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Translation

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Statement

at the Press Conference on January 17, 2009

Citizens of Israel,

Exactly three weeks ago as the Sabbath ended, we sat here before you - my friend Ehud Barak, the Vice Prime Minister Tzipi Livni and myself - and detailed the considerations and goals which guided us in launching a military operation in the Gaza Strip. Today, we face you again and can say that the conditions have been created so that our targets, as defined when we launched the operation, have been fully achieved, and more so:

- Hamas was badly stricken, both in terms of its military capabilities and in the infrastructure of its regime. Its leaders are in hiding. Many of its members have been killed. The factories in which its missiles were manufactured have been destroyed. The smuggling routes, through dozens of tunnels, have been bombed. The Hamas's capabilities for conveying weapons within the Gaza Strip have been damaged. The scope of missile fire directed at the State of Israel has been reduced. The areas from which most of the missiles were launched are under the control of IDF forces. The estimate of all the security services is that the Hamas's capabilities have been struck a heavy blow which will harm its ability to rule and its military capabilities for some time.
- The IDF and the General Security Services have succeeded in conducting an outstanding operation, utilizing all the elements of Israel's force - on land, at sea and in the air. The military operation was characterized by determination, sophistication, courage and an impressive ability in intelligence and operations, which led to significant and numerous achievements. The current campaign proved again Israel's force and strengthened its deterrence capability vis-à-vis those who threaten us.
- The reserves soldiers, who are the foundation for the IDF's strength, proved that the spirit of volunteerism and a willingness to sacrifice still very much exist. These forces were made ready in a thorough manner, equipped with all they needed and thus could demonstrate their professionalism and fierceness of spirit.
- During all the days of fighting, the Israeli home front demonstrated its strength, despite hundreds of rockets and mortar shells indiscriminately fired at a population which numbers one million residents; it was the home front that created an unshakable foundation which strengthened us and gave us the ability to continue fighting. Two years of preparation on the home front proved that we learned our lessons and were properly organized. The Government and the heads of the regional local authorities under attack demonstrated the patience, endurance and that same strong spirit which

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allowed the political echelon to make the right decisions, knowing that the home front could withstand the consequences of those decisions.

- As a decision-making body, the Government of Israel demonstrated unity with regard to goals, and acted professionally and in coordination to achieve those goals. The decisions were all made in a responsible and educated manner, following clarification and in-depth discussions. As an executive branch, the Government met the demands and needs of the population and the fighting forces.
- Alongside the successes, we must also remember the fallen and those who sacrificed their lives to achieve a better reality in the South. The campaign claimed the lives of three residents of the South and ten of our soldiers. Tonight our hearts are with their families. We send our wishes for a speedy recovery to the residents of the South and to the IDF soldiers injured during the operation.
- Today, and in large part due to the success of the military operation, the entire international community is ready to mobilize in order to achieve maximum stability, and knows that, for this to occur, the process of Hamas's strengthening must stop. To this end, we reached a number of understandings - the importance of which cannot be underestimated - which will ensure that the strengthening of Hamas will decrease. We formulated understandings with the Egyptian government with regard to a number of central issues, the realization of which will bring about a significant reduction in weapons smuggling from Iran and Syria to the Gaza Strip.
- On Friday we signed a memorandum of understanding with the American government, in the framework of which the United States will mobilize to take the necessary steps, together with the other members of the international community, to prevent weapons smuggling by terrorists in Gaza. I wish to thank and express my great appreciation to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice Prime Minister for her efforts to reach this agreement, for her contribution to the diplomatic steps and for the widespread diplomatic effort she made over the past several weeks, which were an important contribution to the international backing given to the Israeli effort against the terrorist organizations headed by Hamas.
- Today I received a letter from the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel and the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, in which all four expressed their profound commitment to assisting in any way in order to ensure that weapons will not succeed in reaching the murderous terrorist organizations in Gaza.

I have no doubt that were it not for the determined and successful military action, we would not have reached diplomatic understandings, which together create a full picture of impressive accomplishment.

Citizens of Israel,

The Government decided to launch the operation in Gaza only after long thought and great consideration, and only after all attempts through other means to stop the firing and other acts of terror by Hamas failed. Israel, which withdrew from the Gaza Strip to the last millimeter at the end of 2005 - with no intention of returning - found itself

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under a barrage of missiles. Hamas violently took control of the Gaza Strip and began attacking the communities in the South more intensely. Hamas's methods are incomprehensible. It placed its military system in crowded residential neighborhoods, operated among a civilian population which served as a human shield and operated under the aegis of mosques, schools and hospitals, while making the Palestinian population a hostage to its terrorist activities, with the understanding that Israel - as a country with supreme values - would not act. The external Hamas leadership, which lives in comfort and quiet, continued to set extremist policies while ignoring the population's ongoing suffering and out of a conspicuous unwillingness to ease its situation.

Hamas in Gaza was built by Iran as a foundation for power, and is backed through funding, through training and through the provision of advanced weapons. Iran, which strives for regional hegemony, tried to replicate the methods used by Hizbullah in Lebanon in the Gaza Strip as well. Iran and Hamas mistook the restraint Israel exercised as weakness. They were mistaken. They were surprised.

The State of Israel has proven to them that restraint is an expression of strength which was exercised in a determined and sophisticated manner when that which we had avoided became unavoidable.

During the operation, the State of Israel demonstrated great sensitivity in exercising its force in order to avoid, as much as possible, harming the civilian population not involved in terror. In cases where there was any doubt that striking at terrorists would lead to harming an innocent civilian population - we abstained from acting. There are not many countries which would act thusly.

We have no disagreement with the residents of Gaza. We consider the Gaza Strip a part of the future Palestinian state with which we hope to live a life of good neighborliness, and we wish for the day when the vision of two states is realized.

During the operation, we made widespread and concerted efforts to see to the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian population. We allowed for the transfer of equipment, food and medicine to prevent a humanitarian crisis. In addition, I appointed Minister Isaac Herzog, the Minister of Social Welfare and Social Affairs, to head up this effort, and tonight the Cabinet instructed him to invest all his efforts in preparing a comprehensive plan so that in the next few days, we will be able to provide an appropriate and comprehensive answer to the civilian population's needs in the Gaza Strip. I wish to express my great appreciation to the international organizations which acted and continue to act tirelessly to assist us in providing the Palestinian population with appropriate living conditions. Israel will continue to cooperate with them, especially in the coming days and weeks on behalf of the Gazan population.

Citizens of Israel,

Today, before the Government meeting, I spoke with the President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, who presented Egypt's initiative to me, along with his request for a ceasefire. I thanked the President for Egypt's commitment to finding a solution to this crisis and for the important role it plays in the Middle East. I presented the President's statement to the Cabinet, along with the totality of our achievements in the operation, as well as

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the completion of the goals. The Cabinet decided to accept my proposal to declare a ceasefire.

Beginning at 2:00 a.m., Israel will cease its actions against the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip and will remain deployed in the Gaza Strip and its environs.

It must be remembered that Hamas is not part of the arrangements we came to. These are agreements involving many countries, and a terrorist organization like Hamas is not and need not be a part of them. If our enemies decide that the blows they have already suffered are not enough and they wish to continue fighting, Israel will be ready for that scenario and will feel free to continue responding with force.

Hamas was surprised a number of times during the past several weeks. It did not predict the State of Israel's determination or the seriousness of its intentions to bring about a change in the reality in the region. Hamas's leaders did not believe that the State of Israel would launch a military operation on such a scale on the eve of elections; it did not predict the force of the military attack and moreover - it did not predict the outcome.

Hamas still does not fully appreciate the difficult blow it received. If Hamas decides to continue its wild terrorist attacks, it may find itself surprised again by the State of Israel's determination. I do not suggest that it or any other terrorist organization test us.

This statement tonight would be incomplete if I did not mention the kidnapped soldier, Gilad Schalit. One hundred meters from here, there is a demonstration for his release, and I respect each and every one of the participants. The intensive efforts to secure Gilad's release began long before the operation, continued during it and will continue after as well. The Government of Israel is working on many levels to bring him home, and during the operation we carried out various actions to bring us closer to this goal. Due to the sensitivity of the matter, I will not go into detail. I will only say that Gilad is at the top of our agenda, and we do not need any prodding or reminding in this matter. I am hopeful tonight as well that we will soon see him in his family's embrace.

On a personal note:

For weeks I have been watching the people of Israel day and night as we make the unprecedented effort to fight for and realize our right of self-defense. I saw the brave soldiers, our dear and beloved sons; I saw their commanders and the spirit which buoyed them; I saw the residents of the South, their fierce spirit; and the leadership of the mayors who took care to provide for the needs of their residents; I also saw the actions of the Home Front Command, which quietly and efficiently coordinated the assistance campaign for the southern region; and I heard the bereaved families.

Dear families, the things you said, the pain you expressed, the fierce spirit you demonstrated - these are the foundation for the people of Israel's strength. On behalf of the entire nation, on behalf of the Government of Israel, I share your profound pain and thank you for the encouragement, the strength and the inspiration your strong stance has granted the entire nation.

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I also wish to say something to the people of Gaza: even before the military operation began, and during it, I appealed to you. We do not hate you; we did not want and do not want to harm you. We wanted to defend our children, their parents, their families. We feel the pain of every Palestinian child and family member who fell victim to the cruel reality created by Hamas which transformed you into victims.

Your suffering is terrible. Your cries of pain touch each of our hearts. On behalf of the Government of Israel, I wish to convey my regret for the harming of uninvolved civilians, for the pain we caused them, for the suffering they and their families suffered as a result of the intolerable situation created by Hamas.

The understandings we reached with Egypt, the international backing of the United States and the European countries - all these do not ensure that the firing by Hamas will stop. If it completely stops - the IDF will consider withdrawing from Gaza at a time which it deems right. If not, the IDF will continue to act in defense of our residents.

This is the time to convey our appreciation and gratitude, first and foremost to you, Mr. Minister of Defense, for your work, for the tremendous effort you made, for your skill, professionalism and the understanding you demonstrated throughout the operation - thank you very much. I wish to thank the soldiers of the IDF, their commanders, the Head of the Southern Command Yoav Galant, and the Chief of General Staff Gabi Ashkenazi; to the General Security Services, its fighters and its head, Yuval Diskin; to the Mossad and its hidden fighters, headed by Meir Dagan; to the Israel Police and the emergency services, Magan David Adom and the Fire Department.

Blessed is the nation with such an army and such security and rescue services.

I wish to express my hope that tonight the first step towards a different reality, one of security and quiet for the residents of Israel, will be taken. From the bottom of my heart, I thank the people of Israel, its fighters and their commanders for the fierceness of spirit and the social solidarity they demonstrated over these past weeks.

This is the secret of our strength - it is the foundation for our power and it is the hope of our future.

Thank you.