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REAL, BUT FRAGILE, PROGRESS IN MIDDLE EAST ON SEVERAL FRONTS: GAZA CALM REQUIRES

FULL RESPECT BY ALL, IMPROVED SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, SECURITY COUNCIL HEARS

Welcoming the ceasefire in Gaza and the continuation of commitments made at the Annapolis conference, Lisa Bутtenheim, Director of the Asia-Pacific Division of the Department of Political Affairs, told the Security Council today that there was progress in the Middle East on several fronts, though it remained fragile.

"To turn these fragile, but real opportunities into genuine progress, the bilateral negotiations need to find common ground on the core issues," Ms. Bутtenheim told the 15-Member body as she gave the regular monthly briefing on the situation in the region.

Measures to support the Palestinian Authority and economy in the West Bank must be intensified by donors fulfilling pledges for budgetary support, by Israel easing closure, and other measures, she said, adding that [Road Map](#) obligations needed to be acted upon, particularly an Israeli settlement freeze. On the Palestinian side, she maintained that efforts on security performance and reform should continue and be supported.

The Gaza calm, she said, should be respected by all concerned and continue to be supported with improved socio-economic conditions and efforts to solve outstanding issues, so that there could be an orderly reopening of crossings under the Palestinian Authority. Internal dialogue to that and broader ends should be fostered.

She expressed thanks to the Government of Egypt for its efforts over the past several months, which had contributed to the ceasefire beginning on 19 June. "Egypt's engagement is a sign of the active role regional countries are playing in pursuing diplomatic solutions to the region's problems", she said, "which we warmly welcome."

But while calm had prevailed for several days, Palestinian militants fired one mortar and three rockets at southern Israel on 24 June, with the Islamic Jihad claiming responsibility for the rocket fire in response to the Israel Defense Forces killing of one of its members in the West Bank. A Palestinian farmer had been injured in Gaza by the Israel Defense Forces on 23 June, and in a separate incident another farmer had been reportedly injured by Israel Defense Forces fire on 25 June. Another rocket had been fired from Gaza into Israel on the same day, and today, two mortar shells were fired. In response, Israel closed the border crossings for the past three days.

She said that, during the reporting period before the ceasefire, Palestinian militants had launched 125 rockets and 149 mortars at Israel and at Gaza crossings, resulting in the deaths of both Israeli civilians and soldiers. On 12 June, direct mortar hits by militants on the Erez crossing had led to closure due to damage. Also prior to the beginning of the ceasefire, the Israel Defense Forces had conducted 25 air strikes and land incursions into the Gaza strip, resulting in Palestinian deaths.

She reiterated the United Nations condemnation of all deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on civilians and crossings, as well as any disproportionate or excessive use of force. She also underlined the importance of full respect for calm, as the Quartet had done when it met in Berlin three days ago.

She went on to say that she was encouraged by the 30 per cent increase in the number of truckloads of supplies into Gaza between 22 and 24 June, but noted that there had been no change in the type of commodities being allowed in. While fuel imports had increased slightly since mid-May, the supply of diesel and petrol was below actual needs. Consequences included major restrictions on water supply, the use of vegetable oil to run vehicles, the accumulation of 600 tons of rubbish per day on the streets, and the dumping of 77 million litres of raw or partially treated sewage into the Mediterranean Sea each day.

The Quartet had expressed its strong support for the steady and sufficient supplies of fuel to Gaza, and for the immediate resumption of stalled donor projects, including United Nations projects, she noted. Quartet Representative Tony Blair had been tasked with implementing measures to improve conditions in Gaza, in coordination with Israel and the Palestinian Authority. It looked forward to the re-opening of Gaza crossings under the management of the Palestinian Authority, and welcomed the European Union's readiness to resume its monitoring mission at Rafah, within the framework of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access.

She encouraged the parties to pursue discussions, under Egypt's auspices, to secure the release of captured soldier Gilad Shalit, noting that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had not been granted access to him after two years in captivity. However, a letter from him to his parents had been passed by Hamas to representatives of former United States President Jimmy Carter. She brought the Council's attention to President Mahmoud Abbas' statement of 5 June calling for a comprehensive national dialogue to implement the Yemeni initiative on Palestinian reunification, voicing hope that such dialogue would support calm in the region and sustain the re-opening of crossings.

As for efforts to advance the Annapolis track, she reported that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Abbas had met on 2 June, and that meetings had continued between the chief negotiators, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Palestinian Negotiator Ahmad Qurei. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had held a trilateral meeting with them when she visited the region on 15 and 16 June, and in Berlin two days ago. Secretary Rice had also hosted a meeting with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to discuss implementation of Road Map commitments, and efforts to improve security and promote movement and access for Palestinians in the West Bank.

She said that construction activity in Israeli settlements across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, had continued during the reporting period, recalling that the Secretary-General had stressed that that was contrary to international law and to Israel's commitments under the Road Map and Annapolis process. The Secretary-General had urged Israel to heed the call of the Quartet, repeated in Berlin, to freeze all settlement activity. She also noted that construction on the "barrier" continued, in deviation from the Green Line and contrary to the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion.

Palestinian security forces had produced encouraging results in Jenin, and the international community had offered support to the further development of the Palestinian security sector and judiciary at a conference convened by Germany on 24 June, she said. It was also encouraging to note that Israel had facilitated the re-opening of 12 Palestinian police stations, from a total of 20 agreed to in May.

Regarding the movement of people and goods in the West Bank, she noted that the Israel Defense Forces had removed some obstacles to movement while establishing some new ones. The obstacles removed had been found to be of "minor or no significance" except one, which had previously blocked access from a Palestinian village in Hebron to a main road. The total number of obstacles stood at around 600. Meanwhile, refusal to accept United Nations identification was also causing increased operational concern.

On the economic situation in the Palestinian Authority, Prime Minister Fayyad's government had established a well-monitored and controlled fiscal regime, she said. But the easing of movement and access restriction, and the rate of implementation of donor-funded projects had not been undertaken fast enough. The unjustified delay in the transfer by Israel of clearance revenues in May and unilaterally decided deductions, had led to the postponement of salary payments, making Palestinian Authority budget planning more difficult.

Regarding the situation between Israel and Syria, she said that indirect talks under Turkish mediation continued this month, with a further round of consultations in Turkey and support expressed by the United Nations and the full Quartet. Turning to Lebanon, she said that the formation of a national unity had been slow, but there was hope that the composition of the Lebanese cabinet would be reached soon, leading to full reactivation of Government institutions.

Unfortunately, she noted, in recent days heavy exchanges of gunfire had taken place between Government and opposition supporters in the Bek'a valley, as well as the Aley and Batroun regions and Tripoli, where 10 people were killed on 22 and 23 June. There had also been an increase in violent incidents in and around Palestinian refugee camps.

She reported that the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had remained generally quiet, although significant numbers of Israeli air violations continued to be recorded. She thanked all those who had participated in the 23 June international conference in Vienna, where donors pledged an initial \$112 million for the reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, which had been severely damaged during the hostilities there last year.

The meeting, which began at 10:16 a.m., closed at 10:37 a.m.

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