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DECISIVE STEPS NEEDED TOWARDS MIDDLE EAST PEACE OR 'WE RISK SLIDING BACKWARDS.'

TOP UN POLITICAL OFFICIAL WARNS. AS SECURITY COUNCIL HOLDS DAY-LONG DEBATE

Palestine Says Israeli 'Intransigence' Thwarted Efforts to Restart Peace Process; Israel Stresses Government Ready to Immediately Commence Direct Peace Negotiations

With Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at an "extremely worrying impasse", due largely to simmering tensions and frequent protests in East Jerusalem, ongoing deprivation in the Gaza Strip, and an uptick in militant rocket fire into Israel, a senior United Nations political official today warned the Security Council that the effort to forge a viable Middle East peace was seriously at risk.

"We remain deeply concerned at the current stalemate," said Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs said during his open briefing to the Council on the situation in the Middle East. He warned: "If we cannot move forward decisively towards a final status agreement, we risk sliding backwards, with potentially profound and negative implications." Some 43 delegations participated in the day-long debate, which was also attended by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Mr. Fernandez-Taranco was troubled by the abiding mistrust between the parties and cited disputes over terms of reference for negotiations, continued creation of facts on the ground, and uneven developments in the remainder of the West Bank as among the obstacles to efforts to re-launch serious Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. He also lamented that intense diplomatic activity aimed at jumpstarting the talks, including the recent visit to the region by United States Special Envoy George Mitchell, had failed to gain any traction.

While the parties had indicated that they were reviewing such developments, a breakthrough had not been achieved, he continued, urging both sides to implement their obligations under the Road Map peace plan, the blueprint for a two-State solution to the conflict endorsed by the diplomatic Quartet, comprising the United Nations, the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United States. "We believe that the Quartet can and must play its full role at this crucial juncture, if obstacles are to be overcome and a process is to be resumed with prospects for success," he said.

Among the growing tensions at the root of the impasse, he highlighted recent protests by both Israelis and Palestinians against Israeli actions in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, where several families had been evicted and others faced the same threat. Further, he said there continued to be official announcements of the intent to expand settlement construction within the Israeli-determined municipal boundaries of East Jerusalem, in areas of existing settlements and in Palestinian neighbourhoods, including a new project announced three weeks ago to house 24 settler families in the Palestinian neighbourhood of the Mount of Olives.

He urged the Israeli Government not to finalize approvals of those plans. "The final status of the city remains a final status issue for negotiations, through which a way must be found for Jerusalem to emerge as a capital of two States," he said, also strongly urging Israel to fully implement its obligation to freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth, and to dismantle outposts erected since March 2001.

Turning to Gaza, he said the failure to address the issues that led to Israel's military operation there last year and its aftermath had created an unsustainable situation and a "sense of hopelessness" for the population, over half of which was under the age of 18. He said Hamas remained in de facto control of Gaza, asserting security control and pushing forward its social agenda, and he regretted that Hamas refused to sign the Egyptian reconciliation proposal, accepted last year by Palestine Liberation Organization factions. He urged Hamas to reconsider that position and expressed continued support for the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank.

"There was a notable increase in the number of projectiles fired from Gaza by militant groups during this reporting period," said Mr. Fernandez-Taranco, with over 70 rockets fired and 19 landing in Israel. "Reports of weapons smuggling continue to cause concern." He added that there were also 20 Israeli incursions and

11 air strikes in the Strip, leading to 11 Palestinian deaths, including six civilians. "We urge all parties to refrain from violence and respect international humanitarian law."

Following that briefing, Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, opened the day-long debate by asking, "How can the world's conscience bear to continue witnessing the suffocation and deprivation of an entire people?" Deeming the situation on all fronts of the Palestinian question "critical", he said that Israel's impunity and intransigence had deepened the population's distress and thwarted efforts over the past year to restart the peace process. The situation in Gaza remained grave and the situation in East Jerusalem threatened to further inflame tensions and destabilize the already fragile area and the region beyond.

He also warned that Israel was targeting East Jerusalem with "an aggressive and illegal Israeli policy to alter its demographic composition, status and distinctly Palestinian Arab character and identity and to sever it from the rest of the Territory". Israel's "unlawful agenda" in East Jerusalem also extended to the expulsion or forced displacement of the indigenous population and the revocation of the residency rights of thousands of Palestinian inhabitants -- some 5,000 in 2008 alone.

As the global consensus regarding a two-State solution continued to solidify, Israel was blatantly and arrogantly accelerating its own effort to create an overwhelmingly Jewish majority there and entrench its de facto annexation of the city, he said. Indeed, it was clear that the very viability of the two-State solution and settlement of the entire Arab-Israeli conflict were at stake. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas maintained that peace talks could not resume while Israeli settlement activities continued. The international community and the Quartet stood behind that assertion. Yet, Israel continued to unlawfully create facts on the ground to alter the situation in its favour.

Israel's speaker said the only way towards peace was for the Israelis and Palestinians to engage in serious and honest bilateral negotiations to settle the issues that divided them. Her Government had stated repeatedly that Israel was prepared to immediately commence direct peace negotiations. Towards that goal, Israel had instituted an unprecedented policy of restraint throughout the settlements of the West Bank. That was the latest demonstration that it was prepared to take difficult steps for peace. She asked the Palestinian Observer why the Palestinian Authority "refrains from accepting Israel's outstretched hand to negotiate a historic peace".

In the last year, given the improving security situation across the West Bank, Israel had helped to facilitate considerable economic progress and growth, she said. In that unique environment, Israel called on the Palestinian Authority leadership to recognize the possibility of peace and return to the negotiating table. But in a region where threats abounded, she urged the international community to confront the real challenges to peace and security, namely: the threat of extremism, the danger of nuclear proliferation, and the plague of weapons smuggling and terrorism.

Less than one week ago, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal had proudly announced that Hamas "will never recognize the Zionist entity". Hamas continued to smuggle large quantities of weapons into Gaza. And earlier this month, 20 mortars and rockets had been fired from Gaza towards Israel, including a katyusha rocket, which landed south of Ashkelon, a city with a population of more than 100,000 Israeli citizens. "Where are the concerned voices for peace in the face of such hatred, such smuggling, and such attacks?" she asked.

Following statements by Council members, which urged meaningful talks on all permanent status issues and stepped up efforts to achieve the two-State solution, and assistance for Palestinians in building the institutions necessary for a Palestinian State, representatives from the region weighed in, with some warning that the situation in East Jerusalem was becoming "dangerous". Saudi Arabia's delegate, noting that in 2008 Israel had taken away the identifications of 5,000 Palestinians, under the pretext that they lived outside the Jerusalem municipality, said it intended to take away many thousands more soon. That Judaization and de-population could only be described as "ethnic cleansing".

Since the Council's last open debate on this issue in October 2009, said Egypt's representative on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, Israel had refused to freeze all settlement activities and continued to impose unilateral measures aimed at altering the status, the demographic composition and the Arab nature of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly East Jerusalem. By not refraining from measures that prejudiced the outcome of negotiations on the final status issues, Israel undermined confidence, inflamed tensions, prevented progress and raised questions about its credibility as a partner for peace, he said.

He called "unacceptable" Israel's decision to "restrain" rather than completely halt all settlement activity, and to even exclude East Jerusalem from the scope of that unilateral decision, saying that fell considerably short of Israel's obligations. And in the brief period since that unilateral declaration, Israel had announced the construction of more than 1,600 new units, particularly in Jerusalem, in addition to the construction of thousands more units already under way.

Yahya Mahmassani, Permanent Observer for the League of Arab States, pointed out that by the end of 2009, there were some 100,000 settlers and their number was increasing. The "invasion" of Palestinian territory by Jewish settlers did not support an independent, viable Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel's actions were a flagrant violation of international law. Some 30 per cent of East Jerusalem was now occupied by Israeli settlers and Israel's plan to increase the Jewish inhabitants there continued. However, the international community had declared the annexation of East Jerusalem illegal. Areas in Al-Quds were home to many holy sites, sacred to both Christians and Muslims, and their destruction would have serious repercussions throughout the Arab world.

Also expressing grave concern about the situation in East Jerusalem, and urging swift action to end the illegal activities there that were occurring "right under everybody's nose", Oman's representative, speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, said Israel continued to act as if it was immune to the international outcry against its illegal actions. The Security Council must defend international will and ensure that its resolutions were implemented. The wider international community must firmly address Israel's criminal activities, otherwise the civilian population, especially women and children throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, would continue to suffer.

He said negotiations would gain some degree of legitimacy if Israel ended settlement construction and stopped changing facts on the ground, especially in East Jerusalem. "Israel is totally out of control," and its illegal activities continually undermined any attempts to jumpstart the peace process. The Arab Group, therefore, would urge the international community to ensure that Israel seriously committed to the negotiation process and assumed its legal and moral obligations to the Palestinian people. The international community must move beyond "timid rhetoric" and take a robust stand to end the status quo.

Also speaking today were the representatives of Russian Federation, United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Lebanon, United States, Uganda, Mexico, Brazil, Austria, Japan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Gabon, Nigeria, China, Cuba, Indonesia, Morocco, Algeria, Norway, Viet Nam, Jordan, Pakistan, Argentina, Syria (on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference), Qatar, South Africa, Malaysia, Venezuela, United Arab Emirates, Nicaragua, Tunisia, Iran, and Sri Lanka.

The Acting Head of the Delegation of the European Union also addressed the meeting, as did the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

The meeting began at 10:13 a.m. and was suspended at 1:05 p.m. It re-opened at 3:12 p.m. and closed at 6:33 p.m.

Background

The Security Council met this morning to hear a briefing on the situation in the Middle East, followed by an open debate.

OSCAR FERNANDEZ-TARANCO, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said that an “extremely worrying impasse” persisted in the efforts to bring about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations amid lack of confidence between the parties, disputes over terms of reference for negotiations, continued creation of facts on the ground, tensions in Jerusalem, uneven developments in the remainder of the West Bank, and unsustainable conditions in the Gaza Strip.

He said that intense diplomatic activity was continuing to try to jumpstart negotiations between the two sides, including through United States Envoy Mitchell’s recent visit to the region. While the parties had indicated that they were reviewing developments, a breakthrough had not been achieved. The Secretary-General and his envoy were also actively engaged with Palestinians and Israelis, as well as other actors in the region and among the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East peace process, in an effort to support the initiation of a meaningful process that led to a clear end game.

“We believe that the Quartet can and must play its full role at this crucial juncture, if obstacles are to be overcome and a process is to be resumed with prospects for success,” he said, adding that the Israeli and Palestinian sides must also assume their responsibilities. In that regard, Israel, notwithstanding certain steps already taken, could and should do considerably more to build confidence through the implementation of obligations on the ground and by signalling a genuine commitment to negotiate and resolve core issues, including Jerusalem, within a clear timeframe.

“And while we do not underestimate the difficulties and concerns involved, the Palestinians should continue to engage in earnest, as they are doing, in an effort to bring about resumed negotiations,” he said. At the same time, despite the political impasse, the Palestinian Authority continued its efforts to advance its state-building agenda. During the reporting period, it had marked the completion of its 1,000th small project targeting underserved communities since 2008. He also said that, on 14 January, Prime Minister Fayyad had presented the Government’s priority interventions for 2010 – institution-building, strategic infrastructure and delivery of services. The total cost was estimated at some \$5.5 billion, while only 50 per cent of such projects were partially or fully funded. The Palestinian Authority faced a budget deficit of some \$1.2 billion and was, therefore, in need of further budgetary support this year.

He went on to say that the Palestinian Authority continued to make progress in both law and order and in combating potential terrorism, in accordance with the Road Map. Some 400 newly-trained Palestinian security personnel had been deployed in Hebron in early January, and progress had also been made recently in addressing human rights concerns in Palestinian Authority prisons. He also noted, positively, new Israeli measures to facilitate economic activity in the West Bank. For example, on 4 January the opening hours of the Takumiya commercial goods crossing between the southern West Bank and Israel had been extended to improve the access of goods. “We urge Israel to take more far-reaching measures to facilitate Palestinian development in the West Bank, including further easing closures [...] and refraining from demolishing Palestinian homes,” he said, noting specifically that during the reporting period, such demolitions had left more than 100 Palestinians, including 34 children, homeless.

Reiterating the Secretary-General’s concern about the situation in East Jerusalem, he called on Israeli authorities to put an end to activities such as settlement construction and expansion, house demolition, closures of institutions, and the revocation of residency rights. He said that, during the reporting period, Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, including the Chamber of Commerce, had remained closed, contrary to the Road Map and as they had for nearly a decade. There were also concerns regarding settler-run archaeological excavations in the sensitive Silwan neighbourhood adjacent to the Old City, including tunnelling activities.

Continuing, he said there continued to be official announcements of the intent to expand settlement construction within the Israeli-determined municipal boundaries of occupied East Jerusalem, in areas of existing settlements and in Palestinian neighbourhoods. Those included 692 new housing units in three existing settlements announced on 28 December 2009 and a new project announced three weeks ago to house 24 settler families in the Palestinian neighbourhood of the Mount of Olives. He urged the Israeli Government not to finalize approvals of those plans. “The final status of the city remains a final status issue for negotiations, through which a way must be found for Jerusalem to emerge as a capital of two States,” he said.

He said the policy of partial temporary settlement restraint in the remainder of the West Bank, announced in November by Prime Minister Netanyahu, was broadly being implemented. Teams of Israeli inspectors had visited settlements to verify that stop-work orders were being put into effect. However, due to exemptions in the policy and, in some cases, ongoing construction contrary to the policy, construction activity had been reported in some settlements. “We once again strongly urge full implementation of Israel’s obligation to freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth, and to dismantle outposts erected since March 2001,” he said, adding that two weeks ago, the Palestinian leadership had announced that it was seeking a boycott of settlement products within Palestinian areas.

On other matters, he said that during the reporting period, there had been a substantial increase in Israeli military operations in the West Bank in response to alleged security threats – 143 in total. Three Palestinians had been killed, 87 injured and over 300 arrested, 12 of whom had been found carrying explosives. In a serious episode, Palestinian gunmen had killed a settler on a road near Nablus on 24 December, and Israeli forces had entered Nablus two days later and killed three Palestinians alleged to be perpetrators. The Palestinian Authority had denounced that action.

Turning to Gaza, he recalled that the Secretary-General had noted, on the first anniversary of “Cast Lead” on 27 December, that he remained gravely concerned that neither the issues that had led to that conflict, nor its worrying aftermath, were being addressed. That had created an unsustainable situation and a sense of hopelessness for the civilian population in Gaza, more than half of which was under 18. He said that Hamas remained in de facto control of Gaza, asserting security control and pushing forward its social agenda, and he regretted that Hamas refused to sign the Egyptian reconciliation proposal, accepted last year by Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) factions following extended discussions. He urged Hamas to reconsider that position and expressed continued support for the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank, within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. He also expressed the hope that free and fair elections throughout the Palestinian Territory could be held as soon as possible.

He went on to say that efforts to secure the release of Israeli captive Gilad Shalit in exchange for a number of the 9,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails had so far not achieved a breakthrough. He also said there had been a notable increase in the number of projectiles fired from Gaza by militant groups during the earlier part of the current reporting period. There had also been 20 Israeli incursions and 11 air strikes against targets inside Gaza, leading to 11 Palestinian fatalities. That spike in violence was worrying and underscored the fragility of the current situation. “However, we continue to believe from our contacts that major constituencies wish to maintain calm,” he added.

Continuing, he said that reports of weapons smuggling remained of concern. Egyptian efforts to combat it continued, through the use of tunnel detecting sensors and the insertion of metal sheeting in parts of the ground along the border. Goods smuggled through tunnels were both sustaining and distorting the Gaza economy. There was an urgent need for all crossings into Gaza to be opened as foreseen in the Agreement on Movement and Access.

On 6 January, during a demonstration by Palestinians in Rafah demanding the entry of a solidarity convoy of humanitarian aid, he recalled that an Egyptian soldier had been shot and killed on the Egyptian side of the border with Gaza. As the incident evolved, at least 13 Palestinians were injured on the Gazan side of the border. The Egyptian authorities had called on Hamas to ensure that those involved in the killing were brought to justice.

He repeated the call for an end to the blockade of Gaza. During the reporting period, a weekly average of 534 truckloads of imports entered the Strip, a 10 per cent decline in quantity from the last reporting period, although it was positive that, in December 2009, there had been a slight expansion in the types of allowed imports, with goods such as candles, brooms, eye glasses and blankets entering. There was a 13 per cent increase in the amount of cooking gas entering Gaza, although shortages remained.

There had also been a limited response to the United Nations call for a winterization package for Gaza, he said. In particular, since 29 December, and following

an appeal to the Israeli Government by the Secretary-General, 57 truckloads of glass had entered Gaza as part of an Israeli clearance, for a total of 100 truckloads. That had enabled more ordinary families to repair some of the smaller damage caused during Operation Cast Lead. Israel had also permitted the export of 41 truckloads, comprising nearly 2 million carnations and more than 40 tonnes of strawberries during the reporting period, with approximately 300 tonnes of strawberries expected to be exported by the end of the season.

He reported that the Gaza power plant faced fuel shortages, largely as a result of funding shortfalls, and efforts were continuing to resolve that important issue to prevent a shutdown of the plant. It was also vital that the entry of materials for repair of electricity infrastructure was facilitated by Israel, together with sufficient quantities of fuel.

On 1 January, citing concerns over tunnelling and the risk of attack, the Israeli authorities announced that the Nahal Oz crossing, which was used for the transfer of fuel from Israel to Gaza, would no longer be operational, he said, adding that the bulk of fuel imports would now pass through the much smaller capacity Kerim Shalom crossing. With the exception of a conveyor belt at the Karni crossing used for the import of grain, it was very concerning that Kerim Shalom was now the only operational crossing for the import and export of goods into and from Gaza.

He said there had still been no satisfactory Israeli response to the United Nations proposal to complete stalled projects for housing, schools and health facilities. That was extremely disappointing, and the Secretary-General intended to continue to pursue that matter. Restrictions that appeared to be preventing senior international visitors from entering Gaza were also of concern.

Towards the end of 2009, there had been an increase in impediments within Gaza, owing to demands from Hamas for information from aid agencies, leading to several incidents involving the confiscation or interference with aid supplies, he noted. Following interventions by the United Nations, the goods had been released and operations had resumed. The United Nations would continue to insist on non-interference with international aid operations in Gaza.

He reported that, on 15 January, an arrangement had been concluded whereby the Government of Israel had made a payment of \$10.5 million to the United Nations in respect of losses sustained in the nine incidents investigated by the Gaza Board of Inquiry. In light of that payment, the United Nations had agreed that the financial issues relating to those incidents had been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. As members of the Security Council were aware, the Secretary-General had written to the Council President informing of that arrangement. Hopefully, Israel would allow the entry of sufficient materials to allow the rebuilding of the damaged United Nations buildings and facilities, now that funds were available.

The United Nations continued to support all efforts towards a resumption of Israeli-Syrian negotiations, and comprehensive regional peace, he stressed. United States Envoy Mitchell had visited Lebanon and Syria on 19 and 20 January in the course of consultations on a comprehensive regional peace, and had met with the leaders of both countries. On the ground, the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan remained stable, although settlement activity continued.

Reporting on progress in Lebanese-Syrian relations, he said those had been highlighted by Prime Minister Hariri's first visit to Damascus on 19 December 2009. However, on the security front, an explosion had occurred on 26 December 2009 inside a building used by Hamas in Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiye, leaving two Hamas members dead and three others wounded. Progress, albeit slow, continued towards the reconstruction of the Nahr el Bared refugee camp, which had commenced on 25 November 2009.

The situation in the area of operations of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) remained quiet, but fragile, he said. On 26 December, in the vicinity of Sarda, a UNIFIL patrol had observed several men digging a hole, where 250 kilograms of explosives had been found by UNIFIL; the men had fled as the patrol approached. Israeli air violations had continued on a daily basis during the reporting period, with a marked increase in early January.

"We remain deeply concerned at the current stalemate," he warned. "If we cannot move forward decisively towards a final status agreement, we risk sliding backwards, with potentially profound and negative implications." He continued to urge the parties to implement their Road Map obligations, build confidence, resume negotiations on all final status issues, and see them through to a two-State solution. The Quartet must play its full role in support of the process. He remained committed to an end in the occupation that began in 1967 and an end to the conflict, through the creation of a Palestinian State, living side-by-side with Israel in peace and security, and a comprehensive regional peace, in accordance with Security Council resolutions, previous agreements, the Road Map, and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Statements

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine, said that the Palestinian Authority had earlier declared 27 January as an international day of solidarity with Palestinian prisoners, and he hoped that the situation of those Palestinians detained in Israeli prisons would soon change. The Palestinian people had begun yet another year facing formidable challenges and hardships. "The situation on all fronts is critical due to ongoing Israeli violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

"Israel's impunity and intransigence have deepened the population's distress and thwarted efforts over the past year to restart the peace process," he continued, stressing that the situation in Gaza remained grave and the situation in East Jerusalem threatened to further inflame tensions and destabilize the already fragile area and the region beyond. Citing "unbearable suffering" in Gaza, he said that one year after Israel's incursion into the Strip, the traumatized population there continued to chafe under Israel's ongoing blockade and deliberate obstruction of the reconstruction effort.

He said that the perpetuation of that unjust and absurd "man-made disaster" confirmed, "beyond a reasonable doubt, that this blockade is aimed at collectively punishing and debilitating the population." Indeed, the population had been impoverished, the civilian infrastructure was nearing complete collapse, and the population was now largely dependent on aid for basic necessities, including health care and sanitation. The aftermath of the Gaza crisis had sown the seeds of deep despair and hopelessness, with far-reaching consequences for the Palestinian people now and in the future.

He asked: "How can the world's conscience bear to continue witnessing the suffocation and deprivation of an entire people?" His delegation would continue to press the Council to answer such questions in its pursuit of accountability and justice, including in follow-up to the report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (known as the Goldstone report), "for the war crimes committed against our people".

More than a year after Israel's aggression against Gaza and nearly three years since the imposition of the blockade, he said, the Palestinian people and their leadership once again called on the international community to take whatever steps necessary to break the blockade and compel Israel to immediately open Gaza's border crossings to the regular sustained movement of persons and goods. That would be essential for allowing reconstruction to begin in earnest and to finally jumpstart social and economic recovery, including the Secretary-General's proposals for reconstruction through United Nations civilian infrastructure projects, "which Israel shamefully continued to reject".

Turning to the situation in the West Bank, he said the people there also continued to suffer from Israel's ongoing illegal seizure and colonization of their land, "particularly in and around the heart of the Palestinian Territory: Occupied East Jerusalem." Of utmost concern was Israel's construction of settlements and the wall, its demolition of Palestinian homes, its provocations against holy sites and "settler terror and lawlessness" against Palestinian civilians and properties.

He went on to say that Israel continued to issue regular official declarations regarding new settlement construction, defying repeated international calls to end such activities, comply with international law and the Road Map, and implement United Nations resolutions. Israel was continuing to target East Jerusalem with

"an aggressive and illegal Israeli policy to alter its demographic composition, status and distinctly Palestinian Arab character and identity, and to sever it from the rest of the Territory," he said, adding that Israel's "unlawful agenda" in East Jerusalem also extended to the expulsion or forced displacement of the indigenous population and the revocation of the residency rights of thousands of Palestinian inhabitants -- some 5,000 in 2008 alone.

Clearly, he said, as the international consensus regarding a two-State solution continued to solidify, Israel was blatantly and arrogantly accelerating its own effort to create an overwhelmingly Jewish majority there and entrench its de facto annexation of the city. Indeed, it was clear that the very viability of the two-State solution, and settlement of the entire Arab-Israeli conflict, were at stake. He said Mahmoud Abbas had repeatedly maintained that peace negotiations could not resume while Israeli settlement activities continued. The international community and the Quartet stood behind that assertion. Yet, Israel continued to unlawfully create facts on the ground to alter the situation in its favour.

"Our insistence remains that the peace we are struggling for be based on international law, and that it be a just peace," he declared. Illegal Israeli actions, which were totally contradictory to peace and only fuelled conflict, must no longer be tolerated. Salvaging and promoting a lasting peace on the basis of a two-State solution was dependant on that. Thus, while he welcomed the importance of statements from around the globe denouncing Israeli settlement activities and other illegal measures, ongoing developments provided ample proof that statements alone would not be enough.

Serious practical measures were needed to compel Israel to once and for all cease its colonization of Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and abide by its legal obligations. "We reiterate the need for collective, practical measures, and it is imperative that the Security Council effectively shoulder its responsibilities in that regard," he said. That would dramatically alter the situation on the ground and create the proper conditions to "propel us to a new phase that will bring an end to this prolonged, tragic conflict and will usher in an era of peace, security and coexistence."

GABRIELA SHALEV (Israel), noting that "yet another debate" was taking place on the situation in the Middle East, asked if engagement was taking place with equal frequency on other pressing global matters. She also asked whether meetings, such as those taking place today, could promote peace. History showed that nothing substituted for negotiations between the parties. Peace would be a result of direct negotiations between them, and not meetings of the Council, important as that body was. The only way towards peace was for the Israelis and Palestinians to engage in serious and honest bilateral negotiations to settle the issues that divided them. Her Government had stated repeatedly that Israel was prepared to immediately commence direct peace negotiations.

She said that towards that goal, Israel had instituted an unprecedented policy of restraint throughout the settlements of the West Bank. That was the latest demonstration that Israel was prepared to take difficult steps for peace. She asked the Palestinian Observer why the Palestinian Authority "refrains from accepting Israel's outstretched hand to negotiate a historic peace".

In the last year, given the improving security situation across the West Bank, Israel had helped to facilitate considerable economic progress and growth, she said. In that unique environment, Israel called on the Palestinian Authority leadership to recognize the possibility of peace and return to the negotiating table. In that respect, Israel saluted the efforts by the United States Administration and of Special Envoy George Mitchell to help to facilitate the re-launch of peace negotiations.

In a region where threats abounded, she urged the international community to confront the real challenges to peace and security, namely: the threat of extremism, the danger of nuclear proliferation, and the plague of weapons smuggling and terrorism. In the Gaza Strip, the terrorist Hamas regime continued to hold hostage Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit, in contravention of his most basic rights. Hamas failed to acknowledge previous agreements. It failed to reject violence. And it failed to recognize Israel.

Less than one week ago, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal had proudly announced that Hamas "will never recognize the Zionist entity". Hamas continued to smuggle large quantities of weapons into Gaza. And earlier this month, 20 mortars and rockets had been fired from Gaza towards Israel, including a katyusha rocket, which landed south of Ashkelon, a city with a population of more than 100,000 Israeli citizens. "Where are the concerned voices for peace in the face of such hatred, such smuggling, and such attacks?" she asked.

The silence was all too familiar when Israeli civilians were under terrorist attack, she said, stressing that the firing of any weapons from Gaza at Israeli territory "will be met with a strong and immediate response".

She recalled that, on 26 December 2009, near Al-Khiyam, south of the Litani River and only one kilometre from the Israeli-Lebanese border, the world had witness the discovery of nearly 300 kilograms of sophisticated explosives, planted in close proximity to civilian infrastructure. That event -- along with the explosions in Tayr Fils and Khirbat Silim in 2009 -- highlighted the dangerous pattern employed by an active Hizbullah in Lebanon. Such manifest violations of resolution 1701 (2006) merited serious attention and must be addressed in future reports of the Council.

In the face of those challenges, she extended Israel's gratitude to the positive role played by UNIFIL, particularly its outgoing Commander, General Graziano, and she wished the new Commander, General Asera, much success.

She said that terrorism in her region was fuelled by the flow of illegal arms. Such weapons smuggling -- or, transfer -- reflected a menacing pattern by two particular Member States, which used terrorist proxies to sow violence and endless bloodshed. The continued supplying of arms across the Syrian-Lebanese border to Hizbullah was a gross violation of the arms embargo, as well as other Security Council resolution, and Israel called on the Council and the international community to remain actively seized of those matters in United Nations debates and reports.

The Governments that fuelled terrorism in the region represented not merely an Israeli problem or merely a Middle Eastern problem; they represented a global problem, she said. In the face of such global threats, the international community had a responsibility to support those who acted responsibly, and isolate those who did not. Governments and other forces must act boldly and seize the present window of opportunity. In doing so, the values that lead to peace, justice and reconciliation would be upheld.

Today, upon the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the world should remember and honour all those who perished there.

VITALY CHURKIN (Russian Federation) said that priority attention should be devoted to re-launching negotiations, a path which had been peppered by several obstacles. The minute dialogue ceased, diplomatic activity wilted, often leading to upheaval in that part of the world. That was why he advocated new consultations between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government. To achieve the desired aims, the parties must scrupulously discharge their obligations under the Road Map. Among others, he was referring in particular to the cessation of settlement activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Although the Road Map did not specifically cite cessation of settlement activity as a precondition for negotiations, the situation nowadays has become a genuine barrier on the path to achieving understanding. That was why several partners had expressed deep concern about the decision of the Jerusalem municipal planning committee to build new settlements in the city. In the historical section near the holy sites of three world religions, settlers were altering the status quo.

He urged all parties to refrain from any steps that would prejudice the final status, and said that lasting peace could also not be achieved without resolving Gaza. Steps needed to be taken to tackle the humanitarian disaster under which Gazans lived. The pause in negotiations had meant that it was not possible to announce the dates for a Moscow conference on the Middle East, but he could confirm support for that forum by Quartet partners and the whole international community. His country proposed the convening at the end of February of a ministerial-level Quartet meeting in Moscow, in an attempt to transcend the crises in dialogue, leading to the organization of an international conference. Current diplomatic efforts were of fundamental importance to extricate the peace process.

from the current impasse.

A clear priority was to restore intra-Palestinian unity, he said. He supported the efforts of Egypt, which played a key role in that regard. Continued contacts with Hamas were aimed at convincing its leaders to act in line with the aspirations of the Palestinian people. The Russian Federation would work with all Palestinian sides, convinced that, without Palestinian unity, it would be very difficult to achieve a final status for Palestine. Russia was also devoting special attention to Palestinian development, through serious economic projects and deepened cultural and educational links. Palestinians were regularly educated in his country, via grants provided by the Government, and individuals were trained in Moscow.

The Palestinian people yearned for their own State, and the Russian Federation, together with other members of the international community, would assist in achieving a settlement in the Middle East, mindful that a final settlement must be comprehensive. In Lebanon, he welcomed the present positive moment in the internal domestic situation, which had been the result of patient dialogue among all Lebanese parties. Such a path was in line with strengthening the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Lebanese State.

MARK LYALL GRANT (United Kingdom) said peace in the Middle East was a key objective of his Government, the European Union and the international community. At the same time, the ongoing stalemate between the two sides was a symbol of all parties' failure to bring about a settlement. That situation was not merely a return to the status quo; it bred frustration on the ground. Meaningful negotiations must, therefore, start as soon as possible, if hope was to replace frustration. The United Kingdom continued to support the efforts of the United States and hoped Envoy George Mitchell's activities would lead to some real progress.

At the same time, he said the Israelis and Palestinians should recognize that peace could only be achieved through meaningful negotiations. Moreover, the United States should not be alone in the task or bringing the two sides together. The other members of the Quartet and the European Union would continue to carry out their obligations in that regard. The Israeli and Palestinian sides should also step up their efforts to achieve the two-State solution, including Jerusalem as capital of both States and settlement of the issue with refugees. A way must be found for Jerusalem to be shared as the capital of both States, he reiterated.

To that end, and while taking into consideration steps that had been taken, the United Kingdom continued to be concerned about ongoing settlement construction. He called on Israel to stop creating new facts on the ground, which would only undermine efforts to achieve peace. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority must continue its efforts to unify all factions, and he urged Hamas to unite behind the Palestinian Authority's efforts. He said that the situation in Gaza remained dire. While there had been some easing of movement, there could be no real improvement until the flow of goods for the region's reconstruction were allowed in on a more regular basis. Failing to do so only provided increased traffic through the tunnels, created greater anger, and ultimately, more radicalization of Gazans, and provided more funding to Hamas. It was in Israel's own interest to ease such restrictions. Hamas bore its own responsibility, and it must renounce violence, cease rocket attacks and must release Gilad Shalit immediately.

Finally, he said that a precious opportunity to achieve peace was at hand. The effort was being bolstered by serious support from the United States. There was also broad international convergence on the parameters of a settlement and the two leaders claimed to want to reach a negotiated agreement. Nevertheless, he warned, the current favourable international context would not last forever, and the alternative to a two-State solution was lasting conflict. It was time for the leaders of the two sides to rise above political concerns and pressures and work towards lasting peace.

GÉRARD ARAUD (France) said the visit last week by Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri had been an opportunity for France to express its renewed support for Lebanon and for the normalization of relations between it and Syria, which was an opportunity for the region as a whole. France hoped that normalization would "go all the way", including border demarcation between the two countries, according to Council resolutions. In that connection, resolution 1701 (2006) must be fully implemented. He also urged continued contact between the United Nations and Israeli authorities.

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, he said that the objective was clearly the urgent re-launch of the peace process; there was no other option but to return to talks aimed at creating a viable Palestinian State. France associated itself with the statement to be made by the European Union. It also reiterated resolute support for efforts undertaken by the United States. The Union was ready to play its firm role. Progress was needed on the ground, and settlements remained a major obstacle along the road to solutions. Israel had announced a 10-month moratorium on settlements; however, no peace would be possible without the full cessation, including in East Jerusalem. The settlements were illegal and made the prospects for a Palestinian State more difficult. They also did not contribute to Israeli security; to the contrary, they increased the dangers. He also called for a cessation of home demolitions and evictions in East Jerusalem. Peace could not exclude East Jerusalem, which was to become the capital of the two States.

He urged the Palestinian authority to continue its efforts to bolster the security sector and implement the rule of law, in which the fight against terrorism should remain the priority. To forget Gaza would be a mistake, and he called for the immediate lifting of the blockade, as well as for an end to illegal arms trafficking in the enclave. Israel should cease blocking implementation of resolution 1860. He also called for the immediate release of Corporal Shalit. Regarding the Goldstone report, international humanitarian law must be respected at all times and under all circumstances, and by all parties to a conflict. He recalled the importance of implementation by both parties of an independent inquiry process in step with international standards. The international community should help to strengthen the Palestinian Authority in the context of consolidating the institutions of a future Palestinian State, and financial support was crucial. He noted that, last night, France's Foreign Minister had presided over a follow-up meeting to the 2007 Paris donors' conference, at which \$5.2 billion had been pledged. That would continue to be followed closely. He repeated — there was an urgent need to re-launch negotiations. That main goal was important for Palestinians and Israelis, and for peace in the region as a whole.

ERTUĞRUL APAKAN (Turkey) said that meaningful negotiations covering all core issues leading to a comprehensive settlement of the Middle East conflict should start without further delay. For that to happen, the remaining obstacles to negotiations must be removed and a focus must be put on confidence-building.

In that respect, he wanted to emphasize the current pattern of demolition of Palestinian homes, eviction of Palestinian families and the revocation of residency rights of Palestinians in Jerusalem, "which is unacceptable and undermines trust between the parties." Last year set an all-time record for the number of Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem who were stripped of residency rights. In 2008, the number of such actions was 21 times the average of the previous 40 years, which was quite striking and gave a clear idea about the scope of the current practice. The international community did not recognize Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. The core issues included the status of Jerusalem and it should be settled in a way that allowed it to emerge as the capital of two States living side by side. It was, therefore, important, meanwhile, to preserve the demographic composition, character, status and the cultural and religious fabric of Jerusalem. He called on Israel to put an end to forced evictions, house demolitions and provocative actions.

He said that it was difficult to see how any agreement could be reached while the settlements continued to grow. Therefore, Israel must go beyond moratoriums, which were very limited in scope and timeframe, and meet its commitments in full. All settlement activities, including natural growth, must cease, completely and permanently, and outposts erected since 2001 must be dismantled. Otherwise, it would not be possible to clear the way towards a peace based on a two-State solution.

In regard to Gaza, he said one year after the Israeli operation, more than 1.4 million Palestinian men, women and children were still trapped. Mass unemployment, extreme poverty and food insecurity were steadily worsening, due to the impact of the continuing Israeli blockade. "This cannot go on," he said. The suffering must come to an end and Council resolution 1860 must be implemented. Unless the crossings were fully open and there was an absolute return to normal, building confidence and making progress towards peace would be difficult.

"In the Middle East we are, yet again, at the crossroads," he said. "The stakes are high." Progress must be made under the framework of Security Council

resolutions, the Road Map, the Madrid terms of reference and the Arab Peace Initiative. At such a critical stage, there was no alternative to pushing forward with determination. Otherwise, as the Secretary-General said, we risk sliding backwards, which was a possibility no one could afford.

NAWAF SALAM (Lebanon) said that a year had passed since the Council had adopted a resolution calling for a cessation of Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip. The situation there was still troubling and Israel had succeeded in turning Gaza into "one big prison," through its ongoing closures and refusal to allow any reconstruction activities. Israel was breaching many international laws and covenants, including the Geneva Convention. Israel also continued its assault against Lebanon and other occupied territories by land, sea and air.

The situation throughout Palestine continued to deteriorate, and although the Israeli leadership had claimed to want to take steps to remedy the situation there, that Government's actions on the ground undermined such claims, he said. Settlements continued to be built, Israel continued its claims to Jerusalem and no decision had been made regarding Palestinian refugees. Prime Minister Netanyahu continued to justify such settlement expansion as "natural growth," when the number of settlers was doubling because Israel continued to defy calls to end such activities. It also continued to impose restrictions on the inhabitants of East Jerusalem and seemed bent on changing the historical character of the city.

Israel was also continuing to destroy Palestinian homes and to confiscate residency permits. It was also imposing religious restrictions on both Muslims and Christians wishing to worship at the holy sites in East Jerusalem. Those actions were a "brazen challenge" to international humanitarian and human rights law. He said that all those actions undermined efforts to achieve a two-State solution, for without Jerusalem, there could be no viable Palestinian State. Indeed, Israel was violating the multidimensional nature of the city. He said the path to peace was well-known and the only thing Lebanon was asking was that the Security Council stand by its obligations – and the resolutions it had adopted – to ensure a lasting settlement was achieved.

ALEJANDRO WOLFF (United States) said that advancing the cause of peace in the Middle East remained one of the United States' most important foreign policy endeavours. Its commitment was unwavering, and only through negotiations could the objective be realized. He strongly encouraged international support and the immediate resumption of negotiations towards the two-State solution, which was the only realistic way forward. That was in the interest, not only of the United States, but of Israelis, Palestinians, and all of the region's people. He called on the Council to underscore that message publicly and with all the parties. Waiting to resume talks benefited no one and did nothing to meet the legitimate needs of Israelis or Palestinians.

He noted that United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had said that, through good faith negotiations, the parties could end the conflict and recognize the Palestinian goal of an independent and viable State based on 1967 lines with agreed swaps, and Israel's goal of a Jewish State with secure and recognized borders. Despite the difficulties, the United States was committed to re-launching negotiations and to the cause of a comprehensive Middle East peace, and its National Security Advisor and Special Envoy for the region had had several key diplomatic contacts recently for that purpose. With the Israelis and Palestinians, the United States had consistently pursued a two-prong approach: to encourage the parties to enter into negotiations to reach agreement on all permanent status issues; and to help Palestinians build the economic and other institutions necessary for a Palestinian State. The two objectives were mutually reinforcing.

The United States supported implementation of all Road Map obligations, including a freeze on settlements, he said. It did not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements, but it also believed that the settlement moratorium was a significant step that could have a meaningful effect on the ground. United States policy on Jerusalem also remained unchanged: its status and all other status issues should be resolved through negotiation. He disagreed with some Israeli actions affecting Palestinians, such as the pattern of housing demolitions and evictions. Neither party should pre-empt negotiations through such actions. The United States recognized that Jerusalem was a deeply important issue for both parties – and for Jews, Muslims and Christians worldwide. Through good faith negotiations, the parties could agree to an outcome that realized the aspirations of both parties for Jerusalem and safeguarded its status for all people.

He urged the Palestinians to ensure security and reform institutions, as well as to refrain from any incitement, and he criticized the recent attendance by the Palestinian Authority at a ceremony commending an attack against Israelis. He was, meanwhile, pleased that United Nations staff continued to work with Israel on issues related to the Gaza Board of Inquiry. At the same time, he called on Israel to reopen its border crossings with Gaza, with appropriate monitors to address security concerns. Hamas had yet to accept the principles of the Quartet, renounce violence, recognize Israel, or accept previous agreements and obligations, including the Road Map. Nor had it shown greater interest in building a future for Palestinians through anything other than its hateful rhetoric. He was also concerned with Hamas' efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza, as well as with the continued arms smuggling and launch of rockets against Israel – which had precipitated the Gaza conflict just over a year ago. He also called for the immediate release of Corporal Shalit, held since 2006.

He said that a key support for the Palestinian people came from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and he thanked Karen AbuZayd, the Agency's Commissioner-General for the past nine years, for her years of service. He welcomed the incoming chief, noting that the Deputy Commissioner-General came from the United States. The United States was UNRWA's largest single donor. Unfortunately, the Agency still faced severe and chronic shortfalls. Donors' provision of sizeable emergency support was welcome, but it was no substitute for predictable annual funding. He welcomed the renewed commitment of the Arab League, which pledged up to 7.8 per cent of UNRWA's general fund, stressing the importance of delivering on that pledge. He also urged fulfilment of resolution 1701 (2006) concerning the situation in Lebanon.

BENEDICT LAWRENCE LUKWYA (Uganda) said the Middle East peace process was at a delicate and critical juncture. The situation on the ground remained tense, and he called for the parties to begin negotiations immediately. He called on both sides to work assiduously to attain a viable two-State solution. While Uganda noted positive steps being taken by the Palestinian Authority to bolster economic growth and tackle security issues, it was concerned with the continued construction of settlements by Israel. With that in mind, he called for an end to such actions.

He also welcomed Egypt's efforts to achieve Palestinian unity and called on all factions to get behind those efforts for the betterment of the entire population. He was very concerned by the increase in rocket fire into Israel and was similarly concerned about stepped-up Israeli military activities. Uganda called on the parties to work to decrease tensions in the region, and towards restarting serious negotiations.

CLAUDE HELLER (Mexico) said the Council's debate was taking place close to United Nations Holocaust remembrance activities, and he urged all Governments to continue to fight anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia in all their forms. It was also the anniversary of the Council's adoption of the resolution that ended the December-January crisis in Gaza. It was troubling that those resolutions had, in some measure, remained unimplemented. As such, it was the duty of the Council and the wider international community to work even harder to help bring the two sides to the negotiating table. Nevertheless, the ultimate responsibility for returning to the table rested with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Both should work towards a lasting peace for the benefit of the people of the region. Their actions should follow the path laid down by the resolutions and statements of the Security Council.

He went on to note that dismantlement of all checkpoints would be essential to the establishment of a viable Palestinian State. That, along with the Palestinian Authority exercising control over all Palestinian territories, was essential to a lasting peace and the creation of a viable Palestinian state. At the same time, such efforts would be undermined if Israeli settlement activity continued. He called on Israel to stand by its stated objective of ending settlement construction and called on the international community to support the Israeli Government's efforts to that end. He called on both sides to refrain from any activities that would stoke tensions. He also called on all Palestinian factions to support the reunification efforts of Egypt. As for the situation in Gaza, he said continued restrictions on movement, especially of goods and humanitarian supplies, was most troubling and could only lead to increased tensions on the ground, as well as to illegal activities aimed at obtaining basic goods. He said that peace required renewed dialogue between Palestinian and Israeli authorities, as well as regional reconciliation efforts underway in Lebanon.

MARIA LUIZA RIBEIRO VOTTI (Brazil) said that the situation in Gaza remained of grave concern. Access to basic goods and services was grossly insufficient. The lack of building materials prevented much-needed reconstruction, despite the recent permissions for some glass to enter the Strip. Palestinians, therefore,

were still forced to live in conditions that were simply intolerable. That must end without further delay. More than a year had passed since adoption of resolution 1860 (2009), yet, still, the blockade had not been lifted. Israeli security concerns could, and must be, reconciled with the suspension of the blockade. Another unresolved issue related to the Gaza war was accountability, and there remained a need for credible and independent investigations on the disturbing findings of the Goldstone report. She looked forward to the Secretary-General's report on the outcome of investigations, as requested by the General Assembly. She noted the payment made by Israel for compensation for the losses sustained by the United Nations during that conflict, but stressed that such serious incidents must not happen again.

It was not only the humanitarian situation in Gaza that was untenable more than a year later, she said, pointing to the paralysis of the peace process, which risked further deterioration of the political landscape. An independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State, living side-by-side with Israel in peace and security, within internationally recognized borders, was long overdue. The challenge now was to find a way forward that would enable both parties to resume serious and result-oriented negotiations as soon as possible. Her delegation understood that intense efforts were under way to create the conditions for the process to resume. Parties were obliged to avoid all actions that might jeopardize those efforts. Attempts by Israel to artificially create a fait accompli on the ground and change the demographics of the West Bank and East Jerusalem were especially unhelpful. Palestinians should also do their part by overcoming their divisions, keeping extremists in check and enhancing democratic governance.

The international community, for its part, must remain engaged and provide the diplomatic support needed to sustain the peace process. Brazil reiterated its support for a comprehensive conference on the Middle East, once conditions were appropriate. Further involvement by relevant players from outside the region might also prove beneficial. But, as everyone knew, there would be no peace in the Middle East without a Palestinian State, the establishment of which was in the long-term interest of all. The parties must be assisted in translating that common interest into a politically-sustainable negotiating process without further delay, with a view to reaching a peace agreement at the earliest.

THOMAS MAYR-HARTING (*Austria*) said his delegation remained gravely concerned that peace talks remained deadlocked, despite efforts to bring them to the negotiating table. He called on the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government to step up their efforts to negotiate in good faith, so that such serious matters would not be placed in the hands of extremists, rather than leaders democratically elected by people to act on their behalf. Negotiations to achieve a two-State solution must be urgently resumed and must take place within an agreed timeframe and address all key issues, including settlements, refugees and water. Such talks must also address the status of Jerusalem.

He said that the Palestinian people must also see a real end to illegal violation of their lands, including ongoing settlement construction, building of the separation wall and evictions. He called on Israel to end all settlement activities, including natural growth, and to dismantle all outposts. He urged the Palestinian Authority to continue its efforts to bolster normal economic activities and tackle security issues, including those that would address some of Israel's security concerns. He also called on Israel to ease closures and do more to support Palestinian efforts to jumpstart the economy.

He was troubled to note that one year after, the situation in Gaza remained essentially the same – transport points remained closed and movement remained largely restricted. Indeed, a de facto blockade was not the right path to peace, as it would only lead to deep frustration and unacceptable humanitarian conditions. He also said there must be accountability and an effective remedy regarding the December-January 2009 Gaza conflict. At the same time, he called for unhindered passage into Gaza, so that reconstruction could begin in earnest. On wider issues, he called for the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). He reiterated that shared responsibility of all the parties in the region to transform the status quo from a situation that could only be called a "fragile calm" into a comprehensive peace.

NORIHIRO OKUDA (*Japan*) regretted very much the delay in the resumption of negotiations between Israel and the Arab parties, despite the efforts of the United States and other international actors. Japan, he said, would continue to work with both parties to encourage them to take politically difficult, but necessary steps towards peace, while continuing to provide assistance to the Palestinian people.

Reiterating his call on both parties to carry out their obligations under the Road Map, he said that the decision of the Israeli Government to suspend new settlement construction for 10 months was a step in the right direction, but called on that Government to freeze all settlement activities including "natural growth" in the West Bank, which included East Jerusalem. The status of Jerusalem was one of the core issues of final status negotiations and he called on Israel to refrain from any action that would prejudice the outcome. He encouraged the Palestinian Authority to continue to improve the security situation, and strongly supported its two-year plan to build institutions.

On Gaza, he said it was unacceptable that the blockade remained a year after operation Cast Lead. He called on Israel to improve the access of goods and people and call for an immediate stop to rocket fire from militants. Taking note of the Secretary-General's letter on the follow-up to the Board of Inquiry, he said he expected continued dialogue between the United Nations and Israel to improve their mutual cooperation on the ground. He was also concerned with the rockets that continued to be fired into southern Israel and said such acts should be immediately halted. He also supported the Egyptian effort to achieve Palestinian reconciliation. He closed by expressing strong support for the international effort, especially by the United States, to revive the peace process.

MILOŠ VUKAŠINOVIĆ (*Bosnia and Herzegovina*) said that new risks were emerging, which could potentially jeopardize the efforts of various players focusing on enhancing peace processes in the region. Negotiation processes were crucial, but lasting peace in the Middle East was urgent. Bosnia and Herzegovina, therefore, called for the urgent resumption of negotiations leading, within an agreed timeframe, to a two-State solution. In the wake of the first anniversary of military operations in Gaza, he emphasized his grave concerns about the living conditions there and said it was discouraging that, despite the international community's calls, no progress had been made in the past year. Bosnia and Herzegovina urged that all steps be taken to ease restrictions of movement in Gaza. It also called for further sustained and unconditional opening of crossings for access to humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons. The Agreement on Movement and Access must be fully implemented.

He said his country strongly condemned all violations of international humanitarian law, and emphasized that Israel and Palestinian civilians must be protected. It was deeply concerned over the decision on the new settlement activities by Israel in occupied East Jerusalem. Settlements on occupied land were illegal under international law. The demolition of homes and expulsions in East Jerusalem were a grave obstacle to the peace process, and he joined the numerous calls for Israel's settlement activities to cease immediately. He fully supported United Nations activities aimed at defusing tensions, and called on all sides to show their restraint. Securing lasting peace and stability in the region was only possible through diplomacy and full commitment to the peace process. He urged both Israelis and Palestinians to immediately start with the unconditional implementation of Security Council resolutions, the Madrid principles, the Road Map and previous agreements, including the Arab Peace Initiative. Concerning the regional situation, he said the political progress in Lebanon was commendable, and he welcomed the willingness of Israel and Syria to advance the peace process.

EMMANUEL ISSOZE-NGONDET (*Gabon*) said the many crises and ongoing tensions in the Middle East had drawn the international community's attention for many years. It was troubling to note that, despite the many efforts to achieve peace, frustrations and humiliations of many varieties continued to stifle any hope of long-term development. The ongoing stalemate between Israel and the Palestinians was particularly troubling, and he called on both sides to work harder to implement their stated obligations. Israel must ease closures in and around Gaza and must end its settlement activity. Palestinians must do their part by working harder to end rocket fire from Gaza into Israel, which would go a long way towards addressing Israel's security concerns. Gabon yearned for peace between the two sides and called on the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East peace process to step up its activities to that end. Finally, he said that the fates of both Israel and the Palestinians were intertwined, and the only path forward was to actively pursue viable negotiations towards a sustainable solution.

U. JOY OGWU (*Nigeria*) said that the problem remained intractable. Today, the peace process was not only deadlocked, but the tension was mounting in East Jerusalem and persisted in Gaza. The prospect for the resumption of talks was further hindered by the lack of unity among Palestinians, arms smuggling into Jerusalem and settlement activities, among other factors. In the framework of those daunting challenges, Nigeria welcomed the points enumerated in the Under-

Secretary-General's statement, as well as the compensation of \$10.5 million by Israel to the United Nations in respect of losses sustained last year during operation Cast Lead. Also welcome were efforts by the United States to restart substantial peace talks in the region, as well as initiatives by the Quartet and talks brokered by Egypt. Israel's decision to suspend settlement activity for 10 months provided a window of opportunity, which must be seized.

She said her country remained firmly committed to the Middle East peace process and to a lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It reaffirmed its support for the two-State solution. Progress required the achievement of core benchmarks, peace talks, and an improvement of the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and resolution of restrictions into Gaza. Following Cast Lead, political will was lacking among both parties. But, despair must give way to optimism and concrete credible engagement. She called for the urgent resumption of talks as a means to build confidence between the parties.

Never had it been so critical to build on past efforts, she said. Freezing settlement activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem was also critical to restarting dialogue, and she called for a cessation of those activities, including natural growth. Obstacles to movement of people and goods in Gaza must be removed. The inhabitants, especially women and children, were dependent on aid and should also be engaged in gainful economic activities. She also encouraged Israel to allow stalled United Nations and other development projects in the area to recommence. She called, too, for an investigation into allegations stemming from the Gaza conflict, and on the Palestinians to set up functioning State structures and to strengthen their security capacity. Intensified intra-Palestinian dialogue would lead to domestic peace and security. Finally, as the world commemorated the day of liberation for the victims of the holocaust, she expressed hope that the efforts to realize the vision of freedom from the scourge of war for the people of the Middle East and the world would be rekindled.

ZHANG YESUI (China) expressed deep concern over the stalemate in the Middle East peace process and the bleak prospects for resumption of the peace talks. He urged the concerned parties to strengthen their belief in those talks, overcome the current difficulties and interruptions and create favourable conditions for an early resumption of the peace talks. The parties should avoid actions that could erode the mutual trust or prejudice the outcome of the negotiations. Specifically, he called on Israel to freeze all settlement activity and stop the building of separation walls. It should also refrain from moves that did not contribute to resumption of the peace talks on the issue of East Jerusalem.

Noting that the humanitarian situation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory remained a big challenge for the resumption of the peace process; he appealed to the concerned parties to earnestly implement Security Council resolution 1860, called on them to abandon any violence against civilians, and urged Israel to open all crossings to Gaza and ensure that the region achieved reconstruction as soon as possible, so that the people there returned to normal life. Continuing, he described internal reconciliation in Palestine as of critical importance and expressed the hope that all factions there kept in mind the long-term interests of the nation and worked together for peace in the region. He further called on the international community to redouble its efforts to build the momentum for negotiations and inject new impetus into the peace process. In that regard, he was also hopeful the Quartet would play a bigger role in facilitating the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

Concluding, he said China remained supportive of the achievement of the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative, the principle of "land-for-peace", and the Road Map.

PEDRO SERRANO, acting Head of the Delegation of the European Union, said the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict remained a central political and strategic objective for the European Union. Because of that, on the occasion of the first Foreign Affairs Council last month, following entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Union Foreign Ministers discussed in depth the current situation in the Middle East and the way forward.

During that discussion, several points were emphasized, among which were: a resumption of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, now absent for more than a year, was considered to be of utmost urgency; that the European Union would not recognize any changes to the pre-1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties; and, to that end, the European Union supported the efforts of the United States towards a resumption of negotiations, which were closely coordinated among Quartet partners.

He further said a comprehensive peace in the Middle East had to include a settlement between Israel and Syria and Israel and Lebanon. Also, a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict required a regional approach, and the European Union thus called on all regional actors to take confidence-building measures in order to stimulate mutual trust. As an active Arab contribution, building on the Arab Peace Initiative was of crucial importance, he added, pointing out that those views were shared among all Quartet partners.

MOHAMMED AQEEL BA-OMAR (Oman), speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, said the situation throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory was "extremely serious," due to Israel's ongoing siege of the region. Indeed, the lives of the people, especially in and around the Gaza Strip, were "quite literally falling apart". The reports of international agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), revealed a serious deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Israel continued to act as if it was immune to the international outcry against its illegal activities. It was necessary for the Security Council to defend international will and to ensure that its resolutions were implemented. The wider international community must firmly address Israel's criminal activities, otherwise the civilian population, especially women and children, would continue to suffer.

The Arab group was also concerned with the dire situation in East Jerusalem. Indeed, he said, the attempt to create a new reality on the ground there by actively changing the character of the city was worse than anything that had gone on during the previous 40 years of Israel's occupation of that area. Israel was forcing the indigenous population out of Jerusalem and was revoking the identity cards of those trying to enter East Jerusalem. Ongoing archaeological activities and settlement construction were also illegal and were aimed only at provoking tension. The international community must not allow such actions to take place unchallenged "right under everybody's nose."

As for the Syrian Golan, Israel must be forced to abide by international law and security resolutions. In addition, Israel must not be allowed to continue its aggression against Lebanon by land, sea and air, he said, calling for the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). The Arab group was fully behind all efforts to re-launch the peace process and opening a way forward required a withdrawal by Israel from all Arab lands. The reference point was international law, especially regarding the status of Jerusalem. The issue of refugees must also be addressed. The Arab Group believed that such measures were not conditions, but merely the basis by which long-called for negotiations could begin.

He said negotiations would gain some degree of legitimacy if Israel ended settlement construction and stopped changing facts on the ground, especially in East Jerusalem. "Israel is totally out of control," and its illegal activities continually undermined any attempts to jumpstart the peace process. The Arab Group would, therefore, urge the international community to ensure that Israel seriously committed to the negotiation process and assumed its legal and moral obligations to the Palestinian people. The international community must move beyond "timid rhetoric", and take a robust stand to end the status quo.

MAGED ABDELAZIZ (Egypt), Chair of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement and speaking on the Movement's behalf, said that the peace process faced one of its most difficult times in the international effort to realize the two-State solution and put an end to the occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories. The current crisis of confidence was a direct result of Israel's refusal to move decisively towards a political end game and to implement its obligations. Despite all credible and serious efforts by the Quartet and regional partners to re-launch negotiations and to achieve comprehensive peace in the Middle East, a just and lasting settlement to the question of the Palestinians was still visibly elusive, owing to Israel's positions and continued defiance. The situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory remained critical, requiring serious attention by the Council to overcome the current impasse.

He urged the international community to be resolute in demanding that Israel abide by all of its obligations and cease all its violations and unlawful measures, including collective punishment of the Palestinian people in Gaza, and its illegal settlement activities, and to unambiguously negotiate and resolve all core issues

-- Jerusalem, settlements, the refugees, borders, security and water -- comprehensively and within a fixed timeframe. Regrettably, since the Council's last open

debate on this issue in October 2009, the occupying Power had failed to abide by its obligations and had impeded efforts to resume peace negotiations by refusing to freeze all settlement activities and by continuing to impose unilateral measures aimed at altering the status, the demographic composition and the Arab nature of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly East Jerusalem. Moreover, Israel had not refrained from measures that prejudiced the outcome of negotiations on the final status issues. That only undermined confidence, inflamed tensions on the ground, prevented progress and raised questions about Israel's credibility as a partner for peace.

The unacceptable decision of the Government of Israel to "restrain" rather than completely halt all settlement activity, and to even exclude East Jerusalem from the scope of that unilateral decision, fell considerably short of its obligations, he said. And in the short period since that unilateral declaration, Israel had announced the construction of more than 1,600 new units, particularly in Jerusalem, in addition to the construction of thousands more units already under way. The international community must use its political tools, including via the Security Council, to bring Israel into compliance. The Non-Aligned Movement expressed deep concern regarding the extensive damage caused by the Israeli settlements, the separation wall and the inhuman network of checkpoints, which were severing the Palestinian territory in the occupied West Bank into separate cantons, isolating East Jerusalem, undermining the contiguity, integrity, viability and unity of the Palestinian territory and jeopardizing the prospects for achieving the two-State solution.

The Movement condemned Israel's deliberate policy regarding the construction of more new settlement units and the continued Israeli declarations in that regard, in defiance of repeated calls by the international community, he said.

Further, he said, the Israeli authorities continued to discriminate against the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, including by revoking identity cards and allowing violent Israeli settlers to attack Palestinians and confiscate their homes, properties and land, as well as to devastate their agriculture and desecrate their places of worship. Meanwhile, the unresolved crisis in Gaza was having negative repercussions on efforts to advance the peace process and inflicting unacceptable suffering on the fabric of civilian life there. The Movement demanded that Israel immediately lift its illegal blockade. It stressed again the urgent need to immediately begin reconstruction in Gaza, and it deeply condemned Israel's obstruction of the import of essential reconstruction materials into Gaza. It also deeply condemned Israel's negative response to the United Nations proposal to kick-start civilian reconstruction activity. The Movement called on Israel to compensate the Palestinian people for the damage and trauma they suffered during the military aggression on Gaza last year, along with compensating the United Nations for its human and military losses.

On Lebanon, the Movement remained deeply concerned over Israel's ongoing air and land violations of the country's sovereignty, he said. Regarding the occupied Syrian Golan, the Movement reaffirmed that all measures taken, or to be taken, by Israel, the occupying Power, to alter the legal, physical and demographic status of the Occupied Syrian Golan and its institutional structure, as well as measures to impose jurisdiction and administration there, were null, void and had no legal effect. Concerning the situation overall, it was vital now for the international community to intervene and take a robust and united position to reaffirm clear terms of reference for negotiations on all core issues that were grounded in United Nations resolutions, the Madrid terms of reference and agreements reached between the parties, starting with a total freeze on settlement activities.

PEDRO NÚÑEZ MOSQUERA (Cuba) said that the ongoing illegal occupation by Israel of Palestinian and other Arab territories remained the major obstacle to comprehensive peace in the region. Cuba deeply regretted the constant suffering of the Palestinian people, under the brutal military occupation and colonization by Israel for more than 40 years, and for the continued denial of their fundamental human rights and inalienable right to self-determination. The occupying Power continued its illegal construction of settlements and the wall along the West Bank and, in particular, in and around East Jerusalem, in flagrant violation of international law, and contrary to the objectives of the peace process. Cuba was also deeply concerned about the ongoing housing demolitions and aggressions by extremist settlers against Palestinians and sacred sites. The huge physical, economic, and social devastation caused by those illegal and destructive colonization practices deeply affected the peace process. They might also prejudice the outcome of an agreement on Jerusalem's definitive status.

He said that the situation in East Jerusalem was increasingly difficult and dangerous. The Israeli settlements had grown and more than 5,000 Palestinians had lost their homes. The Palestinian population also continued to grow in East Jerusalem, but they were prohibited from building, forced to live in slum quarters and deprived of their most basic rights. The situation in Gaza also remained of great concern, where the constant siege had caused 1.5 million people to live under constant threat of death and deprivation. More than 20 civilians had died so far this year, owing to Israeli hostility, 11,000 homes had been destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people "sleep rough". Cuba called again for Israel to lift the illegal blockade and allow the circulation of supplies of all kinds into Gaza, which would enable the beginning of its reconstruction.

Israel must put an end, without further delay, to all breaches against the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and meet the obligations of international law, he said. All measures taken or to be taken by Israel with the aim of modifying the legal, physical and demographic condition and institutional structure of the occupied Syrian Golan, as well as the Israeli measures to exercise jurisdiction and administration there, were null, void and had no legal effect. All those measures and actions, including the settlements construction and expansion in the Syrian Golan since 1967, were violations of international law, international agreements, the United Nations Charter, Security Council resolutions, and the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as a challenge to the international community. Cuba demanded that Israel withdraw completely from the occupied Syrian Golan to the 4 June 1967 borders.

HASAN KLEIB (Indonesia) said that there was no doubt that Israel's excessive and disproportionate use of force and its policy of collective punishment were crimes that the international community could not abide. The list of tribulations faced by the Palestinian people at the hands of Israel was long and growing longer by the day, while the international community "was forced to act as bystanders". The Council had been assiduously working over the years to address the multifaceted nature of the Middle East conflict and it, along with the wider community of nations, must now tackle some core issues: the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and Israel's ongoing settlement activities.

As for the humanitarian situation, he said that for years before the most recent crisis there, the Palestinian people had been shut off from true recovery and economic growth. The situation was all the more pathetic because it was man-made and, to that end, the humanitarian suffering sparked by Israel's blockade had been well documented. Indonesia, therefore, joined other countries, and the Secretary-General, in calling on Israel to "end its policies of mayhem and fully respect international law". Regarding Israel's settlement policies, he said such actions had been aimed at altering the demographic composition and status of Palestinian lands, including East Jerusalem. Indeed, Palestinians continued to watch in horror as Israeli settlers encroached further into their territories, all but erasing their hopes of a viable state.

He said that Israel must stop all settlement construction, expansion and planning in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and dismantle the settlements built therein, in compliance with Security Council resolutions. "The settlement issue is the greatest obstacle to the peace process," he declared. The conflict in the Middle East had been going on for too long, and Indonesia fully supported the current surge in diplomacy aimed at facilitating the re-launch of peace negotiations, including the ongoing efforts of the United States. He also recognized the role of the diplomatic Quartet in promoting solutions. However, he noted that Security Council's own record on the matter "is less than sterling", and urged the 15-nation body to signal to the world that it was shouldering its Charter-mandated responsibilities by exerting its influence to bring about peace in the Middle East.

MOHAMMED LOULICHKI (Morocco) said that today's monthly briefing came at a time when the already dire humanitarian situation in Gaza was deteriorating further and there was barely a hint of any indication of a resumption of negotiations in the near- or medium-term. He supported the statements made on behalf of the Arab Group, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement. He condemned the insistence of Israeli authorities to implement plans aimed at changing the heritage of, and laying their hands on, Arab properties in the holy city. Following the adoption of resolution 1860, the international

community had hoped that Israel would end such practices and cease the collective punishment of the Palestinian people, as well as halt annexation of Palestinian lands, acre after acre, but the opposite had occurred. Israelis had laid their hands on more Arab lands and had forced more Arab inhabitants to leave their homes. They had built new units in illegal settlements in Jerusalem and continued construction of the separation wall, as well as housing demolitions and confiscation of identification cards.

Israelis had also continued to target Islamic holy sites through suspicious archaeological digs, built tunnels under a holy mosque and attacked holy shrines, he said. He had followed with grave concern the increasing pace of land attacks in Al-Quds in the past three months. There were many reports on the number of inhabitants whose ID cards had been withdrawn in 2008. Israeli authorities had also continued to provide permits for new housing units in Jerusalem. Those provocative acts were aimed at changing the legal contour of the territory and the demographics of the holy city. They violated international law and obstructed any progress towards the two-State solution. Drawing attention to the dangerous situation in Jerusalem and other occupied territories, he called for wisdom and logic. The question of Jerusalem was not just of interest to Muslims, but to all those with a clear conscience. The peace process was the inevitable choice and its success was the common choice of all peoples of the region. Jerusalem was a major focal point of any solution. Morocco followed with great appreciation the efforts of United States President Barack Obama. It was high time for the international community and the Security Council, as well as all concerned countries, to prevail upon Israel to remove the obstacles and to respond positively to efforts aimed at resuming the peace process.

MOURAD BENMEHIDI (Algeria) said the situation in the Middle East was a source of great concern to his delegation and the wider international community, especially regarding the stalled Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. Indeed, since the Council's last debate on the issue, the situation in East Jerusalem had been getting worse. It appeared that Israel was attempting to complete the colonization of the City, contravening its stated intention to pursue the path of peace. Moreover, the situation in the Gaza Strip continued to deteriorate due to Israel's ongoing blockade of that territory aimed at stifling any meaningful recovery there.

With all that in mind, Algeria strongly called for an end to the "sinister plan" that aimed to starve the entire population of Gaza, cut it off from development and cut it off from the wider international community. He said that Algeria was also alarmed by the methodical policy aimed at strengthening Israel's control of the city of Jerusalem and setting up a fait accompli with regard to its definitive status. The Security Council must reaffirm that illegal actions taken by Israel to alter the demographic character and historical nature of the city were null and void. Because of Israel's intransigence, the peace process was now deadlocked. There had been no progress whatsoever towards implementing the array of international resolutions and peace plans, including the Road Map.

The international community had increasingly shown its exasperation at attempts to make the status quo permanent. He said that Algeria believed that, for any change to take place, Israel must evince a sincere and unequivocal commitment to address all issues that would lead to the achievement of a two-State solution, including ending all illegal activities. In addition, Israel must also show the utmost respect for the terms of United Nations resolutions that were the agreed framework for the way forward. Finally, he said that the international community and concerned parties must find a clearer role for the diplomatic Quartet, whose main task was to facilitate the process in a meaningful way.

MORTEN WETLAND (Norway) recalled that the Assistant Secretary-General had warned at his last briefing to the Council in 2009 of a deep worrying impasse in the situation. That impasse was still present today, as current conditions did not allow for the resumption of final status negotiations. "This is not to say that we can simply resign ourselves to the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to getting the negotiations restarted," he said. "Inaction is not an option." Other efforts must still be made to drive the process forward towards a two-State solution. He trusted that the parties would respond proactively to parallel endeavours by the international community to overcome the current political impasse. Steps in the right direction in some areas of the Occupied Palestinian Territory must not be reversed by detrimental action in others, including East Jerusalem. As for Gaza, the unacceptable stranglehold on the civilian population must urgently cease.

He said that Norway, as Chair of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, had repeatedly stressed the need for a clear political horizon, in order to justify the high levels of international donor support to the Palestinian State-building project. On the economic track, the donor community remained committed to the effort to build a Palestinian State, bottom up. The Committee had given its strong and unanimous support to Prime Minister Fayyad's plan for preparing for Palestinian statehood within two years. The implementation of that work was ongoing, in close coordination between the Palestinian Authority and the donor community. The plan, thus, formed an important platform for continued international support, notably, within a set timeframe. To keep the two-State solution clearly in sight, it could not be relegated to some distant and uncertain future.

BUOI THE GIANG (Viet Nam) said one year after the Council had adopted resolution 1860 that had ended the Gaza conflict, the situation in the Middle East was essentially unchanged. There had been no substantive progress towards a durable ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinians, negotiations on final status had not resumed and border crossings into Gaza remained essentially closed. Moreover, Israel had yet to end its unilateral and provocative construction of settlements and the separation wall. It was also continuing its demolition of Palestinian homes and eviction of Palestinian families, directly altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

He went on to say that the humanitarian crisis in Gaza remained "shocking" and the recent resurgence of rocket attacks against civilians in southern Israel was deeply worrying. That vicious cycle of violence and reprisal attacks had sowed the seeds of confrontation and animosity for far too long, and in order to achieve a breakthrough, all parties must uphold their obligations under the Quartet-backed Road Map, Madrid terms of reference, Arab Peace Initiative and relevant Security Council resolutions. Constructive dialogue and political negotiations must be prioritized. Israel must immediately freeze all illegal settlement activity, dismantle outposts erected since March 2001, open all border crossings and facilitate humanitarian assistance to, and reconstruction of, Gaza. He said that Palestinian factions must make sincere efforts to resolve their differences within the framework of intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Viet Nam also reiterated its call on all parties to strictly comply with international humanitarian law and to conduct, without delay, credible domestic investigations into the many allegations of human rights violations, as recommended in the Goldstone report.

PAUL BADJI, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that at the Committee's opening session last week, the Secretary-General warned that if the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations did not move forward soon, they risked sliding backward. Mr. Badji fully shared that concern, but said there was little prospect for resuming negotiations at present because Israel was creating physical, and what appeared to be irreversible, facts on the land where Palestinians aimed to create their future State. The Israeli Government's 25 November announcement of its "policy of restraint" for 10 months turned out to be disingenuous. Reports showed that construction and official financial support for it continued despite the announcement. The temporary settlement moratorium explicitly excluded East Jerusalem, where settlement infrastructure was being expanded and consolidated, while its Palestinian residents were being dispossessed and evicted.

"I would like to remind Israel that the international community does not recognize its annexation of East Jerusalem," he said. Council resolution 252 (1968) clearly stated that all of Israel's legislative and administrative measures and actions, including land and property expropriation, that tended to change Jerusalem's legal status were invalid. The Committee welcomed recent statements by major international stakeholders reiterating that position. A year after Israel's Operation Cast Lead, Palestinians in Gaza still suffered from its devastating aftermath. The complete blockade of Gaza continued. Generous international funds pledged in Sharm El-Sheik for Gaza's reconstruction had yet to reach their intended recipients. Israel continued to ignore the Secretary-General's initiative to put United Nations agencies on the ground in charge of the most pressing reconstruction projects.

He said the report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza conflict led by Justice Richard Goldstone presented a comprehensive and balanced account of events in Gaza, and had submitted complete and unbiased evidence that both Israeli and Palestinian armed groups had committed serious violations of international human rights law, including some that should be prosecuted as war crimes. He supported its recommendation that Israel and the Palestinians must conduct impartial and credible investigations and prosecute those found responsible, as called for in Assembly resolution 64/10. He called on the Council to remain seized of the matter, and encouraged principled action by the international community aimed at ensuring respect for and adherence to the norms of international humanitarian law. He appealed to all the High Contracting Parties of the Fourth Geneva Convention to fulfil their obligations in keeping with Article 1, to respect and ensure respect for the Convention in all circumstances.

MOHAMMED F. AL-ALLAF (Jordan) said that while the peace process in the Middle East faced serious obstacles, his Government remained actively involved in efforts to ensure that the parties achieved a two-State solution. Indeed, the path to peace was clear and the international community must do its part to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. Such talks must pick up where they left off and must adhere to a set timeline. The negotiations must also address all issues, including refugees and the status of Jerusalem. He supported the efforts of the United States and the wider diplomatic Quartet and called for such efforts to incorporate the aims of the Arab Peace Initiative.

While the international community was stepping up its diplomatic efforts, Israel, on the other hand, was continuing to undermine them, largely by actively working to create new realities on the ground. Such actions, including through the continued imposition of closures of the Gaza Strip and ongoing settlement activity in East Jerusalem, severely undercut the international effort to re-launch substantive negotiations. Indeed, Israel refused to live up to its international obligations by imposing its own rules throughout the Occupied Territory, but especially in East Jerusalem, where it continued to confiscate the identification cards of Palestinians and destroy the homes of the city's indigenous inhabitants.

With all that in mind, he called on international and regional players to recognize the impact Israel's policies had on the Islamic world. The international community must call on Israel to end its attempts to erase the Islamic profile of Jerusalem, he said, stressing that the status of Jerusalem "remains a red line that must not be crossed", and any attempt to make Jerusalem a "Jewish city" would be countered. Indeed, Jerusalem was home to many of the world's religions and that must be respected. Turning to the situation in Gaza, where people were suffering terribly, he said all efforts must be made to ensure Israel implemented the aims of Security Council resolution 1860 (2009). It must ease the closures, so that sick people could go to hospitals and so that humanitarian aid could flow freely into the Gaza Strip. He appealed to the international community to ensure that the people of Gaza did not continue to suffer. The Security Council played an important role in building political momentum to address the situation in the Middle East. The Council must ensure that the Israeli-Palestinian peace process achieved results, as that conflict was at the heart of all problems in the region.

RAZA BASHIR TARAR (Pakistan) said the consequences of the world's collective failure in the Middle East were disastrous for the region and beyond. The grave humanitarian plight of the Palestinians added to that pessimism. Israel's ongoing provocative and aggressive actions in East Jerusalem had compounded the Palestinian's plight and made political settlement even more difficult. There was recognition of the fact that a just settlement of the Palestinian question was central to end the cycle of suspicion and discord that had undermined peace and security in the Middle East, as well as strained relations between neighbours in the region. The question was how to convert that growing international consensus into credible action that would bring to fruition the search for peace.

An immediate end to the illegal practices affecting the Palestinians' human rights was the most important prerequisite to creating an environment of trust and confidence, he said. That, coupled with the international community's active engagement, was the only way forward toward peace and a two-State solution in line with relevant Council resolutions. Returning to the negotiating table was the only option. Efforts to create facts on the ground that prejudiced the outcome of negotiations were not recognized, or acceptable to the international community. It was necessary to learn from past half-hearted attempts and aborted peace processes. Greater political will was needed to bring the parties together to a sustained negotiation process, in good faith and without preconditions, to achieve a comprehensive agreement in a reasonable timeframe. He reiterated Pakistan's full support for an independent, sovereign Palestinian state with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital.

JORGE ARGÜELLO (Argentina) said, recognizing the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and their right to constitute a viable and independent state, his country insisted that Israel cease its military operations in the occupied territories, as well as any practice that contravened international law, by ending illegal settlements and the construction of the wall. In the same vein, however, Argentina recognized Israel's right to live in peace with its neighbours, within safe and internationally recognized borders, and condemned terrorist actions of Palestinian armed groups against the Israeli civilian population.

Argentina believed that the re-launching of the peace process would need the support of the international community and the active intermediation of the United States, in order to put an end to illegal settlements, find a solution to the Jerusalem issue and promote international support to address the establishment of two States and the solution to Palestinian refugees. In that context, his country considered the efforts of United States envoy for the Middle East George Mitchell important, as they were intended to restart the stalled peace process. He also further believed that the Arab League proposal of "land for peace" constituted a nucleus of initiatives that could enable progress in the peace process, and he hoped that Israel would give them consideration.

He also expressed disappointment with the lack of progress regarding the issue of the status of Jerusalem, and noted the Israeli authorities' refusal to freeze the building of settlements and their proclaiming the Israeli presence in the Jordan Valley. Further, at the sixty-fourth General Assembly, Argentina had voted in favour of the resolution calling for "credible investigation" concerning the findings in the Goldstone report.

BASHAR JA'AFARI (Syria), speaking on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), strongly condemned what he said was a continuing inhumane Israeli blockade and dire humanitarian crisis being imposed on the Palestinian population in the Gaza strip and an ongoing illegal and still unpunished colonization campaign being carried out by Israel in the West Bank, particularly around Al-Quds Al-Sharif. Israel's campaign aimed to change the Palestinian Arab identity of the holy city of Al-Quds through, among others, settlements, construction of the separation wall, revocation of Palestinian residency rights and eviction of Palestinian families. He called for the immediate cessation of all those activities in accordance with international law. He recalled that in the thirty-sixth ministerial meeting of the OIC, members reaffirmed that all Israel's colonial measures were null and void in terms of international legitimacy.

He strongly condemned, in addition, attacks perpetrated at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Al-Haram Al-Sharif compound in the holy city, calling on the international community to take urgent actions to halt all illegal Israeli measures and actions aimed at changing its demographic composition, character, geographic nature and legal status. He also called for more action to be taken by the Security Council and other United Nations bodies to bring to justice the perpetrators of killing and destruction during the Israeli military aggression in Gaza one year ago. He also called on Israel to end its collective punishment of Gaza, immediately open all crossing points with Gaza and end its blockade.

He said that the OIC also remained deeply concerned by Israel's ongoing land and air violations of Lebanon's sovereignty, calling on that country to withdraw fully from the remaining occupied Lebanese land in the Sheba'a farms, the Kfar Shouba Hills and the northern part of al-Ghjar village. He reaffirmed that all measures taken to alter the legal, physical and demographic status of the Syrian Golan had no legal effect, demanding Israel withdraw to pre-1967 lines. Finally, he called for intensified efforts to reach a just and comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East on the basis of relevant international agreements, providing for a sovereign State of Palestine with Al-Quds as its capital and a just solution for the plight of Palestine refugees.

SALEM MUBARAK SHAFI AL-SHAFI (Qatar), associating his statement with those made on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Arab Group, asked how the crimes Israel committed one year ago in its assault on Gaza could be forgotten, when they continued to be committed in various forms, especially in the form of an unjust siege imposed on an entire people? Qatar had taken the initiative to provide assistance to the Palestinian people, but such aid was rendered useless if it could not reach its intended recipients. He said that the Council must act on Gaza, because the Palestinian Question was at the heart of its mandate, and it must ensure that the crimes committed by Israel in Gaza did not go unpunished.

He also firmly rejected what he labelled illegal measures taken by Israel in occupied East Jerusalem, along with attempts to change the Arab identity of the city, along with its demographic composition, legal status and religious nature. That Government's attempts to expand the settlements undermined the chances of the two-state solution, by lessening the possibility of a contiguous Palestine with 1967 borders. He reiterated the invalidity of any Israeli annexation of the Syrian Golan, as well as the necessity of returning it to Syria and returning the remaining occupied Lebanese territories to Lebanon. In closing, he stressed that the new Israeli Government must refrain from taking extreme positions and take advantage of current goodwill on the Arab side to end the crisis in the Middle East, and Palestinians must pursue every avenue to foster national unity.

DOCTOR MASHABANE (South Africa), aligning himself with the statement of the Non-Aligned Movement, said his Government had noted with concern the latest rounds of Israeli airstrikes in the Gaza Strip and registered its condemnation in the strongest possible terms. Those obstructionist actions by Israel were hostile to concerted efforts to achieve a negotiated solution to the conflict, to which there could be no military solution. And those actions were yet again proof of Israel's disregard for international law, and fuelled growing international frustration with their actions. They also came in the wake of the report of the Gaza Fact-Finding Mission and the subsequent resolutions adopted by the Human Rights Council and General Assembly that impunity for violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law could not, and would not, be tolerated. He, therefore, reiterated his call on all concerned parties to implement the recommendations of the Fact-Finding Mission.

He said that those hostile activities and disproportionate use of force were a serious obstacle to achieving a negotiated settlement of the Palestinian question. South Africa maintained that the creation of a viable and independent Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, existing alongside a secure Israel, as well as the complete withdrawal of Israel from all occupied Arab territories, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem, was the only means of finding a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to the Middle East conflict. To realize that objective, both the Government and people of Israel and Palestine must refrain from activities that could jeopardize or derail the peace process. The ongoing military occupation of Palestinian and Arab territories, and the denial of self-determination for the Palestinian people, was the primary source of insecurity and instability in the Middle East.

"Is it not about time that this august body, in accordance with its mandate, considers concrete and practical steps towards the resolution of the Middle East and in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?" he asked. Debates had been conducted, resolutions passed and statements made, but no meaningful progress had been recorded. South Africa, meanwhile, condemned the illegal Israeli settlement activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the facts being created on the ground, which could prejudice the final status negotiations and impede the peace process. The blockade on Gaza had dire humanitarian consequences for ordinary Palestinians. The separation wall was not a legitimate security measure, and the Government of Israel had yet to comply with the findings of the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences of its construction. Equally, the ongoing home demolition programme was a serious violation of international law. The crisis in the Middle East region could not be resolved outside of the resolution of the Palestinian question. It was crucial, therefore, that all efforts were geared towards a lasting solution to the incessant struggle of the Palestinian people for self-determination, peace, human rights and prosperity.

HAMIDON ALI (Malaysia) said, despite the so-called 10-month moratorium, Israeli authorities continued to announce plans to build hundreds of settlement units in the West Bank, particularly in East Jerusalem. Construction of the separation wall in and around occupied East Jerusalem continued unabated, despite the International Court of Justice's July 2004 Advisory Opinion, as did illegal land confiscations and countless other illicit measures, such as home demolitions and evictions of Palestinians. Israel's ongoing revocation of residency rights of Palestinians in East Jerusalem had further worsened the situation, with revocations of 5,000 Palestinians in 2008 alone, forbidding them from living in the city where they were born. That was the highest number in a one-year period since the occupation began in 1967, and tens of thousands more Palestinian Jerusalemites were under threat of revocation.

Such illegal policies and the Israeli Prime Minister's affirmation to retain parts of the Occupied West Bank would definitely change the demographic composition, character and status of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, as well as seriously undermine the two-State solution, he said. Such actions gravely violated international law and Israel must be held accountable. The Palestinians' humanitarian situation was grave. Israel's continued illegal blockade was a form of collective punishment forbidden by international law that must be stopped. He urged the Council to take action to end the siege on Gaza, in line with its resolution 1860 (2009). The focus must be on restoring the Palestinians' inalienable rights, including their right to an independent State. That required all parties to act sincerely to achieve a just, lasting solution, and action by the Council to restore peace and stability in the Middle East.

YUSEF S. M. ALGAHRAH (Saudi Arabia), associating himself with the statements of the Arab Group, the Organization of Islamic Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement, said that one year after the war was launched by Israeli occupation troops on Gaza and adoption of resolution 1860, widespread destruction was still visible to all. That was despite all assistance efforts to reconstruct Gaza, which had been prevented by the occupation forces. Israel continued its collective punishment against the Gazan population and impeded reconstruction, erecting barriers and the "ultimate" wall. Those actions were a clear indication of Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people. Decades of occupation had created a tragic situation for the Palestinians, for whom life and death choices were the norm and where hope for a better future had dissipated. Decades of occupation had led to an environment of injustice and frustration, and human suffering and lack of law and dignity.

He said that since the annexation of Jerusalem in 1967, a "bitter trip" had begun to change the demographics of the holy city. In 2008, Israel took away the identifications of 5,000 Palestinians under the pretext that they lived outside the Jerusalem municipality. It intended to take away many thousands more in the coming period. That Judaization and de-population could only be described as ethnic cleansing. Each time the Palestinian question was considered, his delegation had condemned the illegal settlement activities and called for their immediate cessation, including the so-called natural growth, as well as the elimination of all settlement outposts established since 2001. Today, he reaffirmed that the building of settlements was illegal under international law; it impeded peace, the first step of which was negotiation. Yet, no negotiations could be held when settlements were being built and a new reality was being imposed. Negotiations required a complete stop to settlements, especially in East Jerusalem. Yet, Israel claimed it was still committed to negotiations and to peace.

While others in the international community, including the Secretary-General and the Quartet, had deemed the settlements illegal and called for their immediate halt and elimination, there had been no practical translation of that demand by the Council. Saudi Arabia was concerned at the complete absence of the Council with respect to the policy of State terrorism practiced by Israel. That was the outcome of duplicity and double standards. The Council faced a deadlock; its resolutions could not be implemented, rendering that body unable to serve the interests of the affected countries. If the Council was to break that deadlock, then all of its resolutions would be respected.

ILENIA MEDINA (Venezuela) said the Secretary-General's report on the critical situation in the Middle East was timely. That situation, particularly in Palestine, was caused by the systematic refusal of Israel to respect international law and the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, as well as the rights of Syria and Lebanon. Israel did not appear to see that, in doing so, it was ignoring and not respecting its own history. In Caracas, there were two major places of worship separated by two metres – one a mosque, the other a synagogue. That type of peaceful coexistence occurred in many places in the world, but not in the Middle East. The Council should demand that Israel comply with all resolutions on the Middle East and withdraw from the occupied territories. It must end its blockade, home demolitions, detention of Palestinians and evictions. Israel's political genocide was especially apparent in East Jerusalem, where it had revoked the identity cards of Palestinians living there and forced them to leave.

It was scandalous, to say the least, that some were even claiming to ignore the right of Palestinians to their own self-defence from a regime that already had weapons of mass destruction, she said. Venezuela did not recognize Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem. Also worrisome were the December 2009 letters from the Permanent Representatives of Lebanon and Syria to the Secretary-General, in which they informed him of Israel's continued violations in their respective territories. Syria had denounced Israel's plan to further occupy the Syrian Golan and Judaize it. One must ask why the Council had acted so swiftly in other situations outside its competence, but in addressing Israel's clear determination to flout all international law it chose complicit silence and inaction. The United Nations had a historic debt to the Palestinian people. She asked if Israel was willing to comply with the Charter and if the Council had taken the preventive action needed to limit Israel's privileges, as called for in Article 5. She called on the Council to examine implementation of Chapter II of the Charter and recommend that the Assembly take actions in that regard.

ANWAR OTHMAN AL-BAROUT (United Arab Emirates) also condemned the continued Israeli aggression against and blockade of Gaza and other unilateral measures, including settlement expansion. In particular, he underscored the systematic policy of confiscating Palestinian territory; the de-population of their land and replacement of it with new Israeli settlers; the closure of Palestinian institutions; and the provocative acts against holy sites in the old town, including attacks against the Al Aqsa Mosque. That had led to bitterness in the Arab and Islamic world. He warned that those Israeli policies in East Jerusalem were very dangerous and aimed at compelling the largest number of Palestinians to leave the holy city to make it easier for Israel to Judaize it and impose a de facto order,

"riding rough shod over international resolutions".

How else could the intensified measures to confiscate the identifications of Palestinians be interpreted, he asked. Tens of thousands of Palestinians faced the same fate, that of losing their property and right to reside in the city. That revealed attempts by Israel to ethnically cleanse East Jerusalem and impose a de facto situation there. He deplored those Israeli unilateral measures, which did not serve the cause of peace, and he called on the Council and Quartet to assume their responsibilities and take all possible measures to put an end to those acts. He demanded that Israel stop its policy of starving the Palestinians and allow international assistance to reach them, especially in Gaza. He also called on Israel to provide financial compensation for Palestinians in the Strip for its crimes and aggression, in accordance with the Goldstone report. The Emirates also deplored Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace, which took place daily. It reaffirmed that the occupying Authority must withdraw from all Lebanese territory. The United Arab Emirates stood side-by-side with Syria in calling for Israel's full withdrawal from the occupied Syrian Golan to 1967 lines.

MARÍA RUBIALES DE CHAMORRO (Nicaragua) said 2010 marked one year since the brutal Israeli occupation of Gaza. The international community demanded that those responsible for it be tried before international tribunals. She asked how long the Council was going to meet, calling for debates and adopting resolutions. The United Nations had already decided what must be done. The Organization must comply with its historic responsibility to a two-State solution. The problem was not in the content of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), among others, but in Israel's non-compliance with them. Israel did not want to resolve the situation. Israel had its own clearly defined road map: the full absorption of the entire Palestinian territory. The separation wall dividing houses and neighbourhoods and the annexation of East Jerusalem were all examples of that policy of absorption. She condemned Israel's occupation and called for its immediate withdrawal from all Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian territories.

It was high time to go from declarations to deed, she said. It was time to implement all United Nations resolutions on the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and the population in the occupied Syrian Golan. Thus far, commitments to peace had only been made on the Palestinian side. It was time for Israel to make the same commitments. If Israel did not commit itself to an acceptable calendar of implementation, the Council must take the relevant measures called for in the United Nations Charter. Palestinians should be able to unilaterally declare their own independent State, and that State should be recognized by the United Nations as a Member State.

GHAZI JOMAA (Tunisia) said that Israeli excesses and practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territory had impeded revival of the peace process. He pointed to the continued housing demolitions and evictions, excavations around Al Aqsa Mosque, and the Gaza blockade. He urged that the blockade be lifted in order to enable reconstruction and the provision of the necessary commodities. Tunisia, firmly committed to justice and peace, called for an end to the suffering of the people of Palestine and appealed to international partners, notably the Quartet, to bring pressure to bear on Israel to end its provocative practices and engage in efforts for peace. It must halt all settlement activities, lift the Gaza blockade and all such restrictions, and put an immediate end to all acts that might change the character of Jerusalem or deprive Palestinians of their rights.

He said he was of the view that the present political deadlock and tensions in the region were the result of the absence of negotiations. That was a grave threat to the region, which could not endure any more tensions or escalation of the crises there. He called on the international community to surmount the roadblocks that impeded the path to comprehensive peace, which must result from negotiations based on the commitments of all concerned parties to previous agreements. Regarding Lebanon and Syria, he reiterated his call for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories in a manner that would "entrench" peace and stability for all people of the region. Tunisia put the Palestinian question at the top of its agenda; its principled position in that regard was steadfastly on the side of the Palestinians in their just struggle for national rights and the establishment of an independent State on their land.

ESHAGH AL HABIB (Iran) said that almost one year had passed since the brutal operation Cast Lead, but despite all efforts by the United Nations, there was still no prospect of justice for the victims. The Israeli regime continued to defy the will of the international community and persisted with its blockade, causing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The violations of international norms were not limited to Gaza only. There was the persistent assault against the Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, forced evictions of Palestinians from the city, severe restrictions on movement, home demolitions, and new settlement activity, including in Jerusalem and surrounding areas. Further to the General Assembly's adoption on 5 November 2009 of a resolution following up the report of the Gaza Fact-Finding Mission, he expected necessary actions to be taken by the relevant United Nations bodies, including the Council, in order to put an end to the culture of impunity for the Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, it seemed that, for certain Council members, the lives of the Palestinians and their long-time suffering under occupation and suppression "do not count".

He said that certain Council members were accustomed to giving long speeches on human rights, yet their true stance had been revealed in the voting on General Assembly resolution 64/10 on the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Israel in Gaza. That was a clear example of double standards. He hoped that in the coming months, when United Nations bodies endeavoured to follow up the Goldstone report, that they would revisit their unwavering and unconditional support for the Israeli regime, in total disrespect for the norms and principles of international human rights and international humanitarian law. The Israeli regime had also persisted with its aggressive and expansionist policies towards Lebanon by constantly violating its land, sea and air space, and refusing to withdraw from Lebanese occupied land in the Sheba'a, the Kfar Shouba Hills and the northern part of El-Ghajar village. It also continued its occupation of the occupied Syrian Golan. But the question of Palestine remained the most urgent for the international community, requiring swift and comprehensive attention.

YAHYA MAHMASANI, Permanent Observer for the League of Arab States, pointed to the dangerous aggression carried out by Israel. By the end of 2009, there were some 100,000 settlers, and their number was increasing. The invasion by Jewish settlers of Palestinian territory did not support an independent, viable Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel's actions were a flagrant violation of international law. He said he was deeply worried about those practices, and Israel's violation of international law and policy of annexation since 1967. Thirty per cent of East Jerusalem's territory was now occupied by Israeli settlers. Israel's plan aimed at increasing the Jewish inhabitants of East Jerusalem. The international community had declared the annexation of East Jerusalem illegal. It was a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and the Fourth Geneva Convention. Areas in Al-Quds, home to many holy sites, were sacred for Christians and Muslims as well. The destruction of them would have serious repercussions in the Arab world.

He called on the Council to take its responsibility to implement international law. He expressed concern over the siege in Gaza. The blockade hindered the arrival of fuel and other basic materials for Gaza's reconstruction. To return to normalcy, the international community must demand that Israel open the border to allow for the free flow of essential medicines and other goods. He also called for the end of a culture of occupation by Israel in the Arab territories and the creation of an independent Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital. That must begin with a settlement freeze in the Palestinian territories. That, coupled with fruitful negotiations, could lead to a lasting solution to the conflict.

PALITHA T.B. KOHONA (Sri Lanka) said his country had consistently supported a peaceful settlement to the Palestinian question and called on all sides to fully implement Council and Assembly resolutions on the inalienable rights of the Palestinian peoples and the realization of a two-State solution. He remained deeply concerned about the daily widespread suffering and hardships the Palestinian people continued to endure, due to the economic blockade and the ensuing grave situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. He called for the removal of all restrictions on Palestinians. The Palestinian people had suffered for too long. The denial of their fundamental right to statehood due to Israel's continued occupation had seriously affected the socio-economic well-being of the population in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. For peace to be viable and sustainable, Israel must withdraw from all Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. It must end the economic blockade. The illegal expansion of settlements, construction of the separation wall, and changing of the demographic character of the Palestinian territory would only increase tensions and animosities in the region.

The Palestinian Authority had to continue to implement its security plan and make every effort at its disposal to improve law and order and to ensure its territory was not used for illegal attacks on Israeli civilians, he said. Both sides must do everything possible to ensure the safety and security of civilians. He reiterated his support for the Palestinian leadership and stressed the need to preserve and protect the national and democratic institutions vital for a future independent Palestinian State. He urged the Palestinian groups to act speedily to reconcile and reunite within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian National Authority.

He supported the early resumption of negotiations and urged both sides to ensure a climate conducive for their resumption.

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