

SC Press Messages in Gaza, 25 November:

I am today in Gaza on behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations who was distressed that conditions during his recent visit so shockingly resembled the situation during "Operation Cast Lead". He has sent me here out of his concern particularly for the impact on the civilian population. I have today witnessed the destruction caused by the fighting and will report back to him. I have visited refugee families – UNRWA beneficiaries – and extended my condolences as they lost several of their members in an Israeli airstrike. I also saw a newly built UNRWA school which was badly damaged in the fighting. And I spoke to Gazan fishermen of the local cooperative whose office building was also impacted by the fighting.

Many innocent people, including children and women, have lost their lives in this latest vicious cycle of violence. I express my sincere condolences and sympathies to all the families of victims and injured. It is unacceptable for civilians on both sides to live in fear of the next strike. All parties must ensure the protection of civilians at all times.

The UN is prepared to help facilitate all efforts in this regard. The Secretary-General has instructed me and the rest of the UN system to urgently activate recovery and humanitarian assistance in Gaza and step up our existing support. My Deputy will shortly brief you on those efforts. I also welcome UNRWA Director Bob Turner, who will brief you on UNRWA's important efforts.

Meanwhile, I have just returned from Cairo where discussions are ongoing on solidifying the understanding reached on the ceasefire. The truce agreed on 21 November resulted from an intense diplomatic effort which included the Secretary-General's emergency visit. The Secretary-General has welcomed the agreement, and Egypt's leadership role in bringing this about. He has also appealed to parties to respect the understanding reached and commit to its full implementation. At his request, and in continuation of his engagement, I agreed with my Egyptian counterparts to intensify our cooperation to make the understanding work.

The agreement calls first for an immediate and reciprocal cessation of hostilities. The calm has largely held despite few rockets fired in the hours following the agreement and renewed shooting incidents along the fence inside Gaza which already claimed the life of one Palestinian demonstrator. It is now first and foremost paramount that parties respect the calm and avoid any further escalation. Security must come first.

It is also critical that parties allow time for other elements of the understanding to be worked out. Next steps still require difficult work to finalize the details left open in the agreement for a durable ceasefire to take hold over the longer term. This will not be easy but we need to give parties a chance. Where we can assist the parties, we must do so.

It is painful that despite consistent warnings we came so dangerously close to a repeat of Operation Cast Lead 4 years ago. The devastating round of violence is a stark reminder that the status quo is unsustainable. This is at long last the opportunity to address the underlying causes of conflict captured in Security Council resolution 1860. Core elements of the resolution remain unimplemented. These include a full

opening of crossings and an end to weapons smuggling. The Understanding provides a mechanism to address crossing operations, access to the security buffer zone near the fence, and fishing limits. SCR 1860 also calls for long-term security arrangements that include ending the smuggling of weapons. Progress in this regard will also be very important.

The terms of the ceasefire provide a window of opportunity on lifting the blockade. I am pleased to note hopeful signals that the implementation will soon start in earnest: According to an official Egyptian announcement, the parties have already agreed, in principle, to the extension of the maritime fishing limit to 6 nautical miles. While the details will need to be worked out in ongoing discussions, this is already a significant result. The fishermen this morning told me that after years in which their livelihoods have been severely affected by the maritime fishing limit at only 3 nautical miles, they are now hopeful that the line will soon move further out and help them improve their catch.

But this step is not sufficient on its own. More needs to be done with respect to crossings and freedom of movement. As a concrete measure of progress, we hope to see soon a liberalization of import of construction material, including aggregate, bars and cement (ABC) through existing crossings. Exports from Gaza, including transfers to the West Bank, should also become part of ending the closures.

We now have no excuse not to push for the full implementation of resolution 1860 in all its aspects. The resolution also calls for tangible steps towards Palestinian reconciliation. The Secretary-General has continually supported efforts for Palestinian unity and the work of Egypt in this regard. It is my hope that the crisis in Gaza has also created an opportunity to finally overcome differences in very tangible ways. I know that people both here in Gaza and in the West Bank expect nothing less from their leaders.

At the same time, the Secretary-General has called for a meaningful political process. A negotiated two-state solution ending a prolonged occupation is more crucial than ever. The aspiration of the Palestinians for a viable independent state is legitimate and must be realized, or else we risk sliding back to another cycle of violence. As the Secretary-General has stated, a Palestinian state is long overdue.

That is why the United Nations will continue its efforts in support of progress on the ground in parallel with diplomatic progress. I will be traveling to New York later this week to brief the Security Council on the situation here. The peace process, as we all know, is on life support, and I will stress to the Council the urgent need to revitalize prospects for a negotiated two-state solution.

In conclusion, I reiterate the Secretary General's conviction that resorting to violence and military means will only lead to more suffering and destruction. As much as we expect Israel to abide by the understanding on the ceasefire and exercise utmost restraint, our message today to the Hamas leadership is also to abide by its commitments to stop all hostilities, including rocket attacks and attacks along the border. This would be an important step for Hamas towards becoming a partner for peace – first and foremost, in the interest of the people of Gaza.