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### MAJORITY OF ISRAELIS, PALESTINIANS EMBRACE COMMON DREAM OF PEACE

#### SAYS UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL IN BRIEFING TO SECURITY COUNCIL

"Despite continuing tensions, violence and mistrust, a majority of Israelis and Palestinians still embrace a common dream of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," B. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, told the Security Council this morning.

In his first briefing on the issue, he said that, often and tragically, the hopes for peace in the Middle East had been frustrated. There was no choice, however, but to keep working towards that end; to overcome the setbacks that would inevitably occur and to build, wherever possible, on steps in the right direction. There had been several positive developments during the past month – among them the agreement reached in Mecca on a Palestinian national unity Government and the renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

He said that the ceasefire agreed in Mecca had already calmed the internal Palestinian front, although isolated clashes underscored the fragility of the situation. Palestinian Prime Minister designate Ismail Haniyeh had consulted all factions on forming a new Government and remained in close and frequent contact with President Mahmoud Abbas. Under the basic law, the new Government must be finalized by 21 March, and there were signs that it might be presented imminently to the Palestinian Legislative Council. "We must hope that the new Government will take positions and actions that demonstrate, as was agreed in Mecca, respect for the signed agreements of the PLO, which renounce terrorism, recognize Israel's right to exist in peace and security, and impose crucial obligations on the Palestinian Authority."

On 21 February in Berlin, Germany, the Quartet had affirmed it would take a "wait and see" approach, he continued. In the meantime, preliminary discussions were under way on new ideas proposed by the European Commission for facilitating aid, financing and coordination to support Palestinian social and economic development and to strengthen public institutions and governance. President Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had met on two occasions, one on 19 February with United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and again last Sunday in a bilateral meeting, he said. There were also welcome signs of increased engagement by Arab countries, centring around efforts to breathe new life into the Arab Peace Initiative. There were no further moves, however, towards dialogue between Israel and Syria.

During the past month, the lives of 23 Palestinians – 8 at the hands of the Israel Defense Forces – and 1 Israeli had been taken by violence, he said. Noting that Palestinian militants had fired at least 55 rockets into Israel from Gaza, he commended Israel's continued restraint in the face of those unjustified provocations in breach of the agreed ceasefire. Israeli security forces in Tel Aviv had arrested a man who allegedly had been preparing a suicide bombing. Those incidents underscored the importance for a new Palestinian Government to ensure that its security forces worked in harmony to prevent the smuggling of weapons, to impose internal law and order, and to act firmly against those who perpetrated attacks against Israel.

In late February, the Israel Defense Forces had launched a large military operation in Nablus, during which sites used for preparing explosives had been uncovered and a number of suspects arrested, he said. However, thousands of Palestinians had been put under curfew for several days. Other Israel Defense Forces' actions included the firing on fishermen in the coastal waters of the Gaza Strip.

Turning to the situation in the Old City of Jerusalem and Israeli excavation and construction activity near the Al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, he said a delegation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had recently visited that World Heritage-listed site and reported on the situation to the Secretary-General yesterday. The report recommended that the Government of Israel be asked to comply with its obligations regarding heritage conservation in World Heritage Sites, and to stop immediately the archaeological excavation, even though the works did not threaten the stability of the Western Wall or Al-Aqsa Mosque. Other recommendations included a call on the Israeli Government to clearly define the final design of the access structure to the Mughrabi Gate and to have the process supervised by an international team of experts coordinated by UNESCO.

Mr. Pascoe also expressed concern at the continued creation of facts on the ground. The construction of the barrier was now complete along more than half of its route and continuing, contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Settlement activity also continued and the Israeli Government had yet to begin to dismantle the more than 100 settlement outposts in the West Bank, despite its clear obligations to do so under the [Road Map](#).

The Agreement on Movement and Access was still not being fully implemented and, while there had been some progress at Karni, where truck crossings had increased by 15 per cent during the past month – doubling since November – further efforts were needed to meet the targets of the Agreement. There had been little or no progress on other fronts, he added. Rafah had been open for only 16 per cent of the scheduled hours and the crossing had become increasingly volatile and insecure. As the European Union Border Assistance Mission had warned repeatedly, limited and unscheduled openings at Rafah made it extremely difficult to control the crossing.

When some 5,000 Palestinians had tried to exit Gaza through Rafah during an unscheduled opening on 8 March, the human crush had left one person dead and seven injured. "The unsatisfactory situation at Rafah raises the risks of violence, creates greater incentives for smuggling through illegal entry points and causes disillusionment among Gaza residents," he said. Despite the commitments made this past December between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, there had been no meaningful reduction in the number of obstacles to movement in the West Bank, which currently stood at 529. The lack of action to improve movement and access in accordance with existing commitments undermined efforts to revive the Palestinian economy.

Turning to United Nations access, he said that United Nations workers were also facing increased restrictions on their movement, thus jeopardizing humanitarian operations in Gaza, even as needs on the ground continued to grow. That situation had recently drawn the attention of senior Israeli officials, and he hoped that would lead to the lifting of the restrictions.

On Lebanon, he said that there had been several important developments since the Council had last been briefed. Opposition demonstrations that had begun in Beirut in December had continued to occur in a calm and orderly manner and without major incidents. Regional efforts to broker a solution to the political impasse were becoming more intense in the lead up to the Arab League Summit on 28 March, resulting in a general atmosphere of cautious optimism. He said that the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, and the leader of the Future Movement, Saad Hariri, had met three times in recent days to bridge the gap between the Government and the opposition.

In contrast, there had been a "worrying increase" in the number of security threats and bomb scares reported in Lebanon over the past four weeks, he said, adding that Lebanese security forces had discovered several explosive devices in Beirut, in populated areas outside the capital and throughout the country. While a number of those explosives were not primed to detonate; on one occasion, detonators linked to chemical substances had been discovered.

Turning to the situation in southern Lebanon, he said that the past month had been relatively calm along the "Blue Line", although, regrettably, Israeli violations of that border continued. For instance, Israeli planes had violated Lebanese airspace on 21 February, drawing anti-aircraft fire from the Lebanese army in response. In addition, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was conducting an investigation into a Blue Line violation that had taken place earlier this month when a Lebanese youth was forced by Israeli soldiers to cross the Blue Line and the technical fence into the Israeli side. The findings of that investigation would be communicated to both sides.

He said that the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Situation in the Middle East, Michael Williams, had travelled to Israel and Lebanon in late February to prepare for the Secretary-General's next quarterly report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). That report would be submitted to the Council on 16 March.

Wrapping up his presentation, he said he had highlighted a number of positive developments that contrasted with a year of diminished hopes and expectations in the region. "Much will depend now on how recent agreements are implemented on the ground," he said, adding that an international community, engaged in the period ahead with both firmness and flexibility, could help ensure that encouraging steps forward turned into longer strides for peace.

He assured the Council that the Secretary-General had made it abundantly clear that he would be deeply and personally engaged in the continuing search for effective implementation of Council resolutions, as well as a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Secretary-General would shortly be making his first trip to the region and, in addition to attending the Arab League Summit in Riyadh on 28 March, was also considering visits to a number of other countries in the area.

The meeting was called to order at 10:11 a.m. and adjourned at 10:28 a.m.

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