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IN BRIEFING TO SECURITY COUNCIL, UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS

URGES ISRAELIS, PALESTINIANS TO STAY COURSE OF PEACE

Briefing the Security Council this morning on the situation in the Middle East, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Kieran Prendergast urged both Israelis and Palestinians to stay the course of peace, saying that violence only led down into the abyss.

"Today, we are at a point where either the promise of peace or a resumption of violence will define the course of the political process in the weeks and months ahead", he said. Faced with that choice, it was essential that the parties chose the road to peace. The past month had witnessed the most promising openings in the political process since the autumn of 2000.

Yet, he continued, the same period also witnessed the continuation of the sort of violence, by both sides, which had "snuffed out" every previous effort during that period to renew the peace process. For the parties, staying on the path of the [Road Map](#) in the face of continuing violence was very difficult. Since the last briefing, 63 Palestinians and 26 Israelis had lost their lives. That raised the total death toll since September 2000 to 2,714 Palestinians and 778 Israelis. "But let us be clear. Stay the course they must. The alternative was no alternative."

He said that President Bush's initiative to hold the Aqaba Summit gave an especially important impetus to the renewal of the peace process. The statements of [Prime Minister Abbas](#) and [Prime Minister Sharon](#) at the Summit opened the way to begin implementation of the Road Map leading to the two-State solution envisaged in Council [resolution 1397](#). But, regrettably, as had been witnessed all too often in recent years, the Aqaba Summit was followed by a sharp rise in violence re-igniting the familiar spiral of violence, counter-violence and revenge.

The combination in quick succession of endorsement of the Road Map by the parties and the successful outcome of the Summit created the conditions for a genuine transformation of the political dynamics, away from violence and towards peace. But those conditions were still tenuous, and the achievement of Aqaba was fragile. Not unexpectedly, Prime Ministers Abbas and Sharon had each met resistance at home for the commitments they made at Aqaba. Those on the extremes would continue to do everything they could to stifle the nascent peace process.

The international community must play its part by supporting the parties, he stressed. But there was no substitute for determination and commitment by the parties themselves to end the conflict. Each side would have to make difficult concessions if peace was to become a reality.

Regarding the Palestinians, he said it was necessary to assist Prime Minister Abbas and Minister of State for Internal Security Dahlan. Under the first phase of the Road Map, the Palestinian Authority was required to undertake visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis. In endorsing the Road Map, the Palestinian Authority had committed itself to "rebuild and refocus" the Palestinian security forces to provide security effectively for Palestinians and prevent terrorist attacks on Israelis. In addition, the Palestinian Authority was to regroup all security forces under the authority of the Minister of the Interior, Prime Minister Abbas, a task which had not yet begun.

As for the Israeli side, the Government of Israel should immediately halt actions such as extrajudicial killings. Israel should also stop using excessive and disproportionate force in civilian areas, which had caused the death and injury of so many Palestinian civilians. The Government should also discontinue measures of collective punishment, including house demolitions and curfews. The Road Map called on Israel to "take no actions undermining trust" in its first phase. Tuesday's attack on Dr. Rantisi, which undercut the efforts of the Palestinian Authority to negotiate a ceasefire as a first step to disarming armed, violent groups, was counter to the spirit of the Road Map.

Unfortunately, he continued, such attacks would likely harden sentiments among the Palestinian people and strengthen the extremists. Israel had a right to self-defence in the face of repeated terrorist attacks. However, the best way to ensure the long-term security of Israel was through the pursuit of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, beginning with implementation of the Road Map.

The humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory had not improved despite the tentative steps towards renewal of the political process. The main cause of the humanitarian crisis was the closure regime imposed by the Government of Israel. Since the last briefing, the humanitarian situation had worsened as a result of a tightening of the closure. A more stringent movement control regime had been introduced by the Israeli Defence Forces at the main entry and transit points to and within the occupied Palestinian territory.

The Gaza Strip, he noted, was placed under tight closure following the 8 June attack by Palestinian groups on the Erez crossing. Movement within the Strip, particularly across the Abu Houli checkpoint in central Gaza, was restricted to several hours a day. Vehicular traffic into and out of Beit Hanoun, outside Gaza City, was limited to United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) cars. No exception was made for Palestinian ambulance operators who

were now instructed to employ the "back-to-back" method for medical evacuations, which required that patients be moved from an ambulance on one side of the checkpoint to an ambulance on the other side. That was a method that was more usually employed for the movement of commercial goods.

He said that the movement of goods to the Gaza Strip via the Karni crossing (the only crossing for humanitarian goods) had been limited. Only 200 to 250 trucks with commercial and humanitarian items were entering daily, as compared with up to 700 in April and May. Since 11 June, the Karni crossing had again been fully closed. Israeli authorities had provided assurances that humanitarian goods could be brought into the Gaza Strip via an alternative crossing point, but based on past experience, it was doubtful if the alternative would allow for sufficient volume of vehicles to meet humanitarian needs.

If the Palestinian Authority was to build effective institutions and gain the support of the Palestinian people for the peace process, it was essential that the closure regime be eased. It was incumbent upon Israel to pursue its security and self-defence in a manner that minimized the suffering of Palestinian civilians.

At the last [Council briefing](#) on the situation, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, Terje Rød-Larsen, described a "new, draconian" closure regime for the Gaza Strip that seriously affected the work of the United Nations and other international agencies, he said. For a brief period, between 2 and 10 June, the situation improved somewhat, even though the movement of international personnel and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip remained subjected to a stringent Israeli security closure regime.

He said that, on 10 and 11 June, Gaza had been closed to all but those with diplomatic passports. Moreover, the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt had been closed, as well.

Since the last briefing, he said, representatives of the United Nations system and broader international community had met on several occasions with interlocutors from the Government of Israel on the issue of movement restrictions. On 27 May, Mr. Prendergast had met with the Deputy Permanent Representative of Israel to express the Organization's concerns about the closure. On 29 May, two meetings had taken place in the region between the Government of Israel and the international community to discuss the access situation, with particular focus on the Gaza Strip.

The closure of the Gaza Strip for national and international organizations had had a detrimental effect on efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, he continued. The renewal of the closure regime — after assurances from the Israeli authorities that the situation would improve — was worrying. The United Nations would persist in its attempt to resolve that issue on the local level and would continue to keep the Council informed of developments in that regard. Security of staff and goods also remained a serious concern. In both meetings, the international community noted recent incidents of shootings at diplomatic vehicles and refusal to facilitate movement of a European Union/United Nations convoy. Investigations of those incidents by the Israeli Defence Forces had yet to be concluded.

Recalling that the Council's attention had been drawn recently to the Government of Israel's construction of a separation wall, and its effects on Palestinian populations, he said that the impact on lives of those Palestinians who found themselves trapped between the new wall and the Green Line should be considered. The wall potentially separated tens of thousands of Palestinians from their agricultural lands, wells, markets, schools, health clinics and hospitals. By the end of July, 12,000 Palestinians in 15 villages could find themselves wedged between the wall and the Green Line. A further 138,000 Palestinians in 16 localities could be surrounded on three sides by the wall.

He said that the construction of the wall could have obvious adverse implications for the peace process, as well. Given that the wall lay well inside the West Bank and not along the Green Line, it could easily be seen as jeopardizing the territorial contiguity of a Palestinian State and, therefore, inhibiting the establishment of a Palestinian State on the basis of the relevant Security Council resolutions. The placement of the wall had both short-term and long-term implications. In the short term, the isolation and separation would devastate the lives and livelihoods of thousands of Palestinians, generating more frustration and anger among the Palestinian people. That could lessen support for necessary compromises.

In the longer run, he continued, aware of the Government of Israel's statements regarding the temporary nature of the wall, its course, particularly around Jerusalem, could prejudice final status negotiations. While understanding the dilemma facing Israel on how to protect itself from terrorist attacks, nevertheless, in light of developments since the construction of the wall began, he believed that work on the wall should be halted. Suspending its construction would contribute to the overall effort to improve security and humanitarian conditions and restart the political process.

Along the Blue Line, he was pleased to report that the parties had continued to act with restraint, maintaining a fragile calm along the Line. Nevertheless, breaches continued to take place in the form of Israeli air violations and Hezbollah anti-aircraft fire. Israeli jets had continued their pattern of often flying around the area of operation of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and entering Lebanese airspace further north. Despite repeated requests to the Government of Lebanon, the anti-aircraft gun placed in the immediate vicinity of UNIFIL position 8-32 since 18 February remained in place. Those air violations and the consequent anti-aircraft fire carried an escalatory potential.

He again called on the parties to refrain from such actions that threatened to disrupt the otherwise calm situation and to uphold their commitment to respect fully the Blue Line.

Before concluding, he said that the Quartet — United Nations, European Union, United States and Russian Federation — principals would be meeting in Jordan on 22 June. Following the Aqaba Summit, as well as the recent wave of violence in the region, that meeting was a timely opportunity to discuss next steps for the work of the Quartet mechanisms to strengthen the prospects for renewing the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.

The meeting, which began at 10:40 a.m., adjourned at 11:02 a.m.

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