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UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE BRIEFS SECURITY COUNCIL

SAYS ORDINARY PEOPLE HAVE LITTLE CONFIDENCE THAT POLITICAL PROCESS IS DELIVERING

Emergency Relief Coordinator, Also Briefing, Describes 'Almost Total' Disconnect Between Deteriorating Realities on the Ground, Hopes of Peace Talks

"From what I have seen in several field visits, including to the West Bank, Gaza and southern Israel, ordinary people understandably have little confidence that the political process is delivering," Robert H. Serry, the newly appointed Special Coordinator of the United Nations for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General told the Security Council this morning.

Delivering his first monthly briefing on the situation in the Middle East, he said the Annapolis process – where parties re-committed to implement Phase One of the Road Map – needed to proceed. The international community should do everything to ensure that the parties move ahead in bilateral negotiations towards an agreement on all core issues without exception. The Annapolis process could only be sustained, however, by real changes on the ground. A major intensification of efforts in the West Bank was required, including more substantial and urgent Israeli action and continued and intensified efforts by the Palestinian Authority. A different and more positive strategy for Gaza was a humanitarian, security and strategic imperative, for Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority.

Briefing on his visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel on 14 to 18 February, John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, said: "Looking at [the] deteriorating realities on the ground in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as in Sderot [Israel], the disconnect between those realities and the hopes and aims of continuing peace talks seemed almost total, and indeed risks making a mockery of the readiness of the international community to invest \$7.7 billion in the economic development of the Occupied Palestinian Territory." Unless that chasm was bridged quickly, and the humanitarian indicators began to rise and create some hope for the future, the chances of success in the peace talks might be fatally undermined. "And we desperately need those talks to succeed this year. The alternative comforts only the extremists," he said.

The meeting started at 10:07 a.m. and was adjourned at 10:40 a.m., after which the Council went into closed consultations to discuss the situation.

Briefings

ROBERT H. SERRY, Special Coordinator of the United Nations for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, said, after two months in Jerusalem, he was deeply conscious of what was at stake in the Middle East peace process and was convinced of the importance of the United Nations playing its full political, development, humanitarian and human rights role.

He said that, in the bilateral negotiations, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Palestinian lead negotiator Ahmad Qurei were meeting on a continuous basis and President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert continued their fortnightly meetings, despite challenges on the ground and in an atmosphere of confidentiality. Those talks needed to make tangible progress on all core issues, without exception. Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Fayyad and his Government continued to promote good governance and revive the economy. Reminding donors of the urgency that they quickly disburse pledges made last December, he said Quartet Representative Tony Blair continued his work on economic development projects and other confidence-building measures.

Efforts to improve the Palestinian Authority security performance continued, with Palestinian security forces carrying out operations against militants in several West Bank cities, he said. A Palestinian military court had sentenced two individuals to 15 years in prison for killing two Israelis in December. Israel had stopped pursuing 32 Fatah militants after they had surrendered to Palestinian security forces. Approximately 1,000 Palestinian security officers were being trained in

Jordan. However, the security situation for both Israelis and Palestinians remained deeply concerning. One Israeli had been killed and 27 injured by Palestinian militants. Forty-five Palestinians had been killed and 139 injured during Israeli incursion into Gaza and the West Bank.

He said there had been a suicide attack and 320 rockets and mortars had been fired from Gaza. Corporal Gilad Shalit was in his twentieth month of captivity in Gaza. Over 10,000 Palestinian prisoners remained in Israeli prisons, and Israeli military operations into Gaza and the West Bank had continued throughout the reporting period. While cognisant of Israel's security concerns, he said that Israel was obliged not to take disproportionate measures or to endanger civilians. The United Nations principled opposition to extra-judicial killings was compounded by the frequency with which such operations were carried out.

Israel Defence Forces (IDF) operations were also continuing in the West Bank, citing security concerns, he said. Those actions undermined the Palestinian Authority's own security efforts. Improved cooperation of IDF with the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank was crucial, as there were 580 obstacles to Palestinian movement in the West Bank. Closure levels must be reduced significantly, if the Palestinian economy was to revive.

Phase One of the Road Map, to which the parties had recommitted at Annapolis, required the Government of Israel to freeze all settlement activity, including "natural growth", he said. Construction continued in settlements throughout the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, however, and no outposts had been removed. Settlement expansion had been cited by several Palestinian and Arab interlocutors as among the biggest factors undermining confidence in the Annapolis process and prospects for a viable Palestinian State. Despite the Road Map obligation to reopen Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, the Israeli Government had recently issued an order to continue their closure for a further six months. Construction on the barrier continued within Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The situation in Gaza was unacceptable and also unsustainable in humanitarian, human rights, security and political terms. "Several factors have created a dangerous cocktail for Israel, Egypt and the Palestinians, causing deep suffering and damaging prospects for a two-State solution," he said. Since Hamas' takeover last June, a degree of order had been established, but the rule of law was absent. Allegations of human rights abuses continued to be made by various Palestinian and international non-governmental organizations. Hamas had not acted with sufficient determination to bring about an end to rocket attacks by militant groups and had itself also carried out rocket and mortar fire, to say nothing of the recent suicide bombing. Reports of smuggling continued to be of concern, as were reports of outside militant groups now gaining a foothold in Gaza.

He stressed, however, that Israeli measures amounting to collective punishment were not acceptable, calling on Israel to meet its obligations towards the civilian population of Gaza under international law. The breach at Rafah at the end of January had caused understandable relief in Gaza. Although Egypt had moved to re-establish order along the border, the situation remained extremely fragile. Unless addressed, the situation would remain a danger to the safety, security and well-being of the Palestinian population, to the security of Egypt and Israel, and to the sustainability of the political process itself. Only yesterday, several thousand people had protested and IDF had increased its military presence around the Strip.

In light of those developments, the United Nations had made the case with all parties and the Quartet partners that a different and positive strategy for Gaza was required, he said. It was necessary that normal economic life in Gaza be resumed, and arrangements were made that ensured the security of Israel, Egypt and the Palestinians, and the legitimate Palestinian Authority was supported. Rocket fire and suicide attacks should cease and the humanitarian needs of the civilian population must be met. It was now of crucial importance that Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority develop a positive strategy for Gaza designed to achieve those goals.

As for the regional aspects, he said the Governments for Egypt and Jordan and the Secretary-General of the Arab League had underlined the importance of the continued commitment of Arab countries to the Arab Peace Initiative, but had stressed their growing concern regarding the direction of the peace process. The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan had remained largely quiet, other than an incident on 11 February in which two Syrian youths were shot by an Israeli soldier and had to be treated in the hospital. He would not brief on Lebanon, as a report of the Secretary-General was forthcoming.

"From what I have seen in several field visits, including to the West Bank, Gaza and southern Israel, ordinary people understandably have little confidence that the political process is delivering," he said. The Annapolis process needed to proceed. The international community should do everything to ensure that the parties move ahead in bilateral negotiations towards an agreement on all core issue without exception. The Annapolis process could only be sustained, however, by real changes on the ground. A major intensification of efforts in the West Bank was required, including more substantial and urgent Israeli action and continued and intensified efforts by the Palestinian Authority, in accordance with Phase One of the Road Map. A different and more positive strategy for Gaza was a humanitarian, security and strategic imperative, for Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority.

Briefing the Council on his visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel on 14 to 18 February, JOHN HOLMES, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, said: "I found conditions for the people of Gaza grim and miserable, and far from 'normal'." Eight months of severe restrictions on the movement of goods and people following the Hamas take-over in June 2007 had taken a heavy toll, coming on top of years of difficulty and economic decline.

Only about 10 per cent of what had gone into Gaza in January 2007 was allowed to enter in January 2008, he said. Almost 80 per cent of the population was now receiving food aid; most industry and agriculture had collapsed; frequent and lengthy power cuts severely impaired the functioning of essential services and infrastructure; water quality was declining rapidly; the inadequacies of the sewage system were increasingly exposed; and the medical and education systems were teetering on the edge of failure, as lack of equipment, spare parts, qualified staff and psychological strains undermined their functioning. The vulnerability of the weakest to disease was rising, notably among children, who made up over half of the population of Gaza. That bleak situation was further compounded by bureaucratic difficulties between the Palestinian Authority and those administering health care in Gaza.

The Israeli Government had said that, while there were security concerns about the crossing points themselves, the main motivation for the restrictions was continuing firing of Qassam rockets from Gaza, he continued. His visit to Sderot, which had been the target of over 4,300 rockets since 2004, had brought out the physical and psychological damage to the population. Those crude rockets were aimed at hurting civilians and clearly constituted terrorism. Their continued firing was completely unacceptable and must be halted unconditionally. Hamas, which claimed to govern the Gaza Strip, must accept its full share of responsibility for the suffering in Gaza. Above all, it must act to stop those rockets immediately. However, whatever the provocation and illegality of the rockets, effective Israeli isolation of Gaza was not justified, given Israel's continuing obligations to the people of Gaza. It amounted to collective punishment and was contrary to international humanitarian law. Moreover, it did not appear to be having the desired effect either in halting the rockets or weakening Hamas' position among the people of Gaza, or more widely. Only those who wanted to see further radicalization could be happy with the present situation.

The consequences for civilians on both sides were dramatic, and the fundamental principles of distinction between combatants and non-combatants and the proportionality in attacks during the conduct of hostilities must be respected by all sides. The current situation in Gaza was not sustainable and extremely damaging to the prospects for the peace process. Only political efforts could change that dynamic. From a humanitarian point of view, while a return to the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access was what was really needed, he had pressed the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority at least to ensure that more humanitarian and other goods were allowed in on a more predictable and systematic basis.

He had made the same message clear to Hamas, he continued. That meant reopening the crossings and establishing better mechanisms for identifying and addressing the fundamental needs of the population. In particular, he had asked that the material for the restart of \$213 million of frozen humanitarian United Nations projects be given priority. There were some indications that the Israeli authorities were willing to respond positively to those requests. The proposals of the Palestinian Prime Minister for the reopening of the key Karni crossing deserved full support, and a properly negotiated role was also needed for the Rafah crossing, without giving credence to the idea that Israel could hand over its responsibilities for Gaza to Egypt or any other State or authority. Arrangements must

ensure proper screening for goods in both directions, to meet Israel's security concerns, and should be possible, if necessary with international support.

Turning to the West Bank, he said that the conditions of life there were obviously better than in Gaza, but the situation there was of no less fundamental humanitarian concern. What he had read about the barrier, settlements, permit regime and access closures had not prepared him for the reality on the ground. In his meetings with Palestinians in the West Bank, he felt that the despair and sense of humiliation and injustice were no less than in Gaza. That was particularly evident from his visit to Hebron, where the presence of a relatively small group of 600 settlers and considerable security arrangements to ensure their protection had divided the city and severely affected the lives of its citizens. Representatives of Palestinian civil society throughout the West Bank had appealed passionately to the United Nations to do something about their plight and their lack of viable future, as they saw it.

Israel had legitimate security concerns and a right and duty to defend its citizens, he said, but security could not override all other concerns or justify so much damage to ordinary people's livelihoods and infringements of their human dignity and human rights. Israel had obligations towards the Palestinian population under occupation. He had, therefore, pressed the Israeli authorities to begin implementing their commitments to ease at least some of the restrictions.

"Looking at these deteriorating realities on the ground in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as in Sderot, the disconnect between those realities and the hopes and aims of continuing peace talks seemed almost total, and indeed risks making a mockery of the readiness of the international community to invest \$7.7 billion in the economic development of the Occupied Palestinian Territory," he said. Unless that chasm was bridged quickly, and the humanitarian indicators began to rise and create some hope for the future, the chances of success in the peace talks might be fatally undermined, no matter how great the sincerity and ingenuity of all concerned. "And we desperately need those talks to succeed this year. The alternative comforts only the extremists," he said.

Notwithstanding all the difficulties, the humanitarian community would continue to do all it could to save and improve lives and preserve human dignity. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other agencies and non-governmental organizations working in Gaza were doing a heroic job under difficult and dangerous circumstances, not least due to the imposed restrictions on the movement and access of United Nations staff, which were too often not consistent with their immunities and privileges. Meanwhile, he appealed to the donor community to continue to respond generously to what had now become the third largest annual consolidated appeal for humanitarian funds after Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He also appealed to the Council to continue to speak up about the consequences for civilians, in both the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel, "of what is happening, and about the overriding duty on all sides to comply with international humanitarian law and the resolutions of the Council".

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