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RESUMPTION OF DIRECT TALKS BETWEEN ISRAELIS, PALESTINIANS 'SMALL BUT IMPORTANT'

OPENING FOR PEACE NEITHER CAN AFFORD TO MISS, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

Following a prolonged political stalemate amid continuing regional unrest, the direct talks resumed last month between the Israelis and the Palestinians represented a "small but important" opening for peace, a senior United Nations political official told the Security Council this morning.

"This is an opportunity neither could afford to miss," Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said during the Council's regular monthly briefing on the situation in the Middle East.

Mr. Fernandez-Taranco said that was the message conveyed by the Secretary-General during a mid-August trip to Jordan, Palestine and Israel, where the latter was encouraged by both sides' recommitment to the vision of a two-State solution and by visible improvements on the ground.

The United States-brokered direct talks would focus on all core final status issues, such as borders, security, refugees and Jerusalem, and work towards a comprehensive agreement within nine months, he told the 15-member body. To succeed, they must be "meaningful with a clear political horizon and yield early dividends in the immediate period ahead".

After the release of 26 pre-Oslo prisoners from Gaza and the West Bank, based on a 29 July Israeli Cabinet decision, the first formal round of negotiations took place on 14 August in Jerusalem; the second round was being held today in Jericho, Mr. Fernandez-Taranco said. The diplomatic Quartet — comprising the United Nations, United States, European Union and the Russian Federation — had welcomed the resumption of talks and would meet soon to discuss the next steps.

Progress towards ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could also bode well for regional stability, which was all the more critical in recent weeks amid a volatile situation in Egypt, a fragile Lebanon and ongoing turmoil in Syria, he said.

In the past month, progress was mixed, he said. Israeli Security Forces had decreased search and arrests operations. Israeli authorities also had taken several steps to ease Palestinians' access from the rest of the West Bank to East Jerusalem during the holy month of Ramadan, and had partially reopened the historic access road into Hebron City from the south to Palestinian traffic. Such steps, while limited, were important.

But, the Secretary-General remained deeply troubled by Israel's continuing settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where some 2,000 new housing units had been approved, and by continued settler violence. He was also concerned about the fate of some 5,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, especially those on hunger strike and on administrative detention, whom he said should be tried or released.

In Ramallah, the Secretary-General met with the newly reappointed Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and reiterated the United Nations' commitment to help develop the West Bank and Gaza economically and safeguard important State-building achievements, he said. During his visit, the first ever United Nations Development Assistance Framework for the State of Palestine had been signed.

Gaza was another high priority, he said, noting that the Secretary-General had engaged seriously with Israeli authorities to increase access through the legal crossings, including for construction materials into Gaza. Due to political developments in Egypt, access through the Rafah border crossing had been restricted. The Secretary-General condemned the killing yesterday of 25 Egyptian police officers during an ambush on two minibuses in the Sinai Peninsula.

Turning to Syria, where the bloodshed continued unabated, he said the Government forces continued to use indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes against densely populated civilian areas, and armed opposition groups were also failing in their obligation to protect civilians, with many engaging, as well, in military operations in populated areas. Both warring sides were committing acts of torture, abduction and kidnapping, at times along sectarian lines. Military confrontations and displacement could unravel the social fabric of Syrian society.

All efforts must be made to hold perpetrators of international crimes to account, he said, expressing concern over the kidnapping of clerics and civilians in general and the continued influx of foreign fighters that exacerbated sectarian and ethnic tensions.

The Secretary-General, he went on, was also gravely concerned about reports of the alleged use of chemical weapons. A United Nations mission had arrived in Damascus on 18 August to investigate the alleged use of those weapons reported by the Syrian Government at Khan al-Asal, as well as two other allegations reported by Member States.

"The position of the Secretary-General remains unchanged: there is no military solution to this conflict," he said. "Recent military victories by Government forces should not give the Government false confidence that it can win militarily. Likewise, promises of arms should not push the opposition towards different priorities or expectations."

Well over 6.8 million Syrians now depended on humanitarian aid; over the past few days, more than 20,000 had fled from north-eastern Syria into Iraq, he said. In the Golan, the situation remained volatile with intense shelling and heavy clashes between the Syrian armed forces and armed members of the opposition in the area of separation, forcing United Nations peacekeeping at those positions to take shelter. He spotlighted other incidents, which had affected the freedom of movement of United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) personnel.

On Lebanon, he said the relative calm ended with the 15 August bomb explosion in the Beirut suburb of Rouweiss, killing at least 24 people and injuring more than 300. The Secretary-General had strongly condemned the bombing, the deadliest such incident since 2005.

The Syrian crisis continued to hamper Lebanon's stability, especially in the border area, where rocket attacks had occurred in the last month, he said. The area of operation of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), however, remained generally calm, despite almost daily violations of Lebanese airspace.

The meeting began at 10:10 a.m. and ended at 10:35 a.m.

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