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### DESPITE 'URGENT' NEED FOR PROGRESS TOWARDS TWO-STATE SOLUTION IN MIDDLE EAST,

### 'PROFOUND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PARTIES' REMAIN, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

#### Saying Mistrust Deepening, Senior UN Official Highlights Recent Clashes, Confirmation by Palestinians of Intent to Approach UN Next Month for 'Recognition'

Recent terror attacks and escalating violence in the Middle East showed the urgent need to make progress towards the two-State solution, but the political deadlock persisted, B. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, told the Security Council this morning.

"Differences remain profound between the parties regarding what terms should frame negotiations, and mistrust is deepening," Mr. Pascoe said in the monthly briefing on security, political and humanitarian developments in Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon and Syria.

Describing the coordinated terror attacks on vehicles in southern Israel on 18 August, he said that eight Israelis had been killed, including two soldiers. Five Egyptian security personnel died in subsequent operations, although Egypt had cooperated with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the action. Israel had conveyed regret over those deaths, which had heightened tensions between the two countries. Nineteen Palestinians had been killed in air strikes after Israel announced intelligence attributing the attacks to a group based in Gaza, and Gaza militants fired more than 100 projectiles into Israel, killing one civilian. The Israel Defense Forces also conducted search operations in the West Bank, reportedly arresting about 120 Hamas members. Many were injured in all those events.

The diplomatic Quartet, which includes the United Nations, United States, European Union and Russian Federation, had condemned the terrorism and called for restraint from all sides, and the Office of Special Coordinator Robert Serry was actively engaged, he said, supporting Egypt's efforts to restore calm in Gaza. A fragile easing of tensions had been restored this week, but there was concern over the risk of escalation. He reiterated that the cessation of hostilities was a key element of related Security Council resolutions. Indiscriminate firing of rockets was unacceptable.

Calm was necessary if meaningful negotiations were to be given a chance, he said, adding, however, that without political breakthrough and with Israeli settlement activity continuing, the Palestinian leadership had confirmed its intention to approach the General Assembly and the Security Council for recognition in September. On 4 August, the Arab Peace Initiative Committee had announced the Arab League's plan to call on United Nations Member States to recognize a Palestinian State within the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital and to move to submit an application for full United Nations membership. The Government of Israel remained opposed to such actions.

"We continue to hope that the international community would be able to shape a legitimate and balanced way forward to help the parties resume meaningful negotiations that will realize the two-State solution," he said.

Meanwhile, he said, achievements of the Palestinian Authority in state-building, security and economic improvement must be consolidated and bolstered, both through political progress and economic assistance. The Authority was experiencing a serious fiscal crisis and needed \$250 million in additional commitments to meet its obligations. He called on donors to provide timely and generous support.

At the same time, he said, Israel had announced a series of new settlement expansion in the West Bank, with a total of some 5,200 units planned in East Jerusalem and 277 units approved for the Ariel settlement — the largest number approved outside East Jerusalem in a single settlement by the current Government. The Quartet reacted with disapproval to those announcements. In a more positive development, he said, the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the evacuation of the illegal settlement outpost of Mgron, and he looked forward to its implementation. At the same time, plans to relocate some 2,300 Bedouins and judicial decisions allowing the barrier to encircle the West Bank village of Wajeh raised tensions and concern.

Additional tensions continued to arise from settler violence, ongoing restrictions on movement, and incursions by Israel Defense Forces, including a 1 August search and arrest operation which had resulted in the deaths of two Palestinians. Settler violence had declined, but the Israel Defense Forces had issued restraining orders against settlers who were suspected of so-called "price-tag" activities against Palestinians. The Secretary-General had consistently called for perpetrators of such incidents to be brought to justice, he recalled. Israeli authorities initially had eased access to East Jerusalem for West Bank Palestinians during Ramadan, but had tightened restrictions again last week. He reiterated the Quartet's position that the extended ban on Palestinian governing institutions in the city was contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map.

Turning to Gaza, he said that living conditions of the population there remained a priority for the United Nations. While imports into Gaza had increased by 12 per cent since his last briefing — "a step in the right direction" — restrictions remained in place. A comprehensive easing of the closure of the Gaza Strip was needed, along with a substantial improvement in the security situation. It was key that humanitarian organizations be able to work unhindered and independently, he added.

There was continued concern over new orders by the Gaza de facto authorities that would require staff of civil society groups to register with them in order to travel outside the Gaza Strip; of further concern was the prevention of Gaza's students from travelling abroad on scholarships. Meanwhile, however, Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit remained in Hamas captivity, where he had been since 2006. Mr. Pascoe called on his captors to allow humanitarian access to him and to release him without further delay.

He said that the United Nations continued to support reconciliation efforts between Fatah and Hamas representatives within the framework of the commitments of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the positions of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative. The reconciliation accord envisaged elections that would follow the formation of a technocratic Government of unity; such elections had been set for 22 October.

Turning to the situation in Lebanon, Mr. Pascoe highlighted several security incidents of concern, including the 26 July targeting of a United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) convoy outside the city of Saida, which had injured five peacekeepers. Israeli violations of the Lebanese airspace continued on an "almost daily basis, and in high numbers". In addition, two explosions had taken place in Beirut on 29 July and 11 August, and on 13 August, a shooting had been directed at the property of a Member of Parliament. Heavy clashes had also erupted between armed factions in the Ain el Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, and a school of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had been hit, causing material damage.

On 9 August, he said, the Lebanese authorities had informed the Special Tribunal for Lebanon that they were unable to arrest and transfer those accused in the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The United Nations supported the Special Tribunal in its work in that respect, and expected the full cooperation of the Government of Lebanon.

In Syria, national security forces continued to use "excessive and lethal force" against protesters. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had repeatedly urged Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to immediately end such violence and to engage in "meaningful reform". Nonetheless, in an interview on 21 August, President Assad had remained silent on the violence. While he outlined a timetable for planned political reforms — including Parliamentary elections to be held by February 2012 and a revision of the Constitution — Mr. Pascoe noted that "the failure to rein in security forces undermined the credibility of such announcements".

In response to the events in Syria — including a "deeply disturbing" report received by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which noted the possibility of crimes against humanity — Mr. Pascoe welcomed the recent decision by the Human Rights Council to establish an international commission of inquiry on the matter. He hoped that the Syrian authorities would fully cooperate with the commission. Further, a United Nations team had been sent to assess the overall humanitarian situation in Syria. Its visit would conclude today, and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs was expected to provide a briefing in the next few days.

The meeting began at 10:10 a.m. and closed at 10:30 a.m., at which time the Council went into consultations on the Middle East, as previously agreed.

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