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developments in the occupied Palestinian territories, the Palestinian bid for statehood, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, as well as on the 5 August 2012 violence on the Sinai-Israel border. He also spoke on the Syrian situation and its effects on Lebanon (not excerpted here). The complete document (document S/PV.6824) is available through UNISPAL at www.unispal.un.org.

Mr. President,

As we approach the one-year mark since the Security Council was presented with the Palestinian application for membership in the United Nations, we must work to ensure that the occasion is used in a constructive manner to encourage progress towards meaningful dialogue. Last September, the Middle East Quartet put forward a framework for negotiations (see SG/2178) that required systematic progress on core issues. The Quartet envoys have remained in close contact with the parties and one another, including in Geneva on 14 August, in order to assess the situation and the Quartet's future steps. While direct exchanges have continued, in an effort to agree to terms that would create an environment conducive to talks, we are concerned that we have not yet seen the progress necessary for sustained negotiations that could lead to successful outcomes.

At the same time, Israeli and Palestinian Authority representatives have been meeting to identify ways to enhance Palestinian Authority revenue capture by reducing illegal trade and tax evasion. On 31 July Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and Israeli Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz signed an agreement. New measures include the introduction of advanced technologies aimed at improving monitoring of the flow of Palestinian imports through Israel, and the construction of pipelines for transferring petroleum products directly from Israeli ports. Implementation of the measures is expected to begin in January 2013. In another positive development, 6,000 new permits are expected to be approved for Palestinians to work in Israel, bringing the total to 30,500. These are welcome steps that follow others reported

A3. UN UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS JEFFREY FELTMAN, BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST, NEW YORK, 22 AUGUST 2012 (EXCERPTS).

The following is the first Middle East briefing to the Security Council by the newly appointed UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman. A career U.S. Foreign Service officer who previously served as U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs and prior to that as U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, Feltman took office 2 July 2012. Feltman was the sole speaker to the Security Council meeting on "the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question." Excerpted here are his remarks on

previously, and we encourage continued positive gestures. . . .

While in the short term the international community may not be in a position to succeed in helping the parties bridge their political differences, it is critical that all those countries that are committed to helping the Palestinians achieve their legitimate aspirations for statehood focus their attention now on addressing the difficult fiscal and economic situation of the Palestinian Authority. . . .

Those who suffer from financial shortages in the Palestinian Authority are first and foremost the Palestinian people.

A central aspect of the Palestinian Authority's continuing fiscal crisis is a decrease in foreign aid and the failure of donor countries to fulfill financial pledges to the Palestinian Authority in a timely manner. As a result, the Palestinian Authority has faced difficulties in paying full salaries to its employees on time. The Ministry of Health has also launched an appeal for support in addressing a severe shortage of essential medicines and drugs at the central medical stores.

The fiscal crisis is being compounded by a decrease in economic activity. The first quarter of 2012 saw the economy contract by 3 per cent compared to the previous quarter, mainly due to slowdowns in construction and agriculture. Unemployment increased to 24 per cent. A recent World Bank report on Palestinian economic sustainability noted that reversing that negative economic trend will require greater efforts to enable economic activity throughout the West Bank and Gaza, including through a further easing of restrictions in order to allow the private sector to develop.

Private-sector-led economic growth is the key to decreasing the Palestinian Authority's dependence on foreign aid, as is slowing the growth of its spending. The World Bank highlighted the centrality of economic growth for Palestinian State-building; without it, State-building progress could be at increased risk. We repeat our urgent call on donors, particularly Gulf countries, to help tackle the Palestinian Authority's deepening deficit problems. All countries that tirelessly promote the Palestinian

cause in international forums will have an opportunity at the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting to demonstrate in a tangible, practical way their support for the Palestinian people and for the institutions of a Palestinian State to enable them to thrive.

The reporting period witnessed continued settlement construction. On 12 August, Israeli authorities announced the approval of a housing project within the settlement of Maale Adu-mim, east of Jerusalem. A total of 150 housing units will be demolished and replaced by 750 new housing units. On 16 August, Israeli authorities published a tender for 130 housing units in the East Jerusalem settlement of Har Homa. As the Quartet has stated on numerous occasions, any Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank cannot prejudice the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognized by the international community. Any settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, is contrary to international law and should be brought to a halt. . . .

We continue to be concerned by the ongoing policy of demolitions and forced evictions implemented by the Israeli authorities in Area C and East Jerusalem, and we will pursue our dialogue with Israeli authorities in that respect. I am also worried about the continuous restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities on the provision of humanitarian access to Palestinian civilians affected by, or at risk of, demolitions and forced evictions in Area C of the West Bank. Since the beginning of 2011, the Israeli authorities have demolished a total of 162 items and structures in Area C that were funded by humanitarian donor countries, including temporary shelter assistance, water cisterns and animal sheds. Demolition orders have been issued, but not yet implemented, against 142 others. Additionally, since the beginning of 2012, there were at least 15 incidents in which relief items were confiscated by the Israeli authorities.

Four Palestinian prisoners in Israeli administrative detention continue to be on hunger strike. There are concerning reports that the detainees are being mistreated, while one of them is

reportedly on his eighty-seventh day of a hunger strike. We call on the Israeli authorities and the detainees to find an agreement that would permit the immediate ending of their hunger strike and for the prisoners to be well treated, in line with international law. . . .

Let me now turn to the serious events that took place on 5 August in the Sinai at the border with Israel. Terrorists attacked an Egyptian security post near Kerem Shalom, killing 16 Egyptian border guards as they broke their Ramadan fast. The attackers subsequently breached the Israeli border, in what appears to have been an attempt to kill Israelis. Israeli security forces intercepted the attack, and Egyptian authorities have stepped up their efforts to prevent a recurrence of such attacks and to increase security in the Sinai.

The Secretary-General strongly condemned the terror attack. Coming nearly a year after a similar incident in the south Sinai that resulted in both Israeli and Egyptian deaths, that latest attack is a sobering reminder of the need for all of us to remain focused on maintaining and strengthening regional peace and security.

In a related development, Egyptian authorities immediately closed the Rafah crossing with Gaza following the 5 August attack as part of a security operation that also involved the dismantlement of a number of tunnels. In the meantime, the crossing has been periodically reopened to permit travel for humanitarian cases. The potential undue humanitarian impact of the developments in and around Gaza this month should be considered as well. Given the already difficult conditions of Gazans, the basic rights of the people of Gaza must be protected, including the ability to move in and out of Gaza for legitimate religious, educational, work, medical and other purposes, and to ensure the continued availability of basic living essentials, including for development. On 15 August, one Grad missile fired from the Sinai landed near Eilat, in southern Israel.

The events in the Sinai, as well as the continued rocket fire from Gaza, one Israeli air strike and five IDF

incursions, underline the fragility of the situation in Gaza. The Israeli air strike took place on 5 August when the IDF targeted two alleged militants riding a motorbike in Rafah, killing one and injuring the other. A short escalation followed, which included the firing of mortars and Qassam missiles into the area of Kerem Shalom. One Palestinian civilian was injured during the IDF incursions. In all, 35 projectiles were shot from Gaza into Israel during the reporting period, including one Grad missile and other shorter-range projectiles. We strongly condemn the indiscriminate firing of missiles from the Gaza Strip. Israel must also show maximum restraint.

To revive the Gazan economy, restrictions related to the closure of the Gaza Strip have to be relaxed, allowing for trade between Gaza and the West Bank, Israel and other countries. As was noted in last month's briefing (see S/PV.6816), United Nations reconstruction work is having a positive, but short-term, impact on employment. We are working with the Government of Israel to approve United Nations projects on a regular basis: \$360 million worth of projects has been approved, and projects worth \$85 million are currently pending approval. We also continue to urge the Government of Israel to allow the unrestricted import of key building materials, in order to allow for the more effective implementation of reconstruction work in Gaza. It is worth noting that most of those materials continue to be readily available in the Gaza Strip from the illegal tunnel trade. The recent release of 20,000 tons of construction materials for the private sector in Gaza is a welcome move, and we encourage Israel to further ease the present restrictions. In addition, we urge donors to continue to fund United Nations reconstruction work in Gaza through the Palestinian Authority-United Nations Trust Fund.

Palestinian factions remain deadlocked on the way forward towards reconciliation, especially with regard to the implementation of previous agreements. The sequence of elections remains a central point of division. The Palestinian Central Elections Committee initiated a voter registry update in the West

Bank from 5 to 9 August ahead of the local elections scheduled for 20 October 2012. We continue to support efforts to promote reconciliation through Egyptian auspices, under the leadership of President Abbas and within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the positions of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative. . . .

Despite the current stagnation in the negotiating process and the obstacles to be overcome, it is clear that the two-State solution remains the best available and most realistic option for the Israelis and Palestinians. It is the view of the United Nations that not only the parties themselves but all Member States have the responsibility to consider their actions and their language in the light of that goal. All Member States can ask themselves a simple question as to whether a certain course of action brings the Israelis and Palestinians closer to a two-State solution or makes that goal even harder to achieve in practice. Language that calls for the destruction of one of the parties is unacceptable and undermines the ability of the Palestinians to achieve their stated goal of an independent State living side by side in peace and security with Israel. The Secretary-General has been clear that all leaders in the region should use their voices at this time to lower, rather than escalate, tensions.

In conclusion, allow me to underscore that regional developments add urgency to the need to overcome the persisting stalemate in the Middle East peace process. The United Nations remains committed to work for a comprehensive resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of Security Council resolutions, the Madrid principles, including land for peace, the road map, and the agreements previously reached between the parties. While prospects for peace seem to grow dimmer we, as the United Nations, continue to hope that leaders on both sides will recognize and seize the historic opportunity that is now before them to start seriously working towards the goal of reaching a peace agreement that meets the legitimate aspirations and fulfills the rights of the people on both sides.