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**8 JANUARY 2009**

**Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General**

Good afternoon, all.

\*\*Guests at Noon

Our guests at the noon briefing today are, again, John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator; and John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.  They will [brief](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090108_Gaza.doc.htm), of course, on the situation in Gaza.  And we’ll get back to John, who is right here with us, in a few minutes.

Following the noon briefing, General Assembly President Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann will also [brief](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090108_dEscoto.doc.htm) on the situation in Gaza.

\*\*Secretary-General’s [Statement](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12040.doc.htm) on Gaza

The Secretary-General condemns the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) firing on a United Nations aid convoy in Gaza, the killing of two UNRWA (UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) staff in separate incidents and the injuring of a contract worker.  Since the conflict began 13 days ago, four UNRWA local staff have been killed.  The United Nations is in close touch with the Israeli authorities about full investigation of this and other incidents, and about the need for urgent measures to avoid them in the future.

The Secretary-General calls once again for an immediate ceasefire in order to facilitate full and unhindered humanitarian access, and to allow aid workers to work in safety to reach persons in need.  UNRWA has been forced to suspend food distribution, as it cannot guarantee the safety of its staff.  The inability of the United Nations to provide assistance in this worsening humanitarian crisis is unacceptable.

This is a statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General.

\*\* Gaza

The Secretary-General continues his around-the-clock efforts with world leaders to achieve an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.  He is appealing urgently to the Security Council to come to a binding agreement to this effect, so this devastating violence can be brought to an end.  Those efforts continued this morning with calls to Prince Fahd, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, and he is trying to reach Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.  Yesterday, the Secretary-General’s many discussions included meetings with the United States Secretary of State and the Foreign Ministers of the United Kingdom, Egypt, France, Jordan, Norway, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

On the ground, the UN Relief and Works Agency reports that the situation is dire, with 1 million people at least in Gaza without electricity and 750,000 people without water.  You’ll get more information from John in a few minutes.  All the hospitals in Gaza are running on emergency generators 24 hours a day.  UNRWA has food supplies for some days, not weeks.  The Agency underscored the problems it has in distributing aid.  In addition to the attacks on its own personnel, UNRWA says that the only company authorized to pick up and distribute goods in Gaza has also had its personnel shot at twice over the past 24 hours.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres this morning told the Security Council, in an open [meeting](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sc9566.doc.htm), his concerns that Gaza’s civilian population is not allowed to flee to safety elsewhere.  He reasserted his call for a strict adherence to humanitarian principles in and around Gaza, including respect for the universal right to seek and receive asylum.  He will speak to you at the stakeout after that meeting.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization, in a press release, says that health services in Gaza are on the verge of collapse, if steps to support and protect them are not taken immediately.  UNICEF said it used today’s three-hour ceasefire to provide some 560 family water kits and five health kits to families in Gaza.

And, in a letter to Israel’s Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyo Akasaka requested that the Israeli Government ensure immediate access for international journalists into Gaza.  He recalled Security Council resolution 1738, in which the Council urged all parties involved in situations of armed conflict to respect the professional independence and rights of journalists.

You will have, of course, quite a bit more from John on the ground and from John Holmes, when he gets here in a few minutes.

\*\* Lebanon

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) today confirmed that at least three rockets were fired into Israel from the general area of Tayr Harfa, in south Lebanon.  The Israeli Defense Forces returned fire with a few artillery rounds directed at the location from where the rockets originated.  In coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces, UNIFIL has taken immediate measures to identify the perpetrators of this attack.  There has been no claim of responsibility.  Additional troops have been deployed on the ground, and patrols have been intensified across UNIFIL’s Area of Operations to prevent any further incidents.  The Lebanese Armed Forces have also decided to deploy additional units in the south in order to further enhance security in the area.  UNIFIL is investigating the circumstances of the incident, in close cooperation, as I said, with the Lebanese Armed Forces.

General Claudio Graziano, UNIFIL Force Commander, is maintaining close contact with the parties and has called for maximum restraint in order to prevent any escalation of the situation.  The parties reassured the Force Commander about their continued commitment to maintain the cessation of hostilities, in accordance with Security Council resolution 1701.

And this is all I will have for you.  I will take your questions briefly and as soon as Mr. Holmes gets here, we’ll start.  And you have other information, of course, in our highlights today, the way we did it yesterday, since the situation and all your eyes are focused on Gaza.

\*\*Questions and Answers

Question:   Michèle, you mentioned that there was no claim of responsibility for the firing of the rockets from Lebanon.  Do I understand correctly that there is a claim of non-responsibility on the part of Hizbullah?  They said… they even condemned the firing of these rockets.

Spokesperson:     Well, I have read it, like you have, in the press, yes.

Question:   As you indicated, the firing of rockets from Lebanon into Israel and the firing of mortars from Israel into Lebanon –- does the Secretary-General think that the situation in Gaza is threatening international peace and security in the region?

Spokesperson:     Well, at this point, they are assessing the situation, they are assessing –- you know -– that incident on the Lebanese border.  But as far as I know, it’s a limited incident, and we are not reaching that point yet.

Question:   Can you remind me how much assistance UNRWA provides in the form of food distribution?  Is it…?

Spokesperson:     Well, we are going to have the Director of Operations.  Right now, he is with you, and you can get that question answered in a few minutes.

Yes, Matthew.

Question:   I am sorry if I missed this -– I want to apologize in advance, but has Ban Ki-moon… does he support this call by UNRWA for an independent investigation of the bombing of the UNRWA school?

Spokesperson:     Yes, you heard –- there was a statement earlier about… not only about the UNRWA school.  Of course, he supports that request.

Question:   And also, one non-Gaza thing, could you confirm -– it’s been reported that the Tanzanians are sending some 600-800 troops to UNAMID -– is that something you can confirm?

Spokesperson:     I can check with UNAMID for you, Okay?  So we can get an answer on that.

Now, I have an announcement:

The Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Kemal Dervis, has conveyed to the Secretary-General his intention to leave the position of Administrator on 1 March 2009, due to personal and family reasons.  The Secretary-General has accepted Mr. Dervis’ decision with regret and will initiate the process of selection to identify a suitable successor.  The Secretary-General is deeply grateful to Mr. Dervis for the services he has rendered to the Organization, and for so ably leading UNDP at a critical juncture.  The Secretary-General is particularly appreciative of the great leadership displayed by Mr. Dervis in the implementation of his mandate.  Under his leadership, UNDP programmes in support of developing countries expanded substantially over the last four years and made solid progress in the Delivering as One agenda, concerning the UN’s development work at the country level.

There is, of course, an announcement from UNDP, as well, which you can find upstairs.

Question:   I have a question regarding the disappearance of the United Nations Envoy to Niger, Robert Fowler, and his assistant Louis Guay.  I was wondering if the United Nations had anything new on that.  It has been many weeks now.  Do you know something more about it?

Spokesperson:     No, we don’t.  We don’t.  The question was asked the day before yesterday –- I don’t have anything new on that.

Question:   I just wanted to ask what the thinking of the Secretary-General is:  last time there was an UNDP Administrator chosen under Kofi Annan, they actually released a short list.  They said who the candidates were, who were being considered, so it could all be a sort of transparent process.  Do you think that will be followed in this new case of UNDP?

Spokesperson:     Well, we’ll see.  I don’t have the answer for you now.  I just got the announcement, I don’t have the answer for you on the follow-up to that announcement and the choice of a successor to Mr. Dervis.  And, of course, you can ask more questions from UNDP.

Question:   It is the Secretary-General that nominates, right?  Runs the process of choosing the new…?

Spokesperson:     The process is run by the Secretary-General, of course, with the administrative board of UNDP, of course.

Question:   On the question of the independent investigation of the deaths at the school in Jabaliya in the north of Gaza City –- has an independent commission been established and has the Secretary-General asked the nations that have look-down satellite capabilities if they would provide the photographs, which might indicate whether there was artillery fire, mortar fire, or RPG fire coming out of that school as a provocation to the Israelis?  What the truth of the matter is from a technological, satellite point of view –- has that request been made?

Spokesperson:     For the moment, no.  There has been a request for an investigation by the Israeli Forces -– to Israel, but that’s all we have at this point.  We don’t have an independent investigation set up yet, or requested at this point.

Question:   I just want to make sure, coming back to my previous question, what is the United Nations position -– are we in a wait-and-see position now, or what are the actions that the United Nations is doing or can do?

Spokesperson:     You are talking about Mr. Fowler?  We are working very closely with Ottawa and the Canadian Government on this issue and as soon as we have additional information, we’ll get that information to you.  A lot is being done to try to find out what happened and where they are.

Thank you so much.  John?

[Following the briefing, the Spokesperson read out the following [statement](http://www.un.org/press/en/2009/sgsm12041.doc.htm):]

\*\*Statement Attributable to Spokesperson on Lebanon Firing Rockets against Israel

The Secretary-General strongly condemns the firing of rockets against Israel from southern Lebanon on 8 January.  Israel Defense Forces returned fire with several artillery rounds directed at the location from where the rockets originated.  UNIFIL is investigating the circumstances of the incident in close cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces.  The Secretary-General is relieved that today’s incident did not escalate and urges both parties to exercise maximum restraint.  He takes the opportunity to remind the parties of their obligation to fully adhere to Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) and respect the cessation of hostilities agreement.

Thank you very much.