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PEACE PROCESS CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO LOSE MOMENTUM, SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS

SECURITY COUNCIL DURING OPEN DEBATE ON MIDDLE EAST SITUATION

Under-Secretary-General: Violence Overshadowed Efforts to Make Political Progress

The Middle East peace process was too important either to be allowed to lose momentum through inaction or indifference, or to be overwhelmed by violence, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today as the Security Council held an open debate on the situation in that region, including the Palestinian question.

Secretary-General Ban said that, while he was glad that the violence in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel had abated somewhat in recent weeks, tensions remained high and he was deeply concerned about the prospect of renewed violence and what it would mean for the civilian populations in the conflict zone and for the peace process that the international community was trying to advance.

Emphasizing the need to address the many difficulties on the ground, he commended the commitment shown by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to the political process and reiterated his own personal and profound commitment. At Annapolis, the international community had borne witness and expressed its support as Israeli and Palestinian leaders had set themselves the target of reaching agreement by the end of the year. Hopefully, it would be possible to achieve that ambitious goal.

Delivering his regular briefing to the Council, B. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said recent efforts to advance the political process had again been overshadowed by violence, resulting in high numbers of civilian casualties and a lack of concrete improvements on the ground. The reporting period had seen heavy Israeli military assaults in Gaza; the firing of more than 390 rockets and mortars into Israel; an attack on a Jewish seminary in West Jerusalem; and operations by the Israel Defense Forces throughout cities in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. In total, 124 Palestinians, including 36 children, had been killed and 359 injured in Israeli operations. Thirteen Israelis had been killed by Palestinian militants, including four children, and 55 injured. Tensions remained high and, despite an observable reduction in violence in and around Gaza over the past few weeks, it had spread to Jerusalem and the West Bank.

He urged the international community and all regional parties strongly to support efforts to end the violence in and around Gaza – where the humanitarian situation was also a cause of grave concern – and reopen border crossings, while addressing Palestinian, Israeli and Egyptian security concerns. Otherwise, the potential for further violence was all too real, with grave consequences for civilians, regional peace and security, and the political process.

The Permanent Observer for Palestine called on the Council urgently to address the recent escalating deterioration and destabilization of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. Israel had committed brutal crimes against Palestinian civilians, particularly in Gaza, and had announced plans to expand its illegal settlements. Following threats to launch large-scale attacks, including one by the Deputy Defence Minister to inflict a “holocaust” on Gaza’s Palestinian population, Israel had begun a barbaric four-day military aggression in northern Gaza on 27 February, killing more than 120 mostly innocent civilians and wounding more than 300 other Palestinians.

He said the Council must act immediately to ensure Israel’s compliance with international law, and to compel it to freeze all settlement activities, rescind its recent decisions, dismantle settlement “outposts” and take further confidence-building measures to show its seriousness. Such steps were critical to improving the situation and reviving momentum to advance the peace process. The Council’s failure to uphold its responsibilities amid the deteriorating and tragic humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory would only encourage Israel to continue to violate international law and commit crimes against the Palestinian people with impunity.

Israel's representative drew attention to a "particularly worrying trend" with regard to the discourse concerning the Middle East, saying some delegates had a penchant for equating the lawful actions of States in defence of their citizens with the violence of terrorists whose goal was to endanger those very civilians. That misguided tendency was simply unacceptable. Such parity, often in the name of an ill-conceived balance, undermined the strength and credibility of moderate States to bolster one another and isolate extremists. "Let us be very clear: while for Israel every dead Palestinian child is a horrible mistake and tragedy, for the terrorists every dead Israeli child is a victory and a cause for celebration."

During the past month, Hamas had fired more than 300 rockets into Israel, at least 23 of them Iranian-made Grad missiles that had hit the city of Ashkelon, he said. Those attacks marked an escalation of violence, not just in number, but also in weaponry. Grad rockets – smuggled into the Gaza Strip from Iran during the breach of the Gaza border in January – had greater range and larger warheads, and they fragmented on impact. Hamas' new weapon of choice meant that a quarter of a million Israeli civilians now lived in constant danger of rocket fire.

Lebanon's representative, whose country was also a focus of many statements today, said a new Lebanese president should have been elected by now, and stressed the importance, after many postponements, of holding elections as soon as possible in accordance with the Constitution and pursuant to the Arab Initiative. Lebanon, meanwhile, remained committed to full implementation of Council resolution 1701 (2006) and Israel should also abide by its obligations under that text.

He said the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had observed Israeli air violations of Lebanese airspace on an almost daily basis. Also, despite repeated calls, the situation regarding cluster bombs remained unchanged, with Israel claiming to have submitted information on their location and the Secretary-General qualifying that data as being "of very limited value".

Syria's representative described Israel as an outlaw State, saying that the Security Council's inability to adopt a draft resolution calling on Israel to stop its crimes was destroying whatever remained of its credibility. Israel refused to return the occupied Golan to Syria, and continued its policy of terrorism and oppression, keeping Syrians in prisons and denying them necessary medical attention. Moreover, Israel was the only State in the world that had a policy of targeted killing and an annual budget adopted by its lawmakers for that purpose.

Also participating in the debate were the representatives of Croatia, France, Panama, Libya, Viet Nam, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Burkina Faso, United Kingdom, Italy, South Africa, United States, Belgium, China, Russian Federation, Sudan (on behalf of the Arab Group), Pakistan (on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference), Cuba (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement) and Slovenia (on behalf of the European Union).

Taking the floor a second time in response to earlier statements were the representatives of Israel, Syria, Sudan and Cuba.

The meeting began at 10:05 a.m. and was suspended at 1 p.m. Resuming at 3:05 p.m., it ended at 4:35 p.m.

Background

Meeting this morning to consider the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, the Security Council was expected to hear a briefing by the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

Statement by Secretary-General

BAN KI-MOON, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said that, while he was glad that the violence in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel had abated somewhat in recent weeks, tensions remained high and he was deeply concerned about the prospect of renewed violence and what it would mean both for the civilian populations in the conflict zone and for the peace process that the international community was trying to advance.

The many difficulties on the ground must be addressed, he emphasized, commending the commitment of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to the political process, and reiterating his own personal and profound commitment. "Let us remember that negotiations are the only means to achieve legitimate Palestinian aspirations for an end of occupation and independent sovereign statehood, and legitimate Israeli aspirations for sustainable security and an end to conflict." At Annapolis, the international community had borne witness and expressed its support as Israeli and Palestinian leaders had set themselves the target of reaching an agreement by the end of the year. Hopefully, it would be possible to achieve that ambitious goal.

He said everybody should ask themselves and the parties two simple questions: "If not this, what? If not now, when?" The process was too important to be allowed to lose momentum through inaction or indifference, or to be overwhelmed by violence. It was essential that it receive the support of the international community, including the Council. Peace would be achieved within the agreed framework: an end to the occupation that had begun in 1967, based on the foundations of the Madrid Conference; the principle of land for peace; Security Council resolutions [242 \(1967\)](#), [338 \(1973\)](#), [1397 \(2002\)](#) and [1515 \(2003\)](#); and the Arab Peace Initiative. That framework would lead to an end of conflict, the creation of a Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel, and a comprehensive regional peace.

Briefing by Under-Secretary-General

B. LYNN PASCOE, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said that since his last briefing continuing efforts to advance the political process had once again been overshadowed by violence, high numbers of civilian casualties and a lack of concrete improvements on the ground. The reporting period had seen heavy Israeli air and land military assaults in Gaza; the firing of more than 390 rockets and mortars into Israel, including longer-range rockets; an attack on a Jewish school in West Jerusalem; and operations by the Israel Defense Forces throughout cities in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. In total, 124 Palestinians, including 36 children, had been killed and 359 injured in Israeli operations. Thirteen Israelis had been killed by Palestinian militants, including four children, and 55 injured. Tensions remained high, despite an observable reduction in violence in and around Gaza over the past few weeks.

When the Security Council had met in an emergency session on 1 March, the violence in and around Gaza had been at its height, he recalled. The Israel Defense Forces operation "Hot Winter" had lasted five days, causing dozens of civilian casualties, including the deaths of 31 children, while Hamas rocket attacks had extended as far as the Israeli city of Ashkelon, bringing nearly a quarter of a million Israeli civilians within rocket range of Gaza. The Secretary-General had condemned the excessive and disproportionate use of force and the killing of civilians, as well as indiscriminate rocket fire, and called for an immediate cessation of the rocket attacks. All parties must comply with international humanitarian law, but regrettably, neither party had conducted law-based, independent, transparent and accessible investigations into the killings of civilians and other human rights violations, made the findings public, or held perpetrators accountable, as required by the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Since his last briefing, violence had also spread to Jerusalem and the West Bank, he continued. On 2 March, a Palestinian child had been shot and killed by the Israel Defense Forces during a protest against the situation in Gaza. On 6 March, eight Israeli students, including four children, had been killed in a savage shooting attack at a West Jerusalem Jewish seminary by a Palestinian from East Jerusalem, the first such major attack in Jerusalem for nearly four years. On 16 March, dozens of Israelis had rioted in the neighbourhood of the killer's home, and the stabbing of an Israeli in the Old City on 18 March had further contributed to the tense atmosphere. Israel Defense Forces' incursions had taken place in several West Bank towns, resulting in the arrests of dozens of Palestinians for alleged militant activity. In two separate incidents targeting Islamic Jihad on 12 March, four militants had been killed in Bethlehem and another in Tulkarem.

Those incidents had been followed by a barrage of rockets fired by Islamic Jihad from Gaza into southern Israel.

He expressed support for Egyptian efforts to bring about a cessation of violence, particularly in Gaza, and to facilitate a gradual reopening of crossings into Gaza, in coordination with the parties. In that regard, there had been reduction in violence in an around Gaza, and more regular importation of supplies through the crossings. That was a positive but extremely fragile development as the potential remained for even more deadly violence to occur very quickly, endangering the security of the Palestinians, Israel and Egypt, and the political process. All parties should act with a sense of responsibility and cooperate with Egypt, including that country's efforts to complete construction of a new border boundary. Relevant parties were also encouraged to intensify cooperation to ensure that legitimate traffic into and out of Gaza took place at all crossing points and that concerns regarding alleged smuggling were addressed.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remained of grave concern, although there had been an improvement in the volume of goods entering the territory, he said. In the past month, more than 1,400 trucks had crossed into Gaza, 95 per cent of them carrying commercial supplies of basic items. Fuel imports had continued to enter from Israel, although shortages remained in key sectors such as health. On any given day, between 30 and 50 per cent of ambulances could not be used due to lack of fuel. Sanitation authorities continued to dump 60,000 cubic metres of raw and partially treated sewage into the sea every day owing to shortages of fuel, electricity and spare parts. Fuel shortages had also prevented 63 per cent of Gaza's regular fishing trips, further exacerbating what was already a dire socio-economic situation. Food insecurity was increasing as salaries dried up, and at least 50,000 additional beneficiaries had been added to food assistance distribution lists.

He said the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had still not gained access to captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. One of the more than 10,000 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails had died earlier this month, bringing to seven the number of Palestinian prisoners who had died in Israeli custody since the beginning of 2007. In the West Bank, 580 Israel Defense Forces-imposed obstacles continued to block Palestinian movement. The levels of restriction had steadily increased each year since 2005, in both quantity and character, and were at the root of the Palestinian economic decline. The restrictions had continued despite the security efforts of the Palestinian Authority since mid-2007. Recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) projections showed that, under current conditions, gross domestic product growth in 2008 would not exceed population growth. Action to ease closures inside the West Bank was essential if a viable Palestinian economy was to develop as the basis for a viable Palestinian State. Growing restrictions on the movement of United Nations staff within the West Bank and between the West Bank and East Jerusalem also continued to make the delivery of programmed assistance increasingly difficult.

Israeli settlement activity had continued in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, during the reporting period, he said. Tenders and construction permits for hundreds of housing units had been announced this month. Construction continued on many settlements and related infrastructure, such as roads for settler use. The Israeli Government had stated publicly that settlement expansion in East Jerusalem would continue, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had also raised concerns about Israeli archaeological excavations in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan in East Jerusalem, bordering the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount. Additional PLO concerns involved alleged plans to bring more Israeli settlers to Ras al Amud in East Jerusalem while transferring Israeli police personnel to the police station constructed at the centre of the proposed E-1 settlement area between Israel and the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim.

Describing all settlement activity in East Jerusalem or elsewhere in the West Bank as contrary to international law and Council resolutions, he said Israel's failure to cease such activity, including that occurring through natural growth, and to dismantle outposts erected after March 2001 was contrary to the "Road Map". The Secretary-General had made public his concern over the need for urgent action. Construction of the wall continued within occupied Palestinian territory, in deviation from the Green Line and contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. House demolitions in the West Bank had risen notably, with the destruction of more than 100 structures – at least half of them residential – since the beginning of the year, which had displaced almost 400 Palestinians.

There was little to report about the state of bilateral negotiations, he said. Due to significant Palestinian casualties in Gaza, President Abbas had suspended bilateral negotiations with Israel for a period. However, meetings between the heads of the two negotiating teams had resumed recently and the work of several technical groups formed by the parties was being pursued. A recent IMF mission had confirmed impressive financial reform measures, including the re-establishment of cash control procedures and a new accounting system for fiscal reporting. The Palestinian Development Plan would shortly be shared with the international community to enlist support. The financing needs for recurrent costs in 2008 amounted to \$1.7 billion. So far \$1.2 billion had been pledged, about half of which would be disbursed by the end of March. The Co-Chairs of the Paris Donors' Conference had met today to assess the situation since that event. The next meeting of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee would be hosted by the United Kingdom and Norway in London on 2 May.

Efforts to reform, train and equip the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank had continued during the reporting period, he said. Approximately 1,000 officers were currently being trained in Jordan, with support from the United States Security Coordinator, for deployment in the West Bank in April and May. President Abbas had issued a decree aimed at reforming the Palestinian Authority's intelligence apparatus and the Interior Minister had submitted a comprehensive report on West Bank security. Palestinian security forces had undertaken operations to disarm and arrest West Bank militants, but more must be done in order for the Palestinian Authority to re-assert law and order in the West Bank and effectively combat terrorism. Greater Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation was essential in that regard.

The Quartet remained in close contact at the principals and envoys level, and discussions continued on a possible international meeting in the coming period. The Arab States had a vital role to play in supporting the peace process, the central importance of the Arab Peace Initiative and the ultimate need for a comprehensive regional peace. Foreign ministers from the League of Arab States had met in Cairo on 5 March ahead of their annual Summit, scheduled for 29 to 30 March in Damascus. They supported the seven-point plan announced by President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen and calling for a return of the situation in Gaza to what it had been before the Hamas takeover last June, the holding of early elections, and a resumption of dialogue on the basis of previous internal Palestinian agreements. Fatah and Hamas representatives had reportedly held constructive discussions on the plan in Sana'a. The unity of the legitimate Palestinian Authority must be restored through peaceful means in support of the political process for a two-State solution.

He said the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan had remained quiet during the reporting period, although settlement activity continued, while Lebanon remained in the grip of a deep political crisis. Yesterday's parliamentary session to elect a new president had been postponed for the seventeenth time since 24 November 2007. The Secretary-General firmly supported the Arab League initiative and encouraged the parties to implement it, since the longer the stalemate continued, the greater the chance for the political and security situation to deteriorate further. While the general security atmosphere had remained calm with no major incidents, public tension and anxiety had increased. On 16 February, clashes had broken out in Beirut between supporters of various groups affiliated with the majority and the opposition, leaving 20 people injured. Officials on both sides had pledged to cooperate with the Lebanese Armed Forces to avoid a recurrence of such confrontations. Clashes between Fatah and Jund al-Sham had erupted on 21 March in the Ain el-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon, causing one death.

The situation in the area of operation of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had remained quiet, although with increased tension, he said. The Israel Defense Forces had been on a heightened state of alert along the Blue Line since the assassination of Imad Mughniyah on 12 February, and the Lebanese Armed Forces had announced specific measures and the additional deployment of forces in the event of an attack. During the same period, there had been a considerable increase in the number of violations of Lebanese airspace by the Israel Defense Forces, with UNIFIL reporting 222 from 11 to 17 March. They constituted a serious breach of Lebanese sovereignty and the Blue Line, and undermined the credibility of Lebanese national institutions and UNIFIL. A UNIFIL investigation into an alleged breach of Lebanese territorial waters was also continuing. Despite the general increase in tension, however, all parties had reassured UNIFIL that they did not seek a renewal of hostilities.

He said the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), in cooperation with the Lebanese Army and the Prime Minister's Office, had finalized the master plan to reconstruct the Nahr el Bared Palestinian camp. It would be a long, complex undertaking, requiring the international donor community's full support. It was extremely important that the political process between Israelis and Palestinians was continuing, given the

many negative developments that threatened to derail it. That process could only be sustained through more meaningful efforts to implement Phase 1 of the Road Map and improve economic and security conditions. The international community and all regional parties should also strongly support efforts to end the violence in and around Gaza and reopen border crossings, while addressing Palestinian, Israeli and Egyptian security concerns. Otherwise, the potential for further violence was all too real, with grave consequences for civilians, regional peace and security, and the political process. The Secretary-General remained committed to supporting all efforts to secure, through negotiations, full implementation of Council resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine, said that, over the past few weeks, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, had witnessed further deterioration and destabilization which required the immediate action of the Security Council. Brutal crimes had been committed by the occupying forces against Palestinian civilians, including children, particularly in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Government had announced plans to expand illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, especially in and around East Jerusalem.

He said that, following threats by Israeli officials to launch large-scale attacks, including one by the Deputy Defence Minister to inflict a "holocaust" on the Palestinian population in Gaza, the occupying forces had launched a barbaric military aggression against the northern Gaza Strip beginning on 27 February 2008.

Those attacks had resulted in the deaths of more than 120 Palestinians, most of them innocent civilians inside their own homes and including at least 25 children and infants and 10 women. More than 300 other civilians had been wounded. That vicious military campaign had lasted four days during which Israel had used all types of lethal weaponry to bombard densely populated areas, leaving behind massive bloodshed and widespread destruction of property and infrastructure.

Pointing to the negative ramifications of the Council's inability to adopt a resolution clearly condemning Israel's aggression and calling upon it to cease its flagrant violations of international human rights law, he said Israel's continuation of its attacks had deepened the suffering of a people already enduring extremely difficult and miserable living conditions as a result of the suffocating siege imposed by the occupying Power and the resultant humanitarian and environmental disaster inflicted upon them. Israel had continuously justified those crimes under the pretext of security and the right to self-defence and counter-terrorism. However, nothing justified the killing of children. Security, freedom and basic living standards were the rights of all peoples without discrimination and not exclusive to any religion, race, colour or ethnicity. The Palestinian people had a right to prosperity, security and safety.

Israel continued relentlessly to carry out colonial settlement activities and to build the illegal wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem, he continued. Those actions were in flagrant and grave violation of international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention, United Nations resolutions, the advisory opinion rendered by the International Court of Justice on 9 July 2004, and the Road Map. In the context of its attempt to impose massive physical facts on the ground, immediately after the resumption of the peace process with the convening of the Annapolis Conference in November 2007, Israel had announced the continuation of its illegal expansionist plans to change and Judaize the character, status and demographic composition of the Holy City. The illegal settlement campaign and the peace process could not coexist.

He went on to point out the clear and intricate correlation linking Israel's successive, illegal measures and their timing. They included the intensification of settlement activities in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank; deliberate, repeated attempts to sabotage Palestinian Authority security efforts; the increase in, rather than removal of, checkpoints and roadblocks; and the continuation and intensification of the siege on the Gaza Strip aimed at isolating it from the West Bank. In addition to the extreme suffering caused to the Palestinian people, those actions undermined the Palestinian Authority's role and damaged the peace process, raising serious doubts about Israeli intentions and good faith in the negotiations as it pursued its illegal and destructive actions.

The Security Council must undertake urgent and practical measures, including those prescribed by the Charter, to ensure Israel's scrupulous compliance with all of its obligations under international law, he stressed. Israel should be compelled to freeze completely all settlement activities, rescind its recent decisions, dismantle settlement "outposts", and take further confidence-building measures to show its seriousness. Such steps were critical to calming and improving the atmosphere, reviving momentum and helping to advance the peace process towards its stated goals. The Council's failure to uphold its responsibilities amid the deteriorating and tragic humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory would only encourage the occupying Power to continue its violations of international law, to continue committing crimes against the Palestinian people with impunity and to continue undermining the fragile peace process in the region.

DAN GILLERMAN (Israel), describing the struggle of moderates against extremists as the defining challenge of the day, said that across the globe, the forces of extremism sought to transform resolvable political conflicts into endless religious wars, using all the means of violence at their disposal. They fought not for their own rights, but to deprive others of their rights. Iran, a notorious State sponsor of terrorism, used proxies like Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas among the Palestinians to draw the moderates into a cosmic battle where victory was not about achievement, but about total annihilation. The very ideology of the extremists made a dialogue with them impossible. That was why Israel and other like-minded States understood that dealing with extremists was a zero-sum equation. In contrast, negotiations with the moderates, such as Israel's talks with a moderate Palestinian Authority leadership that renounced terrorism and violence, could yield great benefit for both parties.

During the past month, he said, Hamas had fired more than 300 rockets into Israel, at least 23 of them Iranian-made Grad missiles that had hit the city of Ashkelon, a quaint coastal city with a population of 120,000. Those attacks marked an escalation of violence, not just in number, but also in weaponry. Grad rockets -- smuggled into the Gaza Strip from Iran during the breach of the Gaza border in January -- had greater range and larger warheads, and they fragmented on impact. Hamas' new weapon of choice meant that a quarter of a million Israeli civilians now lived in constant danger of rocket fire. Everyone could thank Iran for adding another weapon to the Hamas arsenal, in addition to its already heinous suicide attacks and deadly Qassam rockets. Hamas and its State backers bore sole responsibility for the escalation of violence. The Secretary-General had rightly condemned Palestinian rocket attacks during a Council meeting earlier this month, calling for the immediate cessation of such acts of terrorism, "which serve no purpose, endanger Israeli civilians and bring misery to the Palestinian people".

As Hamas unleashed its terrorism on the civilians of Ashkelon, he went on, it continued to wreak havoc and daily terror on the people of Sderot -- a small, but resilient, city of 23,000. Although some wished to refer to the apparent lull in rocket attacks, the perceived quiet was "only on the surface". The rockets out of Gaza had not stopped; Hamas was using the time to smuggle in and produce more rockets. Building rockets was a silent promise of what was to come next: more terror and more violence, more extremism and more bloodshed. Everyone had seen the great lengths to which extremists were willing to go to kill and maim Israelis.

Detailing the shooting deaths of eight Israeli boys in the Jerusalem rabbinical seminary just over two weeks ago, he recalled that Hamas terrorists had joyfully fired their rifles into the air and passed out candy to children in celebration. That was why it was so sad and disturbing that the Council had not condemned the terrorist attack. The Council had a long-standing practice of condemning terrorism, no matter the victims, no matter the location, no matter the perpetrator, no matter the motivation. Yet, it had not unanimously condemned that intentional killing of civilians, for it had been blocked by the politicized opposition of one Member State in particular. The hypocrisy and cynicism displayed by that State, with its long history of terror, did not bode well for the Council and drew "sad and alarming conclusions" as to the screening process that States underwent before attaining Council membership.

There was a particularly worrying trend with regard to the discourse concerning the Middle East, he said. Some had a penchant for equating the lawful actions of States in defence of their citizens with the violence of terrorists whose goal was to endanger those very civilians. That misguided tendency was simply unacceptable. Such parity, often in the name of an ill-conceived balance, undermined the strength and credibility of moderate States to bolster one another and isolate the extremists. "Let us be very clear: while for Israel every dead Palestinian child is a horrible mistake and tragedy, for the terrorists every dead Israeli child is a victory and a cause for celebration."

Regarding the situation along the northern border, he drew attention to three main areas of concern: stemming the illegal flow of weapons through the porous

Syrian-Lebanese border; preventing the rearming of Hezbollah, which had already adapted its weaponry and tactics so as to take into account the UNIFIL presence south of the Litani River; and the unconditional release of Israeli soldiers Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, kidnapped by Hezbollah on 12 July 2006. Clearly, Hezbollah and Hamas shared the same strategies and tactics, and were funded and supported by the same backers -- Syria and Iran. The relationship linking all four was continually reinforced. Syria and Iran both played host to and supported global and local terrorist organizations, and the international community must press to end that support.

NEVEN JURICA ([Croatia](#)) said his country fully supported the Annapolis process and was encouraged by the resumption of high-level meetings between the two sides despite recent difficulties. The two-State solution should remain the ultimate goal for both sides and any deviation from that course would negatively affect the outcome of the process. The absence of tangible improvements on the ground could also imperil the peace process. Croatia supported efforts to create an atmosphere conducive to negotiations and implementation of the Road Map and condemned actions such as the 6 March terrorist attack on a Jerusalem seminary, and the launching of rockets into Israeli territory.

Expressing concern over the serious humanitarian situation in Gaza, he said he remained mindful of the circumstances that had contributed to its creation, namely last summer's violent takeover and subsequent terrorist activities by Hamas. Croatia was particularly concerned that relief efforts faced obstacles in that territory, which was already heavily dependent on aid, and hoped there would be an early resumption of United Nations and other projects. However, only a permanent political settlement could fundamentally alter the economic and humanitarian problems of the Palestinians and bring lasting security to Israel.

Turning to Lebanon, he expressed deep concern over that country's volatile political and security situation and called for the holding of the presidential election as a priority. Political uncertainty thwarted efforts to achieve the goals of resolution 1701 (2006). Croatia condemned the intimidation and brutal attacks that threatened Lebanon's sovereignty and legitimate institutions. Efforts to end impunity should be seen as an integral part of a sustained political process. Croatia lauded the progress achieved thus far in setting up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

JEAN-MAURICE RIPERT ([France](#)), aligning himself with the statement to be made on behalf of the European Union, said the Israeli population had once again been seriously tested by terrorist attacks, in particular the vicious attack on the religious seminary and the rocket attacks on the civilian population in southern Israel. At the same time, Israel's military attacks in Gaza had resulted in a high number of fatalities. Self-defence could not be applied indiscriminately.

Noting that there had been encouraging signs in the past few days, he expressed support for all efforts to suppress the violence. The perspectives sketched out at the Annapolis Conference towards a viable Palestinian State by the end of the year must be sustained. In addition to ending the violence, that required confidence-building on the ground so that both sides could experience improvements in their daily lives. The siege of Gaza constituted collective punishment, which was contrary to international law and did nothing to enhance Israeli security.

All efforts towards a peaceful settlement must be sustained, as there was no military solution, he said. First and foremost, there was a need to achieve inter-Palestinian reconciliation through dialogue and with the help of States in the region. In that regard, France welcomed the efforts of the President of Yemen. The results of the Paris Conference were now bearing fruit and new impetus must be given to that approach, with donors rapidly meeting their pledges. In turn, the Palestinian Authority must meet its promise to reform the security sector. Meanwhile, Israel must improve the transport and circulation of goods and services, which was a prerequisite for proper economic development. The success of the Annapolis process would be measured by the ability of the parties to fulfil their commitments, particularly under the Road Map.

While fighting terrorism, Israel must do more to release Palestinian prisoners, repeal the restrictions on movement, particularly in the West Bank, and dismantle settlements, he emphasized. The latter activity was a major impediment to peace as colonization ran counter to Israel's security interests. France was concerned about the political stalemate in Lebanon.

RICARDO ALBERTO ARIAS ([Panama](#)) said the relative calm was no cause for celebration since the peace process did not appear to be progressing. Moreover, the last several months had clearly revealed the Council's inability to reach agreement on the subject. It had not only failed to adopt a resolution concerning the precarious humanitarian and security situation in Gaza due to Israeli measures, but it had also failed to agree on a press statement condemning last month's terrorist attack against a religious seminary in West Jerusalem. The Council's monthly debates did not appear to contribute to the peace process.

A lasting peace accord between the Israelis and the Palestinians must be based on a two-State solution and the pre-1967 borders, he said. The Annapolis process had come to a standstill and was at risk of collapse. The lack of progress was due to two key factors, the first being the apparent lack of political resolve on the part of the Israeli Government to commit itself to a genuine negotiating process and to cede certain aspirations and positions. That lack of flexibility was critical considering the total and unrestricted support that Israel received from its closed allies.

The second factor was the political divergence between the Palestinian parties, which made a political agreement to create a national unity Government impossible, he said. The new Yemen-initiated dialogue between Hamas and Fatah augured well for the peace process, but it was not possible to ignore the results of similar earlier efforts. In order to create an environment conducive to a genuine negotiation process, Israel must immediately end its settlement construction. Hamas must stop the rocket attacks against Israel and the latter must end its incursions into the Palestinian territories and its siege on Gaza, otherwise all peace efforts would be doomed to fail.

GIADALLAA ETTALHI ([Libya](#)) said the situation in the Middle East in general, and the Palestinian question in particular, was among the most serious -- if not the most serious -- threats to international peace and security. It had led to the eruption of many wars, continuous aggression, assaults, attacks and suffering for more than six decades. The threat became even more serious as time went by, and still the Council had not undertaken its responsibility, as stipulated in Article 1, Chapter I of the United Nations Charter. Why was the Council "pussyfooting" around? If ever a situation deserved its priority attention it was the question of Palestine.

If the humanitarian aspect was the measure, he asked, where was there more suffering than that endured by the Palestinian people at the hands of the Israeli occupiers? Six million refugees lived in camps, 1.5 million of them under siege in the Gaza Strip. More than 2 million refugees were humiliated daily, pregnant women died at Israeli checkpoints, Palestinian children were terrorized daily on their way to school and workers were unable to reach their jobs, all while detentions and arrests abounded. Surely the Council knew that 40 per cent of the Palestinian youth in the occupied territories had been detained or arrested at least once. Surely it knew that, since it had last considered the situation last month, the Israel Defense Forces had killed more than 150 Palestinians, including 36 children. That was the equivalent of ethnic cleansing and it was making life unbearable for the Palestinians.

As for Israel's continued expansion of settlements and annexation of land, he said the Israeli judiciary and legal authorities had given the Government the right to kill anyone violating the separation wall. In the same period, the courts had decided to prevent Palestinians from using public roads in the occupied territories. No racial discrimination or injustice could be worse than that. Israel was committed not to peace but to defeating the peace process.

The situation in Lebanon was another source of concern, he said, particularly the role of foreign Powers, which had led to the political crisis there. The failure to elect a president had, in turn, led to a political vacuum. Libya supported the activities of the Arab League to redress that situation. Meanwhile, the daily Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace and territorial waters, its attacks against Lebanese in the border areas, its occupation of the Shebaa Farms and its obstruction of the Blue Line only exacerbated the problem. Israel's flouting of resolution 1701 (2006) and the Council's continued disregard of Israeli practices was a sign of its double standards. Also, the decision to annex the occupied Syrian Golan was null and void, according to the Council, but Israel had rejected that text as well.

LE LUONG MINH ([Viet Nam](#)) expressed deep concern over Israel's military attacks and its continuing construction of illegal settlements and the separation wall

in the West Bank. Viet Nam also remained deeply concerned that, despite the repeated appeals of the international community, Israel had not loosened its restrictive measures in the Gaza Strip, which were being implemented in violation of international law, including international human rights and humanitarian law, and were causing an alarming toll in human lives, especially those of women and children, and causing great suffering among the Palestinian population. While sympathetic to the innocent Israeli civilians killed, injured or otherwise harmed in attacks targeting southern Israel, Viet Nam could not accept the use of such actions to justify Israel's own illegal actions. By aggravating the already tense situation on the ground, such actions endangered the limited positive progress achieved since the launch of the Arab Peace Initiative and the Annapolis and Paris conferences.

On Lebanon, he took note of positive developments in the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), including the tripartite cooperation between Israel, Lebanon and UNIFIL to address key security and military operational issues, and the dialogues between Lebanon and Syria on border delineation and demarcation. However, Viet Nam remained deeply concerned about the continuation of targeted attacks against Lebanese civilians and UNIFIL personnel and about Israel's air violations and occupation of the village of Ghajar on the northern side of the Blue Line. It also continued to share concerns expressed about repeated postponements of the presidential election, the slow progress in disarming armed groups, the lack of technical strike data on Israeli cluster munitions and the unresolved issue of Lebanese prisoners. All parties must promote dialogue and national reconciliation, proceeding to presidential elections as planned.

JORGE URBINA ORTEGA (Costa Rica) said the Council had become part of the Middle East problem, a point made clear in the last few weeks by its failure to condemn the closing of the Gaza crossing, which had created an untenable humanitarian situation for the Palestinians. Nor had the Council been capable of condemning the assassination that had taken place in the Jewish religious school in Jerusalem. The Council could not continue to be part of the Middle East problem. It must become once again part of the solution.

While it was normal for the parties to accuse each other, justifying their actions as a reaction to those of the other, what was not normal or acceptable was for the Council to serve as their echo-chamber. It could not continue to validate those actions, believing them to be justified responses to earlier grievance, otherwise it would remain part of the Middle East problem. The Council must show the necessary determination to condemn all acts of violence.

The Palestinian territory had been reduced to 22 per cent of its original size, while the number of people served by UNRWA had risen tenfold in the last 10 years, he said. An approach was needed that would offer the Palestinians productive labour while promoting their economic, social and cultural development and preventing a great catastrophe. The Palestinian leadership must also create an environment conducive to development by ending terrorist attacks against Israel. It was necessary to leave behind the models of successive phases whereby one phase must be completed before moving on to the next. The Israelis and Palestinians must tackle as soon as possible the question of the two-State solution, borders and settlements, refugee return, compensation and the status of Jerusalem.

MARTYN. NATALEGAWA (Indonesia) said there was an urgent need to rebuild confidence, and that would certainly require a complete end to violence. It would require Israel's immediate termination of all illegal activities, including the construction of settlements. Compliance with international law by all parties must be promoted, and the utmost restraint exercised. Incidents in which civilians had been killed or injured must be investigated and accountability ensured. Achieving the goals of the Annapolis process would pave the way for a more comprehensive settlement in the Middle East.

Stressing the importance of an inter-Palestinian dialogue, he said the Palestinians could not have peace with Israel unless they had peace among themselves. The role of neighbouring countries also remained important and the recent initiative by the President of Yemen was encouraging. Also key to the promotion of peace was the formation of a viable Palestinian economy. Indonesia and South Africa would convene, later this year, the Afro-Asian Conference for Capacity-Building of the Palestinian People, to be held in Jakarta.

Turning to the situation in Lebanon, he said that, while the efforts exerted by the international community and regional States were of paramount importance, the final resolution lay in the hands of the Lebanese people themselves. Indonesia, therefore, stressed the urgent need for concerted efforts by all parties in the country to end the prevailing political deadlock and build a consensus that would lead to the election of a new president.

MICHEL KAFANDO (Burkina Faso) expressed the hope that the Arab League Summit, to be held soon in Damascus, Syria, would mark an important stage in the quest for peace and contribute to an easing of Palestinian suffering. Burkina Faso was especially concerned about the humanitarian tragedy. Israel must end the siege on Gaza while the Palestinians stopped the "psychosis" affecting the Israeli population as a result of the rocket fire directed against their country. The Palestinian Authority should be able to exercise its authority over its territory.

It was the two parties, first and foremost, who must create the most suitable conditions for negotiations, he said, adding that he had been encouraged by the recent meeting between the two Palestinian factions in which they had promised, under the auspices of the President of Yemen, to engage in dialogue. Burkina Faso was also encouraged by the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but feared that the continued construction of the separation wall and the expansion of Israeli settlements, including those in East Jerusalem and the occupied Syrian Golan, could affect those talks.

Turning to Lebanon, he said the situation there was most disturbing and called for a revival of the Syrian-Lebanese border delineation commission, which could resume its work on the question of Shebaa Farms. Unfortunately, solutions to that and other problems would persist as long as the political impasse in Lebanon, including that concerning the presidential election, remained unresolved. The overall situation in the region called for speedy and concrete international actions, especially by the Security Council, whose inability to enforce its resolutions was obvious. Only a global approach, with the participation of the main stakeholders from within and outside the region, would make it possible to build a basis for lasting peace.

JOHN SAWERS (United Kingdom) recalled the talk of hope at the end of 2007 and stressed the importance of getting back to that level of optimism and of stopping the window of opportunity from closing. There was a need to secure negotiations on both sides to bring the political process back on track. Only the political process offered a solution for peace and both sides must resume negotiations as soon as possible. As part of the Quartet, the United Nations had a responsibility to work towards that goal, and broader regional support for the peace process was invaluable.

Noting that the situation on the ground was of great concern, he condemned the incessant rocket attacks against Israel, while also urging Israel to ensure that its response was in accordance with international law. Both sides had obligations under the Road Map and one must not wait for the other to take action. Israel must freeze all settlements, which were in violation of international law. A long-term solution in Gaza must address Israeli security concerns and Palestinian hardship. The international community's efforts must support the Annapolis process. The Bethlehem investors' conference would take place in mid-May and it was to be hoped that it would lead to real improvements on the ground.

Turning to Lebanon, he said that country needed the support of the international community to end its continuing political impasse and insecurity. Syria and other influential countries in the region must play a role. Syria should take the steps necessary to resolve the Lebanon situation. Sustained United Nations engagement, including implementation of all Council resolutions on Lebanon, was also crucial.

MARCELLO SPATAFORA (Italy) stressed the important facilitating role played by Arab States and welcomed the support lent by the Arab League and the President of Yemen to the indispensable inter-Palestinian dialogue. It was increasingly urgent to show the first dividends to the public opinions of both parties, just as it was indispensable to adopt measures that would rapidly improve the lives of both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples, which, for the former, meant easing restrictions and checkpoints in Gaza and the West Bank.

He expressed support for reinvigorating the Palestinian economy on the basis of the Palestinian Authority's reform and development plan and the outcome of the Paris Donors' Conference. The Palestinian Authority's initiatives to strengthen public security also deserved support, as did the proposed convening of a

conference on the rule of law and strengthening the capacity of the civil police. Italy was particularly concerned about the Israeli Government's decision to continue building settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which was illegal under international law. It threatened bilateral negotiations and seriously weakened the credibility of the Palestinian leadership in the eyes of moderate opinion while strengthening extremists and enemies of peace.

On Lebanon, he expressed deep concern over the lack of progress towards resolving the political crisis. Italy hoped that the upcoming Arab League Summit in Damascus would mark a turning point in that crisis. It was also to be hoped that the violence would not escalate. A mature assumption of responsibility was required of all Lebanese political forces. Italy looked forward to the operation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and reiterated the importance of UNIFIL's continued presence for the country's continued stability.

DUMISANI KUMALO (South Africa), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, said the international optimism that had greeted the Annapolis Conference and the Paris Donors' Conference was dissipating and the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was deteriorating daily. In the West Bank, the continued expansion of illegal settlements, military posts and checkpoints, in addition to the continuing construction of the separation wall had already undermined the prospects for a viable and contiguous Palestinian State and was a clear violation of United Nations resolutions and the Road Map. The expansion of illegal settlements in Jerusalem, in particular, predetermined a solution to the city's future, which should be the basis of a negotiated solution.

The military offensive by the Israel Defence Forces in Gaza and its total blockade of the territory had further exacerbated the humanitarian tragedy there, he said. The Security Council's inability to condemn what was happening in Gaza, or even to express concern, created the impression that it was once again ignoring the plight of innocent Palestinian civilians. Israeli measures made life unbearable for Palestinian civilians and were an affront to human dignity. Even United Nations personnel and the local diplomatic community were subjected to those daily hardships, humiliations and provocations.

South Africa had consistently condemned attacks on civilians, whether they were Palestinian or Israeli, he continued. The continual rocket attacks on Israel could not be justified in the name of the Palestinian cause. Indeed, they were against the interests of the Palestinian people and only resulted in military retaliation by the Israel Defense Forces. South Africa also condemned the attack on the West Jerusalem seminary which had resulted in the killing and injury of innocent civilians.

ZALMAY KHALILZAD (United States) said his country continued to work in support of progress towards an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement by year's end. The Vice-President of the United States and the Secretary of State had both visited the region to encourage progress in negotiations on the ground and Secretary Condoleezza Rice would return later this week to continue her discussions with the parties.

Recalling that a terrorist gunman had opened fire at a Jerusalem yeshiva on 6 March, killing eight young Israeli students and wounding 11 others, he deeply deplored the deaths of all innocent civilians and stressed the need for progress on the ground in creating an atmosphere supportive of the negotiating process in order to reassure Israelis and Palestinians of the seriousness of that process. There was also a need for international support to ensure that Palestinian humanitarian needs were met and that nations were following through on pledges made at the Paris Donors' Conference. Such efforts would help President Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad build institutional capacity and develop an economy that would form the foundation of a Palestinian State.

He said his country was doing its part by providing basic humanitarian assistance to Palestinians living in Gaza through ongoing programmes of the United States Agency for International Development and annual contributions to UNRWA. The largest bilateral donor to that agency, the United States had given it \$154 million in fiscal 2007 and pledged \$148 million in 2008. The United States was also moving forward with assistance programmes utilizing the \$545 million pledge of assistance to the Palestinian Authority announced by Secretary Rice in Paris last December. On 19 March, the United States had signed a cash transfer agreement with Prime Minister Fayyad, providing \$150 million in budgetary support to the Palestinian Authority. However, much more was needed and Paris Conference participants were encouraged urgently to provide the assistance they had pledged.

Turning to Lebanon, he urged all Council members to give generous support to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon as a clear sign that the international community backed the Lebanese people's efforts to end the era of impunity for political assassinations in their country. The United States was concerned about illegal arms transfers across the Syrian-Lebanese border and fully supported the Secretary-General's call for a process to disarm all militias in Lebanon, in accordance with resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006), and the Taif Accords.

JOHAN VERBEKE (Belgium) recalled that, following the escalation of violence in the region, his country had condemned the rocket attacks against Israel. But while affirming Israel's right to self-defence, Belgium had, like the Secretary-General, condemned its disproportionate response. Belgium had also condemned the 6 March terrorist attack on West Jerusalem. President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert deserved praise for maintaining dialogue and ensuring that the violence did not undermine the bilateral talks launched at Annapolis. The Security Council, however, had been unable to play its rightful role in condemning the violence on the one hand and encouraging the peace process on the other.

Stressing that the situation on the ground could undermine the political process, he said the Road Map and the Movement and Access Agreement were but a small part of the price that Palestinians and Israelis would pay if the peace process bogged down again. Israel must reverse its settlement policy, dismantle illegal outposts and gradually lift movement restrictions. The Palestinian Authority must step up its security efforts and dismantle terrorist infrastructure. Hamas should stop launching rockets, restore the rule of law and return control of the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority.

Regarding Lebanon, he expressed support for the Arab League's mediation efforts and hoped the parties would contribute constructively to overcoming obstacles. Postponement of the presidential election should not detract from the goal of stabilizing the country and the subregion as a whole. Belgium supported implementation of all aspects of resolution 1701 (2006), including the political process, as defined by the Council in August 2006, and for UNIFIL's deployment and contribution to Lebanon's stability.

LIU ZHENMIN (China) noted the recent numerous casualties in the region, saying that, while the situation had eased somewhat, it remained fragile and in danger of escalating at any moment. All parties should redouble their efforts to make arrangements for an early, comprehensive and lasting ceasefire to ensure security on both sides and a normal life for the Palestinian people. China hoped both sides would renounce violence, replacing it with dialogue, and welcomed the pledge by Israel and the Palestinians to adhere to political negotiations.

Recalling that Israel had decided not long ago to expand its settlement activities, he said that decision was not conducive to enhancing mutual trust. China supported the effort by the President of Yemen to promote dialogue and urged the international community to support the Palestinians in ensuring capacity-building, and improving their livelihoods. The international community must think of ways to inject new vitality into the Annapolis process and China supported the Russian Federation's suggestion to hold follow-up meetings.

Israel's negotiations with Lebanon and Syria were also important parts of the peace process and would help achieve comprehensive peace in the entire Middle East region, he said, noting that the presidential election in Lebanon had been postponed yet again. China supported the Arab League's continuing efforts to resolve the political crisis in that country and hoped that all Lebanese parties could put their national interests first in order to solve their differences.

Council President VITALY CHURKIN (Russian Federation), speaking in his national capacity, said the Middle East was living through an especially difficult period and an end to the violence remained elusive. The utmost efforts should be made to end the deaths of civilians on both sides. There should be a cessation of firing rockets into Israel, as well as a lifting of the Gaza blockade, which had become intolerable. The Russian Federation would continue to provide financing for the Palestinians and assistance for their security forces. It was especially important for President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert to remain committed to further dialogue and to implementing their Annapolis agreements, particularly on agreeing parameters for a final settlement by the end of the year.

No less important was strict compliance with the Road Map and refraining from any actions that could undermine it, he stressed. As such, the expansion of Israeli settlement activity was very disturbing and should cease completely. The Russian Federation sought a peaceful and stable Middle East, and urged the international community to mobilize support for the Annapolis process so as to ensure its success. The Russian Federation was conducting active consultations with the Quartet and other interested parties to achieve political understanding for the convening in Moscow of an international meeting on the Middle East. Hopefully, it would soon be possible to determine the "conduct and calendar" of such a meeting.

He said his country also sought progress on the Syrian and Lebanese fronts, in addition to the inter-Palestinian dialogue. Concerning the latter, it was important that the initial contacts be constructive from the very outset. They should focus on key problems facing the Palestinians, discuss ways to restore political unity, integrate the politics of the Occupied Palestinian Territory and focus on dialogue with the Israelis. Hopefully a solution would be found at the upcoming Damascus summit. As for Lebanon, the country was again gripped with unrest with extremist groups stepping up their activities and building up their forces. Russia was a firm champion of unswerving compliance with resolution 1701 (2006) and other texts prohibiting the supply of arms to irregular groups in Lebanon. The Russian Federation also advocated the speedy election of a new president, a position to which all members of the international community should adhere.

NAWAF SALAM (Lebanon) recalled that, just a few days after resuming peace talks with the President Abbas at Annapolis, Israel had disclosed a plan to build 307 houses in the occupied territories. Plans to build more than 1,100 apartments in occupied East Jerusalem had been announced in February, and on 17 March, Prime Minister Olmert had stated that Israel would not stop building on occupied land in and around Jerusalem. As pointed out by the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process in his briefing on 26 February, "continued settlement activity is illegal anywhere in the occupied territory and it is an obstacle to peace", and one of the biggest factors undermining confidence in the Annapolis process and prospects for a viable Palestinian State.

The Road Map called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire on behalf of the Palestinians and an end to armed activity and all acts of violence against Israelis anywhere, he said. Could anyone, in good faith, imagine that the Palestinians could conform fully to such expectations while Israel continued to subject Gaza to an immoral siege and its civilian population to a deliberate policy of collective punishment, not to mention the daily raids and incursions into Gaza and the West Bank? But those realities, no matter how painful, should not allow despair to prevail. The Annapolis process must not be left to erode and Lebanon supported the proposed convening of an international meeting in Moscow.

Turning to the situation in his own country, he said the presence of UNIFIL, which had recently commemorated its thirtieth anniversary, had been caused by Israel's massive invasion of 1978 and continued due to repeated Israeli aggressions, which had culminated in the 2006 war. Deeply grateful to UNIFIL, Lebanon remained committed to full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006). Israel, however, had yet to abide by its obligations under that resolution and, according to the latest report on its implementation, UNIFIL had observed Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace on an almost daily basis, recording 36 on 17 February alone. In spite of repeated calls by the international community, the situation remained regrettably unchanged as far as cluster bombs were concerned. Israel claimed to have submitted information on strike data but the Secretary-General had qualified that data as being "of very limited value".

Also according to the report, he said, Israel's continuing occupation of the northern part of Ghajar "constitutes a continuing violation of Lebanon's sovereignty, resolution 1701 (2006) and the Blue Line". Lebanon supported UNIFIL's takeover, on an interim basis, of administrative and humanitarian responsibilities on the Lebanese side of Ghajar, once the Israeli Army had withdrawn fully. On Shebaa Farms, he urged the Secretary-General to start a long-overdue diplomatic process to place the area under provisional United Nations custody after the withdrawal of Israeli occupying forces until the demarcation of the Lebanon-Syria border became possible. On Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons, their detention was a breach of the basic rules of international law and they should be released immediately and unconditionally. As for the Israeli soldiers abducted on 12 July 2006, the Government of Lebanon had no knowledge of their status or whereabouts and remained ready to cooperate with the Secretary-General.

Regarding Lebanon's internationally recognized borders in the south, he said they were as referred to in the 1949 Armistice Agreement and reiterated in paragraph 5 of resolution 1701 (2006). While Lebanon continued to welcome UNIFIL's help in marking the Blue Line, it regretted that Israel was not entirely cooperating with that effort. Lebanese authorities were maintaining a high level of vigilance against illegal movements of arms and material. The control of Lebanon's northern and eastern borders remained a responsibility shared with Syria, as per operative paragraph 15 of resolution 1701 (2006). As for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the Government appreciated the Secretary-General's sustained efforts towards its establishment and acknowledged generous contributions from Member States towards its funding. The Tribunal would be a key judicial instrument in ending impunity.

Noting that a new President of Lebanon should have been elected today, he said that, while the election had been postponed once more, there was need to stress the importance of holding that election as soon as possible, in accordance with the terms of the Constitution and pursuant to the Arab Peace Initiative.

BASHAR JA'AFARI (Syria) said the United Nations way of dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict could no longer be "business as usual". What was needed was for the Organization to ensure that resolutions adopted since its inception were implemented, including ones denouncing Israel's occupation of Arab territories and its violation of international law. No preventive diplomacy could succeed without dealing with core Middle East issues, including Israel's occupation of Palestine, the Golan and southern Lebanon. Only after dealing with those issues would it be possible to reach a settlement.

The direct and indirect support of some parties for Israel's occupation contravened international law, he said, adding that those parties sent the wrong message to Israel. Rather, those parties should press Israel to seek peace or the absence of stability in the Middle East would inevitably harm their interests. The killings, deportations and home demolitions, carried out by Israel were war crimes, genocide and a "holocaust" against thousands of civilian Palestinian victims. Israel continued to close border crossings and turn Gaza into the world's largest prison. It continued to violate international humanitarian law and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Israel was an outlaw State that completely disregarded international norms, he said. The situation in the West Bank -- where Israel continued its construction of the wall and the expansion of settlements -- was no better than the situation in Gaza. The Security Council's inability to adopt a draft resolution calling on Israel to stop such crimes was destroying whatever remained of its credibility. Israel refused to return the Golan to Syria and to obey resolution 494 (1981). It continued its policy of terrorism and oppression, keeping Syrians in prisons and denying them necessary medical attention. Syria called on the Council to pressure Israel to release prisoners, including the Syrian journalist jailed for his criticism of Israeli policy.

He said Israel had uprooted 370 trees belonging to a Syrian citizen on 23 February, a matter that had been brought to the Council's attention. The upcoming Arab Summit in Damascus would discuss the Palestinian situation. Syria had chosen a well-constructed, comprehensive peace as a political choice. Israel was the only State in the world that had a policy of targeted killing and an annual budget adopted by its lawmakers for that purpose. Syria dismissed the statement by the representative of the United States to the effect that it was interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs. On the contrary, the intervention by the United States in Lebanon occurred around the clock and only thwarted peace efforts.

ABDALMAHMOOD ABDALHALEEM MOHAMAD, (Sudan), speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, said the deterioration of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was the result of Israel's obdurate stance and its attempt to extinguish any hope for a just and lasting peace. For four decades, the Palestinian people had continued to aspire to the creation of an independent Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital, but Israel had always worked to undermine that hope and to prolong Palestinian suffering. It carried out settlement policies and intimidated the population in brazen, systematic violation of international norms. The Israeli occupation authorities engaged daily in practices that contravened international law and international humanitarian law -- committing aggression against civilians by prohibiting their access to basic services and humanitarian aid. That was compounded by settlement expansion, land confiscations, and construction of the separation wall.

Israel killed not only Palestinian people, but also all hopes for a stable Middle East and the hope that the United Nations could redress wrongs and restore Palestinian rights and justice, he said. That weakened the Organization's credibility. The world looked to the Security Council for urgent measures to force Israel to work for peace, end bloodshed in Gaza and the West Bank, and launch a just peace process, leading to its withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders and allowing the emergence of a Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital. It was high time the Council disproved the falsehoods heard worldwide that it was a hostage to the manoeuvres of a few members. It must live up to the ideals of all peoples seeking to end bloodshed and collective punishment, and pave the way for a decent life for the Palestinian people.

The Syrian citizens in the occupied Syrian Golan and the Lebanese people continued to suffer under the yoke of Israeli occupation, he said. Israel also continued its sea-, air- and land-based violations of Lebanese territory, in defiance of resolution 1701 (2006), and refused to provide maps of cluster bombs dropped in August 2006. It was up to the Security Council to put an immediate end to Israeli occupation. The statements made today reaffirmed the international community's support for the Palestinian people and their fight against Israeli occupation. The Council should assume its important role by taking all measures to restore peace for the Palestinian people and end collective punishment by forcing Israel to withdraw from all occupied Arab territories. The Arab Group asked the Organization to play its role fully in that regard.

FARUKH AMIL (Pakistan), speaking on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), said the group had a strong, direct interest in achieving a just, lasting peace in the Middle East. The OIC Summit held on 13 and 14 March had reiterated its call on Israel to comply fully with Council resolutions relevant to the establishment of an independent Palestinian State with Al Quds al Sharif as its capital. It had called on Israel to comply with relevant Council resolutions, withdraw completely from the occupied Syrian Golan to the pre-1967 borders and respect Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Expressing concern about the further deterioration of the already dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip caused by Israel's military escalation and continuing illegal seizure of that territory, he said similar illegal Israeli actions against civilians in the West Bank, including the construction of new settlements and the wall, only fuelled the cycle of violence, undermined steps by the Palestinian Authority to establish calm and security, and threatened the prospects for peace. The international community must respond to that by holding Israel responsible for its actions and ending its impunity.

Voicing support for the Secretary-General's call to investigate incidents in which civilians had been killed or injured, he said the OIC expected follow-up action in that regard. The Council must act in a credible, timely and effective manner. It could not remain silent and marginalized as the crisis escalated, undermining international law and the vision of a just, lasting peace. It was unacceptable for the Council to be deadlocked even on pronouncing itself in response to the violence and the deteriorating situation on the ground. The Council must condemn the killing of innocent civilians and take measures to bring about an immediate ceasefire. The Council must also demonstrate the political will to ensure full and non-discriminatory implementation of its own resolutions and respond effectively to non-compliance. Reclaiming its position as the focal point of international efforts, it must ensure cessation of all actions by Israel that sought to change realities on the ground and which could prejudice a final settlement, including the construction of the illegal separation wall and the expansion of settlements. The OIC called on Israel to withdraw completely from the Occupied Palestinian Territory and other occupied Arab lands.

RODRIGO MALMERCA DIAZ (Cuba), speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said the grave realities in the Middle East region affected the entire international community as they impacted seriously on prospects for peace, security and stability in the region and beyond. The occupying Power's absence of respect for international law and its ongoing illegal occupation remained the major obstacles to the success of efforts to achieve a just and lasting peace. For more than 40 years, the Palestinian people had been suffering under the brutal Israeli occupation and colonization of their land, denied their fundamental human rights, including the inalienable right to self-determination and the right of return. The toll on human life was increasing at an alarming rate.

Citing the poverty rate, currently 65.8 per cent in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and more than 79 per cent in the Gaza Strip, he said the continuing closures, restrictions on the movement and access of persons and goods, including humanitarian and medical goods, had rendered Palestinian economic recovery nearly impossible and aggravated the humanitarian crisis, further destabilizing the situation on the ground. Such violent and illegal actions had deepened the suffering of innocent and defenceless Palestinian civilians, particularly in the Gaza Strip. The Non-Aligned Movement was also seriously concerned about Israel's continuing illegal settlement construction and its unlawful wall construction.

He said those illegal and destructive colonization practices were causing huge physical, economic and social devastation, dividing the Occupied Palestinian Territory into separate, walled-in enclaves and severing East Jerusalem from the rest of the Territory, while completely undermining the unity, integrity and contiguous nature of the Palestinian Territory. Those practices were destroying entire communities, displacing thousands of Palestinian civilians and isolating tens of thousands of Palestinians into isolated cantons. The continuation of those illegal actions threatened the prospects for peace and would make the two-State solution physically impossible to achieve. That situation required the Council's urgent attention.

Turning to Lebanon, he said that country continuously endeavoured to stabilize its territory following Israel's relentless aggression and serious violations of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The Non-Aligned Movement was satisfied with the steps Lebanon had taken to implement resolution 1701 (2006), particularly through the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces south of the Litani River and along the Blue Line. Also welcome was the deployment along Lebanon's northern and eastern borders aimed at ensuring border security and stability. However, the Movement remained deeply concerned about ongoing Israeli air and land violations of the Blue Line. It called strongly on Israel to end the occupation of the northern part of al-Ghajar of the northern side of the Blue Line. Israel must refrain from any provocation of the Lebanese Armed Forces or UNIFIL. The Non-Aligned Movement called also for the prompt settlement of the Shebaa Farms question in full respect for Lebanese territorial integrity. It also called strongly on Israel to provide the exact location of cluster bombs implanted during its occupation of southern Lebanon.

SANJA ŠTIGLIĆ (Slovenia), speaking on behalf of the European Union and associated States, welcomed the intention of the parties to resume negotiations and looked forward to an early meeting of the Quartet principals. The European Union condemned in the strongest terms the terrorist attack on a seminary in Jerusalem on 6 March and continuing rocket attacks. While recognizing Israel's legitimate right to self-defence, the European Union called for an immediate end to all acts of violence. Swift and tangible results on the ground were needed to sustain negotiations and action by both sides to implement their Road Map obligations was vital in order to retain the confidence and support of the Israeli and Palestinian populations, the region and the wider international community.

Deeply concerned about Israel's recent announcement that it would extend the settlement of Givat Ze'ev, she reiterated that settlement building anywhere in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, was illegal under international law. Settlement activity prejudged the outcome of final status negotiations and threatened the viability of an agreed two-State solution. The European Union also called on the Palestinian Authority to make further efforts to implement its obligations with regard to security, where needed, in cooperation with the Israeli authorities. The European Union remained ready to support the reinforcement and reform of the Palestinian security forces.

Violent confrontations in and around Gaza had serious security implications, she said. Concerned over the unsustainable humanitarian situation in that territory, the European Union called for the controlled and sustained reopening of all crossings, for both humanitarian reasons and commercial flows. Reconfirming the Council's conclusions of January 2008, the European Union extended its full support for efforts to facilitate a peaceful solution to the present crisis and reiterated its readiness to resume its monitoring mission at Rafah, according to the Access and Movement Agreement. The Union also recalled its commitment, at the Paris Donors' Conference, to support efforts to build the future Palestinian State in accordance with the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan, and called for Israeli cooperation in that regard.

Expressing the European Union concern over the ongoing political deadlock and deteriorating security situation in Lebanon, she reiterated its strong support for the plan unanimously adopted by the Arab Foreign Ministers in seeking to broker a solution to the political crisis in that country, and commended continuing efforts by the Secretary-General of the Arab League. The parties in Lebanon were urged to proceed, as a first step, to immediate presidential elections prior to the Arab Summit. The success of the plan required all actors to play a constructive role. A European Union High Representative had been designated to

spearhead the regional body's efforts with Arab countries in that respect.

Mr. GILLERMAN (Israel), taking the floor a second time, said it had been enlightening to hear lectures on terrorism from a country under investigation by the Council regarding high-level killings in Lebanon, and on genocide by the "monsters of Darfur". The statement by Cuba's representative, speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, had been as strange and disturbing as the previous one. While the meeting had heard clear condemnation of terror by countries that were members of the Non-Aligned Movement, Cuba's delegate had not said one word about terror. Did Cuba speak on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement or only on behalf of Cuba? The Council and the Movement both deserved an explanation.

Mr. JA'AFARI (Syria), also speaking a second time, suggested that perhaps if the Council had upheld its responsibility to ensure implementation of its own resolutions concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict over the past decades, it would not have had to arrive at the point where someone asked for an end to the occupation of a State that had been illegally occupied for years. Syria had been a victor in the war against Nazism and fascism and what distinguished it from Israel was, among other factors, the fact that a permanent Council member had not used the veto 44 times in order to protect Syria's responsibility under international law to uphold the principles of the United Nations Charter. However, that permanent member had used the veto 44 times to protect Israel while it avoided its commitments under the Charter and international law. The Israeli delegate allowed himself to criticize this or that State because he knew in advance that there was somebody in the Council who would protect him. The Israeli mentality was to allow itself to kill others while claiming innocence. But in the Middle East, everyone suffered from the Israeli occupation.

Mr. MOHAMAD (Sudan) said he did not find the Israeli representative's allegations against the Sudan hollow nor his reference to Darfur strange as he wished to hide his country's crimes against humanity. The Zionist entity compromised the credibility of the United Nations, which had become incapable of terminating the occupation of Palestine. Given the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and peace-loving countries, Palestine's independence would be achieved in the same way that apartheid had been ended in South Africa. Israel could say whatever it liked but the fig leaf in which it wrapped itself would not hide its crimes, nor would it enjoy impunity.

FERMÍ GABRIEL QUIÑONES SÁNCHEZ (Cuba) said he felt it was necessary and timely to respond to the deceitful comments made by Israel's representative with regard to the Non-Aligned Movement's very firm position concerning the cause of the heroic Palestinian people and the situation in the Middle East. First of all, the Cuban delegation had made its statement as Chair of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement. It was not the first time that the Israeli delegate representative had made offensive and distorted statements with regard to the Non-Aligned Movement on the Palestinian question. Cuba's statement contained the opinions of the Movement's 118 members.

He said Israel was once again trying to divert attention from the truly important issues and hide the facts occurring daily in the occupied Arab lands, especially the Occupied Palestinian Territory. However, the distortions and manipulations would not impede the Non-Aligned Movement from bringing into all international forums, including the Security Council, its principled position on the situation in Palestine and the Middle East. The Movement would continue to express its firm opposition to the illegal Israeli occupation and its full support for an independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. It would continue to demonstrate against the occupying Power's violations of human rights, and expected Israel to withdraw completely from the occupied Syrian Golan to the pre-1967 borders.

Neither would the Non-Aligned Movement be silent on Israel's aggression, including against Lebanon's territorial integrity and sovereignty, he said. Hopefully, Israel would show its political commitment to progress on the path to peace, not just through rhetoric but through concrete actions. The Non-Aligned Movement would continue firmly to support the peace process in the Middle East, based on the relevant Security Council resolutions and the principle of land for peace.

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