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TWO-STATE SOLUTION COULD BE IRREPARABLY DAMAGED UNLESS PARTIES TAKE CRITICAL

PREVENTATIVE STEPS, SECURITY COUNCIL WARNED

Top Political Affairs Official Calls For Halt to Flow of Weapons, Foreign Fighters into Syria

Negotiations between Israel and Palestine had reached a “delicate” moment, and unless steps were taken to prevent the reoccurrence of negative developments, as seen in recent weeks, the chances of reaching a two-State solution could be irreparably damaged, the top United Nations political affairs official told the Security Council today.

Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, briefed the 15-member body on the situation in the Middle East, underscoring that a two-State solution was the only way to fully realize the legitimate aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians for self determination, peace and security. The consequences of failure would be dire, he stressed, urging parties to remain steadfast in their commitment to see the process through.

“Nobody predicted this would be an easy process,” he said. While negotiators had been engaging on substance and working towards narrowing differences, strains had been growing “dangerously” between the parties. “These can and must be overcome,” he stressed.

The process had suffered a significant setback, he said. Following the agreed release on 29 October of 26 “pre-Oslo” prisoners, settlement plans in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, had been announced. The United Nations was watching that situation with growing concern.

He said he hoped plans for building 24,000 units — including in the “E-1” area of the West Bank — would be suspended following the Special Coordinator’s discussions with Israel’s chief negotiator. Palestinian negotiators had submitted their resignations in protest over the developments. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, however, made it clear that such actions did not constitute a Palestinian departure from talks.

On the international front, engagement remained strong, he noted, with United States Secretary of State John Kerry, after his regular consultations with Arab foreign ministers in Paris last month, visiting the region again for discussions with leaders on both sides. Quartet Envoys also had met on 29 October.

Still, he continued, the situation on the ground remained tense. Israeli security forces had carried out 356 search and arrest operations, uncovering a variety of security threats. Some 355 Palestinians had been arrested, including two Hamas members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. Several Palestinian civilians had been shot by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints. Violence between settlers and Palestinians continued daily in the West Bank.

Turning to Gaza, he said that one year after parties had signed a ceasefire agreement in Cairo, the situation on the ground had deteriorated amid violence and worsening economic and humanitarian conditions. On 31 October, Israeli forces had conducted an incursion 200 metres into Gaza to demolish a recently discovered tunnel into Israel. Hamas militants attacked the operation with an explosive device, injuring five Israeli soldiers. Israel’s subsequent shelling killed four Hamas militants. Additional violence in and around the area included four rockets and four mortar shells from Gaza into Israel.

On the socioeconomic front, he said rolling blackouts in Gaza had increased to 16 hours a day, following the 1 November shutdown of the Gaza power plant, which had been producing 25 per cent of the area’s power. On 13 October, Israel also had suspended the import of all construction materials. While recognizing Israel’s security concerns, he was confident that stringent control procedures, agreed to with Israel to avoid the misuse of materials, remained adequate, and he called on Israel to urgently reconsider its decision. He also pressed donors to step up their support to Palestine refugees through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

More broadly, he said reports on today’s attack in Beirut, Lebanon, which apparently targeted the Iranian Embassy, had indicated that 23 people had been killed,

including one Iranian diplomat. The Secretary-General condemned that terrorist attack and extended his condolences to the families of those killed, as well as to Lebanon and Iran. Meanwhile, Lebanon's political situation had seen "no progress" in forming a new Government in the eight months since the Prime Minister had resigned.

Nonetheless, he noted that the caretaker Government continued to work with the World Bank and the United Nations on a national stabilization response to the national impact of the Syrian crisis. As of 18 November, 1,500 families fleeing fighting in the Qalamoun region of Syria were reported to have crossed into the Lebanese town of Aarsal. Credible reports suggested that Hizbullah fighters continued to support Syria in battles in Syria in clear violation of Lebanon's disassociation policy.

In Syria, he said, civilians continued to bear the brunt of the conflict, with half of the country's population displaced from their homes and in need of assistance. A recent upsurge in fighting had forced UNRWA to suspend food delivery to refugees in Yarmouk.

"More fighting will bring nothing but further suffering and despair for the Syrian people," he cautioned, reiterating that the Secretary-General and the Joint Special Representative for Syria were working to help the sides agree on how to implement the 30 June 2012 Geneva communiqué. He also reiterated the call to stem the flow of arms and foreign fighters to Syria.

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

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