

**Opening Statement of John Holmes
Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

**Gaza Flash Appeal Launch
2 February 2009
Geneva**

Excellencies, distinguished delegates and colleagues,

Welcome to all of you gathered here today for the launch of the Gaza Flash Appeal. I'd like to welcome my fellow speakers, Dr. Fathi Abu Moghli, the Minister of Health for the Palestinian National Authority; Ms. Karen Abu Zayd, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA; Mr. Max Gaylard, United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory; and Mr. Saleh Saeed, Executive Director of Islamic Relief Worldwide.

Just over a week ago I traveled to Gaza to witness firsthand the effects of 22 days of fighting and to launch the humanitarian needs assessment.

During my visit I had the opportunity to see the destruction in residential and industrial areas of Beit Lahia, Tall Al-Hawa and Gaza City, to meet displaced families at an UNRWA shelter, and others affected by the fighting, to speak to the courageous and tireless health staff at Shifa Hospital, and to visit the damaged UN compounds. The destruction I saw was devastating – both in human and material terms. The magnitude of loss of life and injury to the civilian population is bound to have a lasting impact on the mental and physical well-being of the Palestinians in Gaza.

All aspects of life and livelihood have been affected. Over 1,300 Palestinians were killed and more than 5,300 injured, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health. 21,000 homes are reported to have been destroyed or badly damaged; and at the height of the fighting, over 50,000 people were displaced in UNRWA structures, with tens of thousands more sheltering with families and friends. Health facilities, schools, power, water and sanitation installations, and agricultural and economic production were destroyed or seriously damaged in these three weeks of hostilities.

We are here today not to debate the rights and wrongs but to highlight the needs arising from the recent events in Gaza and to request urgent funds to allow the UN and partners to restore basic social services such as water, health and education, provide food, support emergency repairs of critical infrastructure, and begin to tackle psychological and protection concerns.

This Flash Appeal of 613 million US dollars reflects the outcome of the needs assessments carried out in the last two weeks. It is a strategic plan incorporating 106 NGO and 82 UN projects to respond to the emergency humanitarian and early recovery needs of some 1.4 million people in Gaza.

It builds upon and now supersedes the Initial Response Plan and Immediate Funding Needs announced in mid-January, which requested, as a first estimate, \$117 million for urgent humanitarian actions. Today's Appeal includes the parts of the Initial Response Plan that are still relevant and can be carried forward, as well as new projects. As usual following the issuance of a flash appeal, we will be revising it, and indeed the Consolidated Appeal for the occupied Palestinian territory as a whole, in the coming weeks as our assessment of new needs and priorities on the ground continues.

Let me emphasise that in order for the aid agencies to meet the formidable challenges, two basic conditions have to be met, in addition to a consolidation of the current very fragile unilateral ceasefires and the provision of the resources for which we are appealing.

The first is much freer access for humanitarian goods and staff. On this, we welcome Israel's recent cooperation in allowing increased shipments of basic commodities. But there must be a regular, predictable and sufficient flow of life-sustaining goods and uninterrupted and facilitated movement of humanitarian staff in order for this relief effort to succeed. Many humanitarian workers, including international NGOs, are still being refused regular entry to Gaza. Essential items such as construction materials, pipes, electrical wires and transformers, key equipment and spare parts now need to be allowed in. Returning to the kind of access restrictions which were in force before the hostilities will not be workable. These requirements for this crisis are the same as for others, for example in Darfur or Myanmar. But for the Palestinians in Gaza to live, as opposed to simply being able to exist and survive, commercial goods also need to be allowed in and out.

The second condition is that meeting immediate needs should be kept separate from political considerations. The United Nations will engage all parties in Gaza, including the Palestinian Authority, Israel and those in control on the ground, to try to ensure that there is no political interference in the movement or distribution of humanitarian assistance, and no diversion of it. We are, for example, exploring ways to strengthen audit and control over the delivery of aid to ensure that it reaches the intended beneficiaries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Although the fighting has stopped in Gaza, the difficult task of rebuilding people's lives and recovering from the devastation is only just beginning. The extraordinary achievements of humanitarian staff amid the dangers of the fighting, their courage and their dedication, command our profound admiration. They also make me confident that together, as the international community, we will now be able to surmount the challenges ahead and effectively provide assistance to the Palestinians in Gaza in their hour of need.

I therefore urge you to support this Appeal and to convert the outpouring of sympathy and generosity we saw during the fighting, in terms of donations, including of humanitarian food and medical supplies, and in terms of pledges for eventual reconstruction, into flexible financial contributions to these vital projects in this Appeal today.