

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
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**STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

New York, 6 January 2009

Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Council,
President [Mahmoud] Abbas of the Palestinian Authority,
Secretary-General of the League of Arab States [Amre Moussa],
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the Council meets to address the grave crisis in Gaza, I welcome the leader of the Palestinian people, President Mahmoud Abbas, who is recognized by the members of this body as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. . His presence, and that of high level representatives of members of the Security Council, as well as Arab and other Member States, is a reminder that we must move from debate to action, and must do so immediately.

The situation on the ground demands nothing less. The Israeli military operation, with the stated purpose of bringing an end to rocket attacks by Hamas militants and a change in the security conditions in Southern Israel is in its eleventh day. Israel has intensified its air bombardment and sea attacks into Gaza. These attacks have caused damage and destruction both to Hamas militant facilities and to public infrastructure, mosques, schools and homes.

Rockets have continued to be fired at Israel by Hamas militants, most recently reaching 30 km from Tel Aviv. Three days ago, in a further escalation, Israeli troops entered the Gaza Strip. There have been fierce clashes in heavily populated areas, including in and around Gaza City and in refugee camps.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health and media sources, over 570 Palestinians have already been killed, and over 2700 have been injured. UN teams are unable to confirm figures due to the dangerous situation on the ground, but objective assessments, including those based on visits to hospitals, suggest that the numbers are credible.

Israeli sources have confirmed the deaths of 5 soldiers and another 50 injured, in addition to 4 civilians killed and dozens injured in the more than 500 rocket attacks launched in the last 11 days, some of which have struck homes and schools.

As this conflict has escalated, I have repeatedly condemned indiscriminate rocket attacks by Hamas and the excessive use of force by Israel. I have called for an immediate end to the violence, and I have warned that if these appeals went unheeded, civilians were inevitably going to continue to be killed in large numbers. Today, at United Nations facilities in Gaza, this is exactly what has happened.

Three UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East] schools, set up by the United Nations as places of refuge for civilians fleeing the fighting, have been hit in adjacent Israeli strikes. The third strike, at a school in Jabalia refugee camp, has killed dozens of civilians. These attacks by Israeli military forces which endanger UN facilities acting as places of refuge are totally unacceptable, and should not be repeated. Equally unacceptable are any actions by Hamas militants which endanger the Palestinian civilian population. Today's events underscore the dangers inherent in the continuation and escalation of this conflict. I call once again for an immediate ceasefire.

In the midst of this fighting, the civilian population of Gaza faces a humanitarian crisis. Entire families have perished in the violence, including women and children, UN staff, and medical workers. There are no shelters for the vast majority of the civilian population. Food and fuel supplies are insufficient. A million people have no electricity. A quarter of a million have no running water. The only answer is an end to the violence. Whatever the rationale of the combatants, only an end to violence and a political way forward, can deliver long-term security and peace.

I have been actively engaged with regional and world leaders to bring the violence to a speedy end. I stressed to President [George] Bush today the importance of acting immediately, and I had valuable consultations with Arab leaders yesterday and today, including President Abbas. My envoys and I have been working to facilitate the emergence of a consensus, and I will continue my efforts with regional and world leaders, including many already gathered here in New York.

I am gratified at the most recent initiative by President [Mohamed Hosni] Mubarak and President [Nicolas] Sarkozy for a way out of the present impasse.

I also intend to travel next week to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, and to regional capitals. But I do not believe we can wait until then to end the violence. We must achieve that now.

To do so, there must be an immediate ceasefire, durable and respected fully by all sides. Immediate humanitarian measures, including open crossings for humanitarian assistance should be ensured.

In addition, viable international mechanisms will be required to ensure that borders are properly functioning. This must include a plan to ensure that the crossings operate as envisaged in the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, and that smuggling from any direction is addressed.

Third parties will need to provide assistance, both on the ground and in terms of diplomatic support, to supervise and safeguard all the various elements of a ceasefire.

Gaza's enormous social relief and reconstruction needs will need to be addressed.

A consolidated account of the current humanitarian needs including the urgent appeal by UNRWA has been issued by the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs. I urge all member states to respond promptly and generously to this appeal.

We need urgently to achieve Palestinian unity and the reunification of Gaza with the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority.

And we must see the urgent continuation of negotiations for a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which we worked so hard for in 2008 but did not achieve.

This Council has the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. I hope, Mr. President, that the Council will act swiftly and decisively to put this crisis to an end.

Thank you, Mr. President.