

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
(as delivered)**

New York, 31 December 2008

Mr. President, distinguished members of the Council, excellencies,

A dramatic crisis in Gaza and southern Israel has now reached its fifth day.

The civilian population, the fabric of Gaza, the future of the peace process, stability in the region, and goodwill among people throughout the world: all are trapped between the irresponsibility displayed in the indiscriminate rocket attacks by Hamas militants and the disproportionality of the continuing Israeli military operation. All will be further threatened if the conflict continues or escalates to a new phase of deadly violence.

I am profoundly troubled that the call of this Council, issued nearly four days ago, for an end to the violence has gone unheeded. I wish to underline in the strongest possible terms the world's call for an immediate ceasefire that is fully respected by all parties. This must be achieved now. The parties must step back from the brink. All this violence must end.

Mr. President,

As a result of the crisis and violence, conditions for 1.5 million people in Gaza today are nothing short of terrifying. The people of Gaza are living under heavy bombardment, which has targeted Hamas facilities, smuggling tunnels and other Hamas infrastructure as well as the former Palestinian Authority security structure, government buildings, residential homes, mosques and businesses.

Over 300 people lie dead, among them at least 60 women and children. Over 800 are wounded.

In southern Israel, there has been a continuous stream of rockets fired from Gaza by Palestinian militants. Longer-range rockets have been used by militants hitting major Israeli cities, with hundreds of thousands now in range. Four Israelis have died since Saturday and over thirty more have been injured. Schools have closed and daily life in southern Israel is extremely difficult as Israelis live in constant fear of rockets which have hit homes and schools.

Let me be clear: I condemn unequivocally and in the strongest possible terms the ongoing rocket and mortar attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian militants. But I also condemn the excessive use of force by Israel. All parties must fully uphold international humanitarian law. It is the civilian populations that are bearing the brunt of this escalation, and there must be swift and decisive action by the international community to bring to an end their suffering.

Mr. President,

All parties must address the serious humanitarian and economic needs in Gaza and to take necessary measures to ensure the continuous provision of humanitarian supplies. Without the violence stopping, it is extremely difficult to get food to people who need it. It is too dangerous for civilians to leave their homes to seek urgent medical treatment, buy supplies and assist people in distress. Conditions for parents and children in Gaza are dangerous and frightening.

I wish to pay tribute to United Nations staff in the area who are working hard under deeply adverse conditions to address urgently the humanitarian situation of Gazans. I am pained at the death, injury and damage that United Nations personnel and premises as well as others associated with our programmes have sustained.

I also pay tribute to the efforts of donor countries which have come forward and pledged their support.

Pursuant to assurances given to me by Prime Minister Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni of Israel and the continuing close cooperation between United Nations agencies and the Israeli authorities on the ground, some humanitarian aid is passing through the Kerem Shalom crossing. Today, a total of 84 truckloads, including 34 for humanitarian aid agencies, entered Gaza. As a result, UNRWA is opening seven emergency distribution centres with a skeleton staff to distribute recently donated wheat flour starting tomorrow.

However, the Karni crossing and the Karni conveyor belt, which UNRWA urgently requires to open to bring in wheat grain supplies, remain closed, as do the Nahal Oz fuel pipelines. There remains a shortage of wheat grain, which exacerbates a shortage of bread in a situation in which two-thirds of Gaza's population were already reliant on some kind of food aid prior to this escalation. Fuel shortages have led to the closure of the Gaza power plant and power shortages for up to 16 hours a day. To address the shortages of food and fuel, the Nahal Oz and Karni crossings must be opened. Unless there is an immediate end to the violence, the humanitarian situation will deteriorate significantly.

Mr. President,

I urge all members of the international community, in particular those in the region, to exert what influence they have on the parties to end this violence now. Yesterday, at the Quartet meeting I stressed the need for decisive action. I welcome the efforts underway, including by Arab and European leaders; but I must repeat: not enough has been done, and more is urgently required.

There must be an immediate ceasefire that is fully respected by all parties. This must create new conditions on the ground that ensure at last that crossings into Gaza will be reopened; that rocket attacks and weapons smuggling will end; and that we will pursue political dialogue, and only political dialogue, to reunite Gaza with the West Bank; and that the root cause of this suffering, the absence of Israeli-Palestinian peace, is ended.

Even as this crisis rages, let us never forget the underlying issue: there must be an end to occupation, an end to conflict, and the creation of a Palestinian State. Let us not lose sight of our goal: two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the region, based on Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 1397, 1515, and 1850, the principle of land for peace, the Madrid terms of reference, and the Arab Peace Initiative. This conflict must end, and it must end once and for all.