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MIDDLE EAST VISIT BY UNITED STATES PRESIDENT OFFERS OPENING FOR SERIOUS POLITICAL

INITIATIVE TO NEGOTIATE TWO-STATE SOLUTION. TOP UN ENVOY TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

Special Coordinator Robert Serry Briefs; Says Much Work Ahead, International Community Must Work in Concert to Help Palestinians, Israelis Bridge Differences

Following the visit by United States President Barak Obama to the Middle East last week, there was now an opening to develop a “serious and substantial” political initiative to achieve the negotiated two-State solution between Israelis and Palestinians that would best serve the interests, rights and aspirations of both sides, a top United Nations envoy told the Security Council today.

“The visit by President Obama to the region last week marks an important opportunity to reinvigorate efforts towards a two-State solution,” said Robert Serry, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, in his regular monthly briefing. The President also had visited King Abdullah II of Jordan, who had been central to recent dialogue efforts. Following up to the visit, United States Secretary of State John Kerry met with President Mahmoud Abbas in Amman and returned to Jerusalem to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

To be sure, the Middle East faced a period of “extraordinary” turmoil, he said, noting that the months ahead would not be easy. Both sides must show the political will and determination to make progress, while concerted actions by the international community — and the region — would be needed to support their efforts. The United Nations was committed to play its role in shaping the conditions for a return to meaningful negotiations in the period ahead.

With that in mind, he welcomed President Obama’s strong reaffirmation of the two-State solution as necessary, just and possible, as well as his call for an independent, viable Palestine and emphasis on Israeli’s right to security. In a related “hopeful signal” for regional stability, the Secretary-General welcomed on 22 March news that Israel and Turkey had agreed to restore normal relations.

The Secretary-General also had stated in a letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, following the 18 March confirmation of a new Israeli Government, that he counted on his commitment to the two-State solution. It would be critical this year to achieve substantial results that would strengthen Israel’s security, as well as its regional and international standing, by fulfilling Palestinians’ legitimate aspirations for a sovereign, independent and viable State.

While Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas reiterated their commitment to the two-State solution, they undeniably differed on its terms and how to attain it. The United Nations and the international community must help them bridge their differences. “We should not underestimate the difficulties, but neither should we belittle the real possibility to overcome them,” he said, calling for concerted action through a “revitalized” Middle East Quartet that engaged more broadly with key Arab partners.

During the reporting period, no new settlements had been announced, he said, and three structures in settlement outposts had been demolished on 18 March. Moreover, there were fewer incursions by Israeli security forces in the West Bank, including in Area A, as well as fewer demolitions of Palestinian structures. He hoped that such “initial” signs of reversing negative trends would take hold and create an environment for a meaningful political process to take shape.

At the same time, overall violence was high, he conceded, noting that several clashes had occurred during protests, including those in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners, which caused the death of one Palestinian. Israel’s use of rubber-coated bullets had injured many Palestinians, including a 23-year-old man who died from his wounds on 22 February. There were clashes at the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif compound on 3, 6 and 8 March in which Israeli police fired stun grenades at Palestinians throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails. Settler violence against Palestinians also continued, injuring six. Israeli security forces arrested nine settlers suspected of such assaults in the West Bank.

He also voiced concern about the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody, urging that those being held without charge be charged and face trial with judicial guarantees, in line with international standards, or be promptly released. Both sides must adhere to the 14 May 2012 agreement, he recalled.

Turning to Palestinian state-building efforts, he said the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee had met in Brussels on 19 March, where he had highlighted the growing disconnect between the success of the Palestinian state-building agenda, and the continued political impasse. Gains could erode, given the negative socioeconomic and security trends and "dire" fiscal situation of the Palestinian Authority. He urged Israel to transfer Palestinian clearance revenues to the Authority in a timely manner, while the Authority must focus on structural reforms. A political horizon must be restored without delay.

As for the situation in Gaza, he said the 21 November ceasefire had suffered a "serious setback" with rockets fired into Israel on 21 March for the second time. In reaction, Israel had rescinded the extension on the fishing limit, restricted travel into and out of Gaza, and closed the Kerem Shalom Crossing, bringing the movement of goods to a halt for a second time since 27 February. The United Nations condemned such rocket fire and also urged Israel's continued restraint. It would continue to support Egypt's efforts to restore calm. "No progress" had been made on Palestinian reconciliation efforts during the reporting period.

At the regional level, the situation in Syria had worsened over the last month, he continued, voicing deep concern at the pursuit of a military victory by both sides and their "reckless" disregard for civilian lives. The Secretary-General had repeatedly said that the prospects for a political solution would remain "forlorn" unless the parties abandoned violence and committed to a political solution. International consensus and a common position from the Security Council were critical in that regard.

Also, nearly 1.2 million Syrian refugees had fled to neighbouring countries and he appealed for pledges made at the 30 January Kuwait pledging conference to be realized. The Secretary-General had responded promptly to charges that chemical weapons had been used in Syria, informing Syria, France and the United Kingdom of his decision to investigate those allegations and seeking pertinent information. He also had sent a letter to the Security Council President. In the area of operation for the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), continued military activities in the area of separation could jeopardize the ceasefire between Israel and Syria.

In Lebanon, he said the 22 March resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati had cast uncertainty over the political process at a time of increased tensions, noting that the Secretary-General called on all parties to remain united behind President Michel Sleiman. On 14 March, when the Council was briefed by the Special Coordinator, it had clearly recognized the fragile situation in Lebanon and expressed deep concern on the impact of the Syrian crisis on the country's stability. Following that, on 17 March, four Sunni religious scholars had been assaulted in Beirut, and the following day Syrian helicopters were reported to have entered Lebanese airspace and fired rockets near the north-eastern border town of Arsal. There also had been reports of Syrian shells landing in Lebanon's north-eastern region of Hermel.

With consultations on a new Government set to begin this week, he emphasized the need for all parties to make "swift progress" to ensure that parliamentary elections took place on a consensual basis, and within the legal and constitutional framework.

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

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