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ISRAELI, PALESTINIAN LEADERS URGED TO FOCUS URGENTLY ON ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

OF 'NEGOTIATED TWO-STATE ENDGAME' IN SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING

Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace Process Reports That Brazil, Argentina Have Recognized 'Independent State of Palestine'

Israeli and Palestinian leaders should focus with urgency in the coming year on the essential elements of a "negotiated two-State endgame, for the benefit of both peoples", the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process told the Security Council this morning.

"The parties have set for themselves important timelines that have received strong international endorsement and 2011 is the year in which these are to be met," Robert Serry said during his monthly briefing to the Council. "It is vital that both parties are now fully forthcoming on substance in talks with the United States, and that further measures are taken on the ground without delay to strengthen and enable the agenda of Palestinian State-building," he added.

Conditions in the Gaza Strip must also remain in focus, and calm must be maintained, stressed Mr. Serry, who is also the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, and his Envoy to the Middle East Quartet. He said an active third-party role on substantial issues was essential if a negotiated solution was to be achieved, adding that close consultation with the Diplomatic Quartet was important in that regard. In the year ahead, the credibility of the political process and of its sponsors, including the Quartet, would be at stake.

Expressing his own and the Secretary-General's sympathy to Israel following the deaths of 43 people in a fire on Mount Carmel two weeks ago, one of the worst natural disasters in the country's history, he noted that the country had received assistance from the region, including from the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey, as well as from further afield. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had expressed Israel's gratitude for the solidarity and material support.

He went on to state that although Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority had pledged in September to seek a framework agreement on permanent status within a year, that process had suffered a serious setback because, regrettably, Israel had failed to renew its freeze on settlement construction. On 8 December, efforts by the United States to create an environment conducive to the resumption of direct talks by through a renewed settlement freeze had been brought to a close and President Abbas had reaffirmed that he would not return to direct negotiations unless Israel froze settlement activity.

In East Jerusalem, Israeli authorities had approved 130 new homes in the settlement of Gilo and the construction of 625 new units had been announced in the Pisgat Ze'ev settlement, he continued. There had been a significant increase in construction since the moratorium's expiry on 26 September. Emphasizing that settlement activity contravened international law, the Road Map and the Quartet's position, he reiterated the stance of the United Nations and the wider international community that Israel should meet its obligations to freeze all settlement activity and dismantle outposts erected since March 2001.

Reporting that Quartet envoys had met with United States Special Envoy George Mitchell in New York on 10 December, ahead of his trip to the region, he said: "The need to shift strategy is evident. We understand that the United States will now engage both sides in indirect talks on all the final-status issues and the Secretary-General expects the parties to engage seriously." In response to requests from President Abbas, Brazil and Argentina had recognized the "independent State of Palestine" within borders conforming to the 1967 cease fire lines, he said, adding that the [European Union Council of Ministers](#) had reiterated yesterday its readiness to recognize a Palestinian State, when appropriate.

Quartet envoys had also discussed the urgent need to further enable the State-building efforts of the Palestinian Authority, he said. Israeli steps under consideration included a further easing of restrictions on movement and access; a reduction of Israeli incursions and measures to enable the Palestinian Authority's efforts to extend into Area C of the West Bank; and a release of prisoners. Israel needed to roll back occupation measures as the Palestinian Authority rolled out the basis for statehood, he emphasized.

He said the World Bank had reported that in the third quarter of 2010, the Palestinian Authority had made steady progress on implementing its reform programme, maintaining financial discipline and achieving its budgetary expenditure targets. Palestinian security forces continued to make commendable efforts to maintain security in West Bank areas currently under their control, he added, noting that a reliable security partner had indisputably emerged. However, tensions persisted, he cautioned. Israeli security forces had conducted 193 incursions into Area A during the reporting period, resulting in injuries to 21 Palestinians and 98 arrests, including that of a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council from the Hamas-affiliated Change and Reform bloc. Describing other incidents, including the discovery of seven pipe bombs in a Palestinian vehicle, he noted reports that the number of arrests and interrogations of children had increased significantly.

"The parties should show discipline and responsibility in refraining from provocative actions," said Mr. Serry, expressing concern about a rise in demolitions of Palestinian-owned structures. He was also concerned that a study prepared under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Information denied the

religious significance of the Western Wall to Jews. However, the "regrettable" study had been removed from the Authority's website, he noted, stressing the need for figures of political and religious authority on each side to refrain from denying or denigrating the other's heritage, rights and dignity. He said he continued to follow with concern indications by the Israeli authorities that more restrictive procedures would be applied at crossing points between East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank. As for the humanitarian consolidated appeals process, launched on 30 November, he said it totalled \$575 million and comprised 213 projects aimed at addressing humanitarian needs, with a particular focus on areas where the Palestinian Authority had limited control and where the Government of Israel had not met needs in full. He asked donors to support the 2011 appeal fully in order to prevent a further deterioration in living conditions.

Turning to Gaza, he expressed concern about recent volatility in the enclave and ongoing closure measures, while noting that there had been positive developments. On 8 December, Israel had decided to allow exports from Gaza, which was key to reviving the Strip's economy and its legitimate business sector. However, the weekly number of truckloads entering Gaza had decreased slightly to 997, from 1,026 during the last reporting period. United Nations agencies had received approval to complete construction projects totalling \$110 million, he said, adding that he had urged the Israeli authorities to allow the provision of construction materials to the private sector, and to expedite further approvals of United Nations projects, including more schools of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Freer movement of people must also be a priority.

"It is essential that calm is maintained," he continued, noting that, while the de facto authorities had publicly repeated their desire to maintain calm, militant groups had fired five rockets and 20 mortar shells into Israel. Allegations of weapons smuggling into the Strip continued to be made, he added. Meanwhile, Israeli security forces had conducted four air strikes and 12 incursions into Gaza, killing four Palestinian militants, wounding one and injuring 23 Palestinian civilians. He stressed the importance of maximum restraint on Israel's part and underscored the need for all parties to protect civilians and respect international humanitarian law.

Reiterating calls by the United Nations for the immediate release of Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit and for the granting of humanitarian access to him, Mr. Serry said it was deeply regrettable that a prisoner-exchange deal had not yet been concluded. He also expressed concern that the de facto authorities in Gaza had issued a temporary closure order to the offices of the Sharek Youth Forum, an important non-governmental organization partner of the United Nations, and stressed the importance of full respect for the work of legitimate civil society organizations in Gaza, as well as the need to uphold the fundamental freedoms of association and expression.

There had been no progress in efforts to restore Palestinian unity, he said, noting with concern that there were signs of tension between the two main factions. Palestinian Authority security forces had arrested members of a Hamas cell in the West Bank, which had allegedly been preparing attacks against Palestinian and Israeli targets. On the other hand, Hamas security forces had detained a number of Fatah members throughout the Gaza Strip. "Internal calm is needed if reconciliation is to progress," Mr. Serry said.

Turning to Syria, he expressed concern about the lack of progress in peace negotiations with Israel, and over public expressions of a lack of confidence in the prospects for progress. However, the occupied Syrian Golan remained stable, despite continuing settlement activity, and diplomatic actors continued to explore possibilities for progress. In that light, it was to be hoped that recent contacts between Israel and Turkey, in the aftermath of the latter's provision of assistance to fight the Mount Carmel fire, could help both countries overcome past tensions.

As for Lebanon, political activity continued to be dominated by speculation concerning the Special Tribunal, he said. Differences between political camps had led to the suspension of Cabinet meetings from 10 November to the present, although a meeting was scheduled for 15 December. However, Lebanese parties continued to express their support for efforts by regional neighbours, particularly Syria and Saudi Arabia, and Special Coordinator Michael Williams continued to call for the settlement of all disagreements by dialogue through regular State institutions.

He urged donors to continue to assist with the reconstruction of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp and with the General Fund of UNRWA, as the return of the first 2,000 refugees was expected by next month. The overall situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had remained generally quiet, although air violations took place almost daily, he noted.

Mr. Serry reported that United Nations officials had consulted with the relevant parties on the 17 November decision by Israel's security cabinet to accept, in principle, the Organization's proposal for a withdrawal of Israeli forces from the northern part of the Lebanese village of Ghajar.

Also this morning, Mr. Serry paid tribute to Richard Holbrooke, United States Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, who died on Monday. The meeting began at 10:37 a.m. and ended at 10:57 a.m.

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