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ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN TALKS CONTINUE, TENUOUS CEASEFIRE HOLDS, BUT RECENT VIOLENCE

BETWEEN PALESTINIAN RIVALS COULD UNDERCUT REUNIFICATION, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

The top United Nations political official today told the Security Council that, while Israeli-Palestinian peace talks were continuing and the “fragile” ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was holding, the recent dramatic surge in violence between rival Hamas and Fatah clans threatened to undercut prospects for Palestinian reunification.

In his monthly briefing on the situation in the Middle East, B. Lynn Pascoe told the Security Council that, despite Ehud Olmert’s announcement last month that he was set to step down as Israel’s Prime Minister, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations as part of the Annapolis process were continuing “on both political and technical levels”, as were indirect talks with Syria.

Noting that Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had met as recently as 6 August, Mr. Pascoe cautioned that the sides still seemed to differ on key issues. “It appears that the gaps between the parties remain and I reiterate the Secretary-General’s call for the need to press ahead to make real progress in overcoming the differences to reach the goal of agreement by the end of the year, despite the political restraint,” he said.

Mr. Pascoe also cautioned that the situation on the ground in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem “remains a cause for serious concern”, as he described the major increase in inter-Palestinian violence since July. Hamas had seized control of the last remaining Palestinian Authority institutions in the Gaza Strip, most notably the Governorates that Hamas had previously recognized as legitimate. Three Governors had been detained by Hamas forces and two were still in custody. Reacting to Hamas’ action in Gaza, Palestinian security forces in the West Bank had arrested dozens of Hamas activists, most of who had later been freed on President Abbas’ orders.

Stressing that those actions had severely prejudiced the prospects for Palestinian reunification within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority, Mr. Pascoe said: “Hamas and the Palestinian Authority should both release detainees seized as a result of the recent violence.” Such a move by both sides might serve as a first step in a process leading to the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority—an outcome to which United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon remained committed.

He went on to report that, while the Egyptian-mediated ceasefire between Israel and Hamas that had begun on 19 June was largely holding, it was nevertheless fragile. Settlement activity had continued across the West Bank, and particularly in East Jerusalem, and on 24 July, permission had been given for 20 permanent housing units at Maskiyot in the West Bank, outside the footprint of any existing settlement.

As for the situation in Gaza, he said that, while the number of delivery trucks entering the City during the reporting period had increased by some 75 per cent, most basic commodities, from school supplies to mechanical parts and bedding, remained in short supply. There was also a severe fuel shortage, which was impacting agriculture, as farmers inside Gaza were unable to run water pumps for irrigation. “Normal economic and daily life is extremely difficult throughout Gaza,” he said, stressing that the benefits of the ceasefire had not yet translated into significant improvements in the living conditions.

The overall fiscal performance of the Palestinian Authority had continued to improve, but it nevertheless faced a budget shortfall of some \$400 million from October to the end of the year, he reported. That meant that Palestinian Authority salaries might not be paid from the end of September. He urged all donors to fulfil outstanding pledges and direct external assistance to budget support.

Looking ahead, Mr. Pascoe noted that the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East peace process was set to meet next month on the margins of the General Assembly, followed by an *iftar* to be hosted by the Secretary-General with Arab partners. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee was also set to meet. “These occasions will enable us to take stock of the progress that has been made and the gaps that remain to be bridged, and to assist urgently in the implementation of donor pledges to address the impending Palestinian budget crisis,” he said.

The meeting began at 10:13 a.m. and ended at 10:30 a.m.

Briefing

B. LYNN PASCOE, Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, told the Council that a number of significant developments had taken place in the Middle East during the reporting period, including Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's announcement on 30 July that he would not seek re-election. Despite Mr. Olmert's decision to step down, however, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were continuing, as were indirect talks with Syria.

Meanwhile, there had been a rise in internal Palestinian violence as Hamas had taken to consolidate its grip over the Gaza Strip. The fragile ceasefire between Hamas and Israel continued to hold, but the situation on the ground in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem "remains a cause for serious concern".

Regarding the negotiations that were part of the Israeli-Palestinian Annapolis peace process, he said that talks were continuing on both political and technical levels, and on 6 August Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had met again. "It appears that the gaps between the parties remain, and I reiterate the Secretary-General's call for the need to press ahead to make real progress in overcoming the differences to reach the goal of agreement by the end of the year, despite the political restraint," he said.

He next detailed the recent major increase in internal Palestinian violence, which had killed 43 Palestinians and wounded 366 others. One Israeli soldier died in East Jerusalem of injuries sustained on 11 July, and nine Israelis had reportedly been injured. The rise in the inter-Palestinian violence had stemmed from an incident in late July in which five Hamas members and a child had been killed in a beachside bombing in Gaza. Hamas had claimed that the Fatah-affiliated Hillis clan were sheltering the perpetrators and had attacked that clan's stronghold in eastern Gaza City, the last bastion of Fatah's military presence in Gaza.

The ensuing violence had left 10 members of the Hillis family dead, and dozens of the clan's members had fled through Israel to the West Bank, he said. Hamas had detained members of the family along with dozens of Fatah and other activists, and there had been allegations of torture committed by Hamas against detainees. Following the 25 July bombing, Hamas had initiated a "well-orchestrated campaign" for total control of the Gaza strip. Hamas forces had raided more than 200 community-based organizations, leading to, among other things, a disruption of activities involving thousands of beneficiaries; 23 of the institutions had been supported by the United Nations.

He said that Hamas had then seized control of the last remaining Palestinian Authority institutions in the Gaza Strip, most notably the Governorates, which Hamas had previously recognized as legitimate and which had continued to report to President Abbas. Three Governors had been detained by Hamas forces and two were still in custody. Those actions had severely prejudiced the prospects for Palestinian reunification within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. "We are also concerned about the consequences for UN operations in Gaza," he added.

Reacting to Hamas' action in Gaza, Palestinian security forces in the West Bank had then arrested dozens of Hamas activists, most of whom were later freed on President Abbas' orders. Palestinian Authority security forces had closed a number of Hamas-linked institutions in the West Bank. "Hamas and the Palestinian Authority should both release detainees seized as a result of the recent violence," he said, stressing that such a move by both sides might serve as a first step in a process leading to the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority—an outcome to which United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon remained committed.

Mr. Pascoe went on to report that, while the Egyptian-mediated ceasefire between Israel and Hamas that had begun on 19 June was largely holding, it was nevertheless fragile. Ten rockets and one mortar had been fired from Gaza into Israel, without causing casualties. During this period, no Israeli Defense Forces air strikes or incursions had been reported, though one Palestinian child had been injured by Israeli Defense Forces shooting near the border. Twelve other Palestinians had been killed, however, during a tunnel collapse along the Gaza-Egypt border. More than 25 such tunnels had been closed as part of Egypt's efforts to curb smuggling.

Continuing, he said that talks for the release of Israeli captive Gilad Shalit had stalled and the International Red Cross had still not been given access to him, after two years in captivity. Meanwhile, the United Nations had welcomed Israel's decision to release some 200 Palestinian prisoners as a goodwill gesture to President Abbas.

On the situation in the West Bank, he noted that three Palestinians, including two children, had been killed, and 185 Palestinians, including 47 children had been injured during the reporting period. The children had been shot by the Israeli Defense Forces in an action against Palestinian demonstrators in Naalin village. There had also been a rise in settler violence, including at least 34 settler attacks on Palestinians, resulting in 35 injuries, including of 9 children. Settlement activity had continued across the West Bank, particularly in East Jerusalem. On 24 July, permission had been given for 20 permanent housing units at Maskiyot in the West Bank, outside the footprint of any existing settlement.

"We are concerned at reports that the trailers of the Mgron settlement outpost are to be evacuated in exchange for the construction of permanent residential units in other settlements," he continued, stressing that the Secretary-General had repeatedly stated that the all settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, ran contrary to the Fourth Geneva Convention and Israel's commitments under the [Road Map](#) and the Annapolis process.

Concerning checkpoints, Mr. Pascoe said that two major stations in the West Bank had been partially opened to Palestinian traffic, leading to a significant improvement in access to those areas. However, the overall number of closures had remained unchanged at 608, as some previously removed obstacles had been re-installed. Construction continued on the barrier around East Jerusalem and within the West Bank, deviating from the Green Line and contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

Turning to other issues, he reported that, while the overall fiscal performance of the Palestinian Authority had continued to improve, it nevertheless faced a budget shortfall of some \$400 million from October to the end of the year. That meant that Palestinian Authority salaries might not be paid from the end of September. "We urge all donors to fulfil outstanding pledges and direct external assistance to budget support," he said.

On former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's work on behalf of the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East peace process, he said that certain obstacles to movement had been eased in the region and, at the end of July, a telecommunications deal had been signed between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, enabling a second mobile phone operator to launch in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. That deal had been an important part of Mr. Blair's "May package" intended to stimulate economic growth. At the same time, however, to achieve significant economic impact, all outstanding measures needed to be implemented rapidly, as originally negotiated.

Turning to the situation in Gaza, he said that, while the number of delivery trucks entering the city during the reporting period had increased by some 75 per cent, most basic commodities, from school supplies to mechanical parts and bedding, remained in short supply. There was also a severe fuel shortage, which was impacting agriculture as farmers inside Gaza were unable to run water pumps for irrigation. That lack of both fuel and spare parts meant that some 84,000 litres of raw and partially-treated sewage was dumped into the Mediterranean every day. Power outages hit the area at least four or five hours a day. "Normal economic and daily life is extremely difficult throughout Gaza," he said, stressing that the benefits of the ceasefire had not yet translated into any significant improvements in living conditions.

Updating the Council on developments in Lebanon, he said that the past month had been marked by both positive political developments and ongoing political concerns. For example, after weeks of discussion among members of the National Unity Government, the Cabinet's ministerial declaration had been agreed and presented to Parliament. Just last week, the declaration had received a vote of confidence, representing an important milestone in the implementation of the Doha Agreement. At the same time, those developments had been "shadowed" by security incidents in and around Tripoli, including the detonation of an improvised explosive device at a bus stop frequented by Lebanese soldiers.

Looking ahead, Mr. Pascoe noted that the Quartet was set to meet next month on the margins of the General Assembly, followed by an *iftar* to be hosted by the Secretary-General with Arab partners. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee was also set to meet. "These occasions will enable us to take stock of the progress that has been made and the gaps that remain to be bridged, and to assist urgently in the implementation of donor pledges to address the impending Palestinian budget crisis," he said.

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