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LACK OF POLITICAL PROGRESS IN MIDDLE EAST HAS CREATED VACUUM FOR VIOLENCE

EXTREMISM, SENIOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS OFFICIAL TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

International partners were seeking a way out of “a deep and worrying impasse” in the political quest for a Middle East peace as security and economic efforts continued on the ground, Haile Menkerios, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, told the Security Council in a briefing this morning.

Recalling warnings that violence and extremism would fill the vacuum left by the lack of political progress, Mr. Menkerios said: “We now face a very real danger of such a vacuum, with no Israeli-Palestinian negotiations under way, no agreed terms of reference for such negotiations, and no framework in place to ensure implementation of Road Map obligations.”

He said that in furtherance of efforts to relaunch negotiations, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had visited the region between 31 October and 4 November and President Barack Obama had met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington, D.C., on 9 November. In the absence of mutual commitments to fully implement Road Map obligations, however, an impasse had developed with the Israeli Government’s proposal to restrain, rather than freeze, settlement activity. A Government planning commission had approved 900 additional housing units to expand the Gilo settlement on the southern outskirts of occupied East Jerusalem and 17 house demolitions had been carried out.

The Secretary-General had deplored Israel’s settlement activity, which were illegal, and had expressed dismay at the continuation of demolitions and evictions in Jerusalem, he noted. Quartet envoys were actively engaged on the issues. Expressing his deep frustration at the political impasse, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas had stated on 5 November that he had no desire to participate in the forthcoming presidential elections and had indicated that there were other steps he would take in due course.

On 23 October, President Abbas had issued a decree calling for presidential and legislative elections on 24 January 2010, Mr. Menkerios recalled. Hamas had stated, however, that, in the absence of an intra-Palestinian reconciliation accord, it would not allow elections in Gaza. On 12 November, the independent Central Election Commission had announced that holding elections on 24 January would no longer be possible. Egyptian efforts to secure factional agreement on its proposed reconciliation package continued.

He said that the political uncertainty on the Palestinian side, however, had not interrupted continued Palestinian efforts to meet Road Map commitments, pursue economic and security cooperation and build institutions for statehood. On 15 October, for instance, Palestinian Authority security forces had handed over some 20 pipe bombs to the Israel Defense Forces. In another positive development, the new “Wataniya” telecommunications company had announced the launch of its commercial services in the West Bank. On 10 November, the Jalameh Crossing near Jenin was opened for Arab Israelis to cross by vehicle. There were currently 579 movement obstacles in the West Bank, down from 592 in September.

Despite those positive steps, he said financial challenges remained. The projected Palestinian Authority budget deficit for 2009 was estimated at \$1.5 billion, with a projected financing gap estimated at \$350 million. The Palestinian Authority was likely to be forced to resort to further commercial borrowing to meet its obligations.

He said that during the reporting period, which coincided with the olive harvesting season, there had been 45 recorded instances of Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians and olive trees. There had been 26 incidents involving Palestinian violence towards Israeli settlers. No steps had been taken to remove unauthorized outposts erected since March 2001. Seventy-three Palestinians had been injured and more than 300 arrested during Israeli raids in the West Bank, and daily clashes took place around the checkpoint between East Jerusalem and Ramallah. Seven Hamas-affiliated members of the Palestinian Legislative Council had been released by Israel on 1 and 3 November.

Continuing, he said that on 30 October, armed settlers had attempted to take over a Palestinian house in East Jerusalem, and on 3 November, a group of armed

Israeli settlers escorted by Israeli security forces had taken control of a Palestinian home in East Jerusalem. Confrontations on 25 October around the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount had left 24 Palestinians and nine Israeli security personnel injured. Twenty-one Palestinians had been arrested. He commended in that regard the efforts of Jordan in lowering tensions. Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem remained closed by Israeli order, contrary to Israel's Road Map obligations.

Turning to Gaza, he said that, 10 months since the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead, there was still great concern over the consequences of the blockade of the area, noting that, during the reporting period, imports were made up of mostly food items and hygiene products, and there had been no exports. To cope with immediate needs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs was finalizing a "winter response plan" to meet minimum seasonal needs, which required full Israeli cooperation.

Israel, he said, had indicated a readiness to facilitate water and sanitation projects, including two desalinization units for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), though materials had yet to enter Gaza for three other approved projects. The United Nations was compiling a comprehensive list of water and sanitation needs to present to the Israeli Government.

He called "completely unacceptable" the fact that no satisfactory response had been received to the proposal put forward in May to complete \$77 million of stalled projects of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

According to Israeli Government officials, arms continued to be smuggled and increased capability rockets, including those with a range to reach Tel Aviv, had been test fired from Gaza, he said. During the period, 12 rockets and mortars had been fired into Southern Israel, without Israeli casualties, while Israel had conducted 19 incursions and nine air strikes on the Strip, which had left one Palestinian child dead and 22 Palestinians injured. Five Palestinians were also reported dead in accidents involving the collapse of tunnels between Gaza and Egypt.

Within Gaza, he said, Hamas had closed down a journalists' organization and severely restricted public assembly, while practical cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas had so far allowed 2,500 pilgrims to leave Gaza to perform the pilgrimage. On the other hand, hundreds of students in Gaza had been unable to go abroad to pursue educational opportunities.

He reiterated the call for the release of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit and underscored the importance of the release of Palestinian prisoners from among the 9,000 in Israeli jails. He also recounted the responses of the United Nations system to the report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict.

On other regional developments, he said that both the Israeli and Syrian leaderships had been engaged by third parties to explore prospects for progress. There had been no concrete developments, although two Syrian prisoners had been released and the occupied Syrian Golan remained quiet during the reporting period.

In Lebanon, he noted the formation of a new Government, which was now awaiting agreement on a ministerial statement, after which Parliament would give its confidence to the new Government. The United Nations looked forward to working with the new Government on implementing Security Council resolutions. The situation in the area of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) remained quiet, although air violations continued on an almost daily basis.

In conclusion, he said that the decision of President Abbas not to seek a new term was "a loud and clear wake-up call", imperilling the two-State solution. The Quartet partners remained active in seeking a clear strategy on the way forward, which would require immediate action on the ground and the implementation of Road Map requirements.

According to a prior agreement, the Council immediately began consultations on the matter after the meeting, which began at 10:13 a.m. and ended at 10:35 a.m.

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