate with Hezbollah through third parties, which in the past had led to prisoner exchanges.

Israeli interlocutors stressed that they were seeking to minimize civilian casualties and damage to Government and public infrastructure, and accused Hezbollah of resorting to tactics that made it inevitable that civilians would be in the firing line when Israel acted to defend itself. Both Prime Minister Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni stressed that once they felt that Hezbollah had been weakened sufficiently not to pose an immediate terror threat to the citizens of Israel, they would welcome a political framework that ensured no return to the status quo ante and would facilitate the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004) .

From the mission's consultations, it became clear that there are serious obstacles to the achievement of a comprehensive ceasefire in the immediate future. However, the mission sees two vital political goals for the international community in the days ahead.

The first goal is to secure, urgently, some form of cessation of hostilities. This is essential so that captives are protected and released, humanitarian access is ensured, civilian casualties are dramatically reduced, and the political space is opened to negotiate a full and durable ceasefire.

The second goal is to develop quickly the elements of a political framework that would pave the way for a full and durable ceasefire. A return to the situation as it existed prior to the Hezbollah attack on 12 July is untenable. A political package is needed that gives the Governments of Israel and of Lebanon confidence that the horrors each country is now enduring will not be repeated –the end of the Hezbollah threat against Israel, and the full respect by all Lebanese parties and all Lebanon's neighbours of the Government of Lebanon's sovereignty and control. It is difficult to envisage a sustainable ceasefire without such a political framework.

The team discussed with the parties a number of elements that might provide a framework to end the crisis. Yesterday the Secretary-General outlined these in his briefing to the Council.

I should stress that, in developing these ideas and conducting initial consultations on them with the parties, it was made clear that these would require further discussion and elaboration.

It was also pointed out that the planning and implementation of these elements should, as far as possible, be done in parallel.

In responding to these ideas, Prime Minister Siniora was clear that any steps to defuse the crisis required an internal Lebanese consensus. However, he stressed repeatedly that he

now felt that any process to reassert the sovereignty of the Government of Lebanon over the entire country must address what he termed the "core issues", such as the issue of Sheba'a. In responding to these ideas, Prime Minister Siniora was clear that any steps to defuse the crisis required an internal Lebanese consensus. However, he stressed repeatedly that he now felt that any process to reassert the sovereignty of the Government of Lebanon over the entire country must address what he termed the "core issues", such as the issue of Sheba'a Farms.

For their part, Prime Minister Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni were adamant that the prisoners must be returned, unconditionally, and not made part of a negotiating process. They would consider any proposal that would help guarantee that Israel would not be vulnerable to terrorist rocket attack along its northern border, through the Government of Lebanon deploying in the south and the disarmament of Hezbollah and other militant groups.

I wish to add that, on my way back from the region, the team met the Spanish Foreign Minister. It also met this morning the Secretary of State of the United States in advance of her visit to the region.

Before concluding this briefing, allow me to add a few words about our consultations with President Abbas in Gaza. As the Secretary-General reported yesterday, apart from the deep humanitarian and security crisis that affects the people of Gaza every day, President Abbas focused our attention on the need for a political path forward.

He was particularly concerned that the current crisis in Lebanon involved, among other things, an attempt by non-Palestinian extremists to hijack leadership on the Palestinian issue. He felt it was important to de-link the crises and for the Palestinian issue to be addressed, urgently and creatively, on its merits. He left us with a powerful impression that the international community has work to do in assisting the parties to develop a credible political framework that can show the path towards what the G-8 calls the root cause of the problems of the region — the absence of a comprehensive Middle East peace.

The Secretary-General and the Secretariat are working on the political, peacekeeping and humanitarian fronts to respond to this deep regional crisis. We would welcome a united stance by the Security Council.