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### UPCOMING PERIOD WILL BE CRITICAL TO TALKS ON ENDING CRISIS IN SYRIA

#### ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

##### 'Grave Turmoil' Threatens Regional Stability, Warns United Nations Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace Process

With "grave turmoil" on the ground threatening stability across the Middle East, a top United Nations official warned the Security Council today that the coming weeks would be critical on two major diplomatic fronts — negotiations to halt the increasingly bloody crisis in Syria, and ending the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Efforts to develop a meaningful initiative on a two-State solution were likely to reach a critical point in the next few weeks, said Robert H. Serry, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, as he briefed the Council this morning. "This is the time for concerted action in support of a substantive initiative, lest we miss the slight opening that has been offered in recent months", in particular by the renewed regional commitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and by the engagement of Secretary of State John Kerry of the United States, currently on his fourth trip to the Middle East.

Indeed, it was a moment that the parties to the conflict "cannot afford to lose", he said, stressing that the international community must not relent in its commitment to advancing prospects for the resumption of meaningful negotiations. While diplomatic efforts to break the political deadlock had remained quiet during the reporting period, they were no less serious in determination. In April, a delegation of Arab Ministers visiting Washington, D.C., had reaffirmed the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative, he noted, encouraging the Government of Israel to continue to respond positively to that "slight opening".

On the ground, he noted, both parties had been exercising some restraint and care not to upset the fragile situation, in order to support the ongoing diplomatic effort. With the exception of the pre-approval of 300 housing units, no new approvals or tenders had been issued for settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since March. "Palestinians have shown countenance in diplomatic fora, and Palestinian security forces have maintained their robust performance in maintaining law and order," he said.

However, recent tensions around the sensitive issue of Jerusalem were troubling, particularly when it came to restrictions of access to holy sites, he said. Clashes between Palestinians and settlers in the occupied West Bank had intensified during the reporting period. In one deplorable event, a settler had been stabbed to death, the first Israeli killed by a Palestinian in the West Bank since September 2011. The killing had triggered numerous incidents of settler violence against Palestinians and their property, he said, adding that the reporting period had also witnessed continuing demolitions of Palestinian homes and property in Area C and East Jerusalem.

He recalled that six months ago yesterday, the parties to the conflict had agreed to a ceasefire understanding in the Gaza Strip, making today a good opportunity to take stock and look ahead. The understanding had brought a marked improvement during its first three months, with no rockets from Gaza landing in Israel. In the second three months, however, 33 rockets and five mortar shells had landed. Eleven Palestinian civilians had been injured in the buffer zone during the same period.

Nonetheless, "the ceasefire understanding reached last November continues to represent the best opportunity to start changing the negative dynamics in Gaza," he stressed. The United Nations continued to support Egyptian efforts in that regard. In addition, delegations from Fatah and Hamas had met in Cairo on 14 May to advance the implementation of existing reconciliation agreements. Reportedly, the factions had recommitted themselves to consultations on the formation of a national consensus Government headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, as prescribed in previous accords. Those consultations should begin within a month and lead to a Government in the next three months.

Meanwhile, efforts to stop the bloodshed in Syria were a matter of great urgency and must be a top priority of the international community, he said. On that front, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had welcomed the initiative by the United States and the Russian Federation to bring the Syrian parties to the negotiating table. "The weeks ahead will be critical and we urge everyone to cooperate." The Secretary-General remained deeply alarmed at the escalating violence as the humanitarian crisis continued to worsen, with every third Syrian now in need of urgent assistance.

He said one in four Syrians had been uprooted from his or her home. Neighbouring countries were reaching their limits, hosting over 1.5 million registered refugees. While recognizing the impact on host countries, Mr. Serry stressed the importance of keeping borders open for refugees fleeing the violence, consistent with international humanitarian obligations. In that context, the priority of the United Nations was clear: to continue to ensure that the millions of Syrians in need of lifesaving assistance received it.

Additionally, the Secretary-General remained gravely concerned about the allegations of chemical weapons, he said. Amid such mounting reports, the United Nations once again urged the Government of Syria to allow the mission established to investigate those claims to proceed without further delay.

Turning to Lebanon, he said the past month had seen repeated incidents of shelling from Syria in Lebanese territory. Given the scale of the challenges facing

Lebanon — including growing pressure from the unprecedented Syrian refugee crisis — it was vital to agree on a new Government without delay, he emphasized, encouraging all parties to continue to engage positively with Prime Minister-designate Tammam Salam in order to reach an early agreement. “Now is the time to intensify efforts to agree to a way forward and avoid an institutional vacuum.”  
The meeting began at 10:13 a.m. and ended at 10:38 a.m.

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