

OSCAR FERNANDEZ-TARANCO
ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East
31 May 2010

Mr. President,

1. In the early hours of this morning, Israeli naval forces boarded a six ship convoy which was heading towards Gaza.
2. The stated purpose of the convoy was to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza and to break the Israeli blockade on Gaza. The convoy was reportedly carrying a range of educational, medical and construction materials and approximately 700 activists, citizens of a number of countries. Among their number were reportedly members of parliament from several countries.
3. In the lead up to today's events, the Israeli authorities conveyed their intention both publicly and through diplomatic channels not to allow the convoy to reach Gaza. The Israeli authorities stated that should the convoy proceed contrary to these warnings, they would divert the convoy to an Israeli port, inspect the cargo, facilitate the entry of only those goods that are allowed into Gaza in accordance with Israel's blockade, and deport those on board.
4. The organizers of the convoy indicated their intention to proceed with their convoy and to attempt to deliver their full consignment of cargo to Gaza and to break the blockade. A committee of persons organized by the de facto Hamas authorities in Gaza was formed to receive the convoy.
5. Several governments with nationals on board the vessels urged restraint from all sides and indicated to the Israeli authorities their utmost concern that their nationals be protected.
6. The Secretary-General's spokesman last Friday warned that all involved act with a sense of care and responsibility and work for a satisfactory resolution.
7. The convoy was due to reach Gaza today. According to the Israeli authorities, Israel naval forces conveyed directly to the convoy during the early hours of this morning that they would not be allowed to reach port in Gaza. However, the convoy proceeded towards Gaza.
8. At approximately 0400 hours local time, the Israeli navy acted to intercept the convoy. This reportedly took place some 40 nautical miles off the coast, in international waters. This reportedly involved Israeli military personnel boarding the vessels, supported by naval ships and helicopters.

9. Israeli forces took control of all six vessels. However, there was serious violence on the main passenger vessel, a Turkish-registered ship named ‘Mavi Marmara’. We have also seen media reports of violence related to a Greek-registered ship, the “Sfendonii”.
10. As a result of this violence, according to latest information, at least 10 people were killed and at least 30 injured, while at least 6 Israel military personnel were injured. There are no finally confirmed casualty figures at this stage.
11. Given the circumstances, it is not possible to state definitively the sequence or details of what happened. The Israeli government has stated that the demonstrators onboard used knives and clubs against IDF Naval personnel, and possibly live fire, and that a weapon was grabbed from an IDF soldier. Given that those who were on board the ships are now in Israeli custody, including reporters who were traveling with the convoy and had their transmission equipment confiscated by the boarding Israeli forces, further information from the organizers of the convoy has been minimal since this morning. We have no independent information on what transpired.
12. According to Israeli statements, the seriously injured were subsequently evacuated by helicopter to hospitals in Israel. All ships have arrived under escort at the Israeli port of Ashdod. An Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman has stated that all international persons from the vessels will be deported.
13. Israeli authorities have expressed regret about the casualties but blamed the activists for the violence. President Abbas has condemned Israel’s actions and the killing of the activists and declared three days of mourning in the occupied Palestinian territory. There have been widespread regional and international expressions of alarm and concern at the bloodshed, as well as diplomatic demarches seeking a full explanation from the Israeli authorities. There have been protests in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel and several regional capitals.
14. The Secretary-General stated earlier today in Kampala that he is shocked by the killings and injuries of people on the boats and condemned the violence. He called for a full investigation to determine exactly how the bloodshed took place and stressed that Israel must urgently provide a full explanation.
15. At the Secretary-General’s direction, Special Coordinator Robert Serry, along with UNRWA Commissioner General Filippo Grandi, have been actively engaged on the ground since the crisis broke to urge restraint and an end to violence and coordinate with all relevant parties in the aftermath of this tragedy.

Mr. President,

16. In conclusion, we underscore the importance of a full investigation into this incident as called for by the Secretary-General. It is also imperative that Israel

provide access to detainees in accordance with relevant international legal standards. And more broadly, we stress the importance of all parties strictly adhering to the framework of international law, including international humanitarian law and the law of the sea.

17. We also stress that these developments come at a time when all efforts should be focused on the need to build trust and advance Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and nurture regional cooperation in support of peace. It is vital that the proximity talks continue.
18. Finally, we wish to point out that today's bloodshed would have been avoided if repeated calls on Israel to end the counterproductive and unacceptable blockade of Gaza had been heeded. We stress the scale of unmet needs of Gaza's civilian population and reiterate that the blockade is unacceptable and counterproductive and must end. Special Coordinator Serry briefed the Council in detail on 18 May on the serious humanitarian, human rights and socio-economic conditions facing the civilian population in Gaza, and made clear the range of interventions, from water and sanitation to education to health to the commercial sector, that are urgent to meet needs. The only way forward for Gaza is a different and more positive strategy that implements Security Council resolution 1860. It is now more vital than ever that this be put into effect.

Thank you, Mr. President