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SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPRESENTATIVE, IN SECURITY COUNCIL, STRESSES IMPORTANCE

OF ADDRESSING CHALLENGES SQUARELY IN ORDER TO ADVANCE MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Briefing Touches on State of Israeli-Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian Tracks

Despite daunting challenges in the Middle East, peace could and must prevail, Robert H. Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, said this morning as he briefed the Security Council on the situation in the region, including the Palestinian question.

Describing the challenges as realities that must be "squarely addressed if peace is to be advanced", he cited the severe repercussions of the Gaza crisis; continued division among the Palestinians; the new political situation in Israel; the inconclusive results of last year's Israeli-Palestinian negotiations; unmet "Road Map" obligations, especially those concerning settlements; and the freeze in indirect Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

In the year ahead, the international community would need to be united and determined as it intensified its efforts, he said, adding that United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon took heart from the active engagement of the Security Council and welcomed the clear statements of intent and early engagement from the new United States Administration, including President Barack Obama's appointment of Special Envoy George Mitchell. The United Nations and its Member States, including those in the Quartet, had political responsibilities that needed to be shouldered.

Israelis and Palestinians must also shoulder their responsibilities, he stressed, adding that the latter faced the challenges of reconciliation and noting the resumption of direct Fatah-Hamas contacts, as well as the planned meeting of all Palestinian factions in Cairo on 22 February. They should find common ground from which to tackle outstanding issues and achieve unity, leading to a united Government and paving the way for presidential and legislative elections. As the Quartet had agreed in December, restoring unity on the basis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) principles would be an important factor of progress – the more so in the context of a durable Gaza ceasefire. As the Secretary-General had informed the Council, the United Nations would work with a united Palestinian Government encompassing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank under President Mahmoud Abbas.

On the Israeli side, he continued, the challenge ahead was the formation of a new Government after the failure of the 10 February elections to produce a clear winner. Following consultations with party leaders, President Shimon Peres was expected to commission one of them to form a coalition Government, which would take several weeks. Any new Government should abide by Israel's commitments, including those to implement the Road Map and pursue continuous final-status negotiations on all core issues without exception, as reaffirmed by the parties before the Quartet in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, last November.

He said that, having visited Cairo on 3 February, he had reiterated the Secretary-General's support for Egypt's efforts, as backed by the League of Arab States, to conduct talks with Israel and Hamas with the aim of achieving a durable and sustainable ceasefire. A ceasefire regime would only be durable if broader progress was made, including an exchange of Palestinian prisoners for the release of Israeli captive Gilad Shalit, continued cooperation and action to prevent the re-supply of weapons to Gaza, full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access, and Palestinian unity. A coordinated international response to concrete progress on those issues would be crucial.

One month after the declaration of unilateral ceasefires, a proper ceasefire regime was still not in place, he said, pointing out the ever-present danger of a return to the unsustainable conditions of 2008, or even renewed and more devastating violence. In attacks "that are as irresponsible as they are unacceptable", Palestinian militants had recently fired 15 rockets and 12 mortars towards Israel, and detonated an explosive device against an Israel Defense Forces jeep on the Israeli side of the border, while the Israeli Army had conducted 19 air strikes on Gaza. There was an urgent need for all parties to cease all acts of violence and fully respect international humanitarian law, especially in light of reported incidents in which Hamas had purportedly taken revenge on alleged collaborators in Gaza.

Turning to humanitarian matters, he said a daily average of 146 truckloads had entered Gaza in the past month, four times the number in December 2008, but

only a third of those that had entered the enclave in May 2007. The Gaza Strip remained desperately short of basic goods and supplies as food and medical supplies had accounted for more than 90 per cent of all imports during the reporting period. Only 52 per cent of industrial fuel needed and 23 per cent of the necessary cooking gas had entered the territory during that time. The total ban on the importation of petrol and diesel, in place since 2 November, had continued except for small quantities delivered to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). There had been no exports for 13 months, save for a solitary truck carrying flowers for export to Europe last week.

He said the Israeli operation had left destruction in some places that was “shocking to see”. Thousands of Gazans remained homeless and the level of food insecurity remained at an estimated 75 per cent due to shortages and inflated prices. More cash must be allowed into the Strip as residents were unable to pay for goods. Tens of thousands of people were without water and hundreds of thousands suffered from intermittent supply resulting from the damage to Gaza’s infrastructure, which could not be repaired due to the lack of spare parts.

On the positive side, there had been a decrease in electricity shortages and only small shortages of medicines had been reported, he said. The United Nations had issued a flash appeal covering funding needs of \$613 million over nine months for 188 projects in Gaza. The Organization was in constant dialogue with Israel regarding humanitarian conditions and access to Gaza. “While we appreciate Israel’s stated readiness to address humanitarian needs, we have not yet seen truly open crossings for required access, which is so crucial given the extent of the needs in Gaza.”

Meeting the humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza was Israel’s obligation under international law, he emphasized while also calling on Hamas not to interfere in United Nations operations and noting that UNRWA had suspended operations after the group’s confiscation of food aid and blankets on 6 February. Following the return of those goods, distribution had resumed on 9 February. The United Nations Mine Action Team was working to render unexploded ordnance safe, but the removal by unknown persons of several unexploded bombs from a local police traffic compound underscored the need to identify a secure site to which unexploded ordnance could be transported.

For its part, the Palestinian Authority was preparing a plan for the early recovery and reconstruction of Gaza, to be presented in Sharm el-Sheikh on 2 March, he said, welcoming initiatives by Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to provide immediate assistance to civilians in Gaza, with United Nations assistance, including \$50 million in cash transfers for temporary shelter; \$17 million for electricity and water-pipeline repairs; and a \$600 million housing loan guarantee to supplement cash assistance.

He said the Board of Inquiry established by the Secretary-General had begun its work and was expected to review and investigate a number of incidents in the Gaza Strip between 27 December and 18 January in which death or injuries had occurred, or damage had been done to United Nations premises. The Secretary-General expected that the Board would enjoy the full cooperation of all parties concerned.

Warning that the situation in Gaza must not divert the international community from the overall political process, or challenges in the West Bank, he said praised the efforts of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad for the relative calm and security maintained in that territory during the Gaza crisis. Palestinian Security Forces had resumed actions to disarm militants and a commission of inquiry had been established regarding the death of a Hamas member under unclear circumstances while in Palestinian Authority custody. There was a continuing need for donors to deliver quickly on pledges, as the Government was still obliged to meet regular monthly commitments through interim measures. The funding for Gaza’s recovery and reconstruction was in addition to the Palestinian Authority’s existing salary, pension and social safety net commitments.

On the ground, Israel had eased certain closure measures, although it had imposed curfews on Nablus and Qalqilya on 17 January, he said. More than 150 Palestinians had been arrested by the Israel Defense Forces, whose actions had also resulted in three fatalities and 96 injuries. Illegal settlement activity continued, and plans were reportedly under way to seize more than 1,700 dunams of Palestinian land for the expansion of the Efrat settlement. There had also been a number of Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians, including a shooting on 12 February. Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem remained closed by Israeli order; and construction of the barrier continued within Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Recalling that the same basic points regarding settlements had been reported in every briefing, he said the approach taken since Annapolis – to secure implementation of Road Map commitments to freeze settlement activities, including through natural growth, and to remove outposts – had not worked. In the aftermath of the Gaza crisis and amid continuing political uncertainties, official communication between the Israeli and Palestinian Governments was limited and the bilateral negotiation process on core issues was effectively on hold for now.

Turning to the situation in Lebanon, he reported increased tension as a result of the crisis in Gaza, including frequent demonstrations throughout the country. Divisions between the PLO and Hamas had not translated into open confrontation in Lebanon, but concern remained that events might affect Palestinian camps in the country. Progress continued to be made, albeit slowly, towards the reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, despite considerable amounts of unexploded ordnance that continued to be found. Securing adequate funding for the camp’s reconstruction remained an issue of serious concern.

Domestically, Lebanon continued to enjoy a period of relative stability, and implementation of the May 2008 Doha Agreement had taken place on schedule, he noted. However, there were signs of increased political tension in the run-up to parliamentary elections scheduled for 7 June. The National Dialogue, bringing together Lebanon’s main political leaders, had met on 22 December and 26 January. Following a rally on 14 February to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the terrorist killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 22 others, a politician close to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt had been stabbed to death.

Turning to other regional aspects, he said Israeli settlement activity in the occupied Syrian Golan had continued, but the Israeli-Syrian talks facilitated by Turkey had been discontinued as a result of the Gaza crisis. Given the importance of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations, it was to be hoped that it would be possible to further that track alongside a reinvigorated Israeli-Palestinian track in the year ahead. A comprehensive regional approach to peace, as embodied in the Arab Peace Initiative and Security Council resolutions was required if bilateral efforts were to bear fruit.

In conclusion, he said the Secretary-General intended actively to engage his regional and international partners, including in the Quartet, on the way ahead, and remained firmly committed to doing everything possible to end the occupation and the conflict, resulting in two States living side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders, while achieving comprehensive peace in the region, in accordance with Security Council resolutions.

The meeting began at 10:10 a.m. and ended at 10:30 a.m.

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