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Full transcript of Secretary-General's press encounter

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I returned last night from an emergency visit to the region, during which I had long and detailed discussions with the Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian leaders.

Later this morning, immediately after this press stakeout, I will join by video conference today's meeting of the Quartet which will be held this morning in Vienna at 11 o'clock New York time to discuss the alarming escalation of violence in Israel, Palestine and particularly in Jerusalem.

My Envoy, Special Coordinator [for the Middle East Peace Process] Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, will be there to represent me in person.

During my meetings in the region on the Middle East, all agreed on the urgent need to reduce tensions and avoid actions that would further fuel the violence.

I was profoundly troubled by what I saw and I heard.

People on both sides shared heartbreaking stories of violence against their loved ones.

I strongly condemned all acts of terror and violence, and I offer condolences to the families of those who have been killed or injured.

The tensions around the Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount have the potential to add a religious dimension to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that could be exploited by extremists on both sides, with potentially dangerous regional implications.

I welcome the assurance of Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu that Israel has no intention of changing the status quo on the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount, which many Muslims believe is under threat. I appreciate the efforts of H.M. King Abdullah of Jordan, in accordance with Jordan's special role as Custodian.

The level of incitement is utterly unacceptable. It is critical for all parties to avoid provocative rhetoric and actions that can further inflame passions in an already overheated environment.

It is equally critical that Israel exercise maximum restraint and make sure that security measures are properly calibrated, so that they do not breed the very frustrations and anxieties which perpetuate violence. One killing or house demolition creates a whole family of angry people. One neighbourhood closure creates a community of despair. One funeral can spread rage among thousands. Force should be a last resort, not a first resort.

Security measures alone will not end the violence. Only by [restoring] a political horizon can we hope to overcome today's despair and focus on achieving long-term peace.

I also urged President [Mahmoud] Abbas of Palestine to harness the energy and passion of the people, particularly young people, towards a peaceful direction -- to realize their aspirations of peace and [make] stability a reality, rather than resorting to violent means.

This is at heart a political conflict that will require a serious negotiation process by two partners willing to make the necessary compromises to reach the long-desired goal of a two-state solution.

The Quartet remains committed to working with all relevant parties -- on the ground, regionally and internationally -- to create the conditions for a return to meaningful bilateral negotiations.

I thank the members of the Quartet -- including Secretary of State John Kerry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and European officials, as well as the Arab leaders who are taking part in today's meeting, for their efforts.

Despite the anger and polarization, there is still time to step back from the brink.

Our envoys plan to visit Israel and Palestine in the near future to explore significant steps that each side can take to restore confidence and move towards an end to occupation and the establishment of a viable, sustainable Palestinian state, living in peace with Israel.

Thank you.

Q: Is it time, Secretary-General, for the two leaders to meet face-to-face? Is that something that you suggested to them?

SG: I strongly suggested and urged them to sit down together. There is no substitute to direct talks at the leaders' level, and I conveyed this when I talked to Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu and he said that President [Mahmoud] Abbas has my invitation and I also conveyed this message to President Abbas: Please try to have a dialog directly. And when I went to Jordan with His Majesty King Abdullah, I also urged him to play a very important role as custodian of the agreement, and he said that he will do his best.

Q: Secretary-General, staying in the region on Syria, there are talks in Washington, possibly in the administration, of a no-fly zone over Syria; would the U.N. endorse that?

SG: Well, I will see whatever would be necessary to bring peace and stability and protect the human lives; but at this time I do not have any comments on the idea of no-fly zone. This idea of a safe zone, no-fly zone has been mentioned and floated many times in the past, but let us see how this discussion is moving on. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General. On the Quartet meeting, what would the United Nations, what is the United Nations seeking from the Quartet meeting? You've talked in some generalities -- that they would like to see next steps. What kinds of specific things would the U.N. like to see to try to defuse this situation?

SG: This is going to be through the Quartet principals meeting [this year] -- in February and September and now October. And while the principals had three meetings, with our envoys, Quartet envoys, have been constantly meeting and discussing how the Quartet can really bring the parties together to bring peace and stability. And I'm going to brief what I have discussed with the leaders during last two, three days. And as you know Secretary Kerry has already met the Prime Minister Netanyahu and he is going to engage in Jordan, I understand tomorrow, with President Abbas and Jordanian King, so all this kind of concerted and joint efforts, I hope, will result and bring some, first of all, stopping

violence and reducing and de-escalating this current situation. This is, I think, of first and foremost importance. I strongly urge the importance of de-escalating the situation. One of my messages to the leaders in the region is that if this kind of violence, implicated with religious implications, will create the much, much worse situation. It may spin out of control. Before that, it is important to take action now. I think this should be the major, main points of discussions in the Quartet.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, your legal office has done a study concerning providing protection to the Palestinian people. The Presidency of Spain has distributed to the members of the Security Council. Now we understand your position and many western leaders to defend the right of Israel to defend their civilian population from attacks and to protect them, but the question is: who will protect the people living under occupation, the Palestinian people, for 50 years?

SG: This is one of the points of which I had the serious discussions with President Abbas and also the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, [Nabil] Elaraby, and upon the request of Security Council, I have submitted the compendium of historical examples since the days of League of Nations, starting from early 1920s and up to most recently, there are more than a dozen cases, almost 20 or something cases, where United Nations has been providing some protective forces or engagement. For me as a Secretary-General at this time, it is now in the hands of Security Council and President Abbas strongly asked under current situations, they needed international protection or presence. I made it clear to the members of the Security Council that while I distribute this compendium, this does not suggest any policy option or policy recommendation from my part. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, can you comment please, Mr. Secretary-General, on President [Bashar al] Assad's visit to Moscow and his meeting with President [Vladimir] Putin, and what should be done now and urgently for Syria at this moment?

SG: I sincerely hope that through President Assad's visit to Russia and meeting with President Putin, they really have a very concrete and serious discussions of how to bring this current, violent situation and transform into a political dialog, political negotiation. I hope this opportunity will provide such an occasion that the leaders in the region realize that there is no point, it's needless to continue this kind of military options. And I have been repeatedly saying there is no such military option, there should be a political solution. Now, I hope that President Assad fully realizes through his meeting with President Putin, in a sense that I would really hope that this will really change some dynamics on the ground.

Q: I wanted to ask on Burundi, just this morning the UK Ambassador said that the UK is concerned of a threat of genocide, is the word that he used, so I'm wondering under Rights Up Front what are your thoughts about Burundi and what the UN or the Secretariat can do. And I wanted to ask about what the John Ashe case, or what has been called the John Ashe case – what do you conclude from what has come out so far on how it penetrated the UN and what type of reforms do you think are needed? Thank you.

SG: On this genocide issues, I hope there should be some creative investigations by the relevant experts and there should be, first of all, a clear understanding and investigations. And if the conclusion is that there were such kind of genocide issues, then there should be accountability, justice must prevail and perpetrators must be brought to justice.

About this former PGA (President of the General Assembly) John Ashe's case, I was really shocked and very concerned to learn of this serious allegation against John Ashe, which goes to the heart of the work of the United Nations and its Member States. I have made it quite clear all the times that the United Nations' staff or leadership should work with the highest level of integrity and ethical standard. That is why I have made this one of the top priorities, and I have asked OIOS (Office of Internal Oversight Services) to have a thorough investigation and I have established a small task force led by my Chief of Staff, Susana Malcorra, to draw out some means and measures – how we can make more transparent and accountable measures, particularly on the case of President of General Assembly, Office of the President of General Assembly. We have all of the discussion of this matter with President [Mogens] Lykketoft, the current PGA. He fully supports what I'm going to do, with all this investigation by OIOS and with our own internal discussions to draw up some measures to improve the conduct of the Office of the PGA. And if necessary, I'm going to recommend to the General Assembly to take some legislation, so that the United Nations, whether it is the Member States' side or the staff, Secretariat side, we all have a responsibility and duty to conduct our duties [in] a transparent and accountable [way], with the highest integrity and ethics.

Q: Sir, UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees) has acknowledged in a statement that it has found at least some of its personnel had posted on social media incendiary rhetoric, potentially that could be used to incite violence, so I'd like to know your reaction to that finding; and, secondly, what steps would you recommend that UNRWA take and their staff take to make sure this never happens again, a zero-tolerance policy, if you will? Thank you.

SG: I think that it was corrected by the senior leadership of UNRWA, after having discovered that kind of remarks. And I made it clear that there should be some coherent and correct statement whenever something happens. I think that has been addressed already. Thank you very much. Thank you.