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BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN ISRAEL, PALESTINIANS HAVE COMMENCED, BUT NEW

SETTLEMENTS, ONGOING VIOLENCE REMAIN CONCERNS, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Highlights Results of Paris Donors Conference, Says Next Few Months Critical for Renewed Peace Process

Since the Annapolis conference in November, bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had commenced, but at the same time, new settlement activity and ongoing violence had been a cause of concern, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs told the Security Council this morning.

During his monthly briefing on the situation in the Middle East, B. Lynn Pascoe said that on 17 December the Secretary-General had joined representatives of 68 States and international institutions at a donor's conference in Paris. As the Secretary-General had said, the promises of Paris would only be realized if all partners now exerted a common effort. Donors would need to follow through on the reported \$74 billion pledged for the next three years; the Palestinian Authority on implementing its reform agenda; and Israel would need to ease significantly restrictions on movement and access.

On the same day as the conference, the Quartet had met and had reaffirmed the importance of Palestinian economic and institutional capacity-building in order to lay the foundation for a viable and prosperous Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza, he continued. Quartet representative Tony Blair was continuing his efforts to secure agreement on joint projects between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, which were crucial to bringing about improvements on the ground. Israeli-Palestinian negotiations had formally commenced on 12 December.

He said that central to improving the situation on the ground and building confidence to support the bilateral negotiations, was action by the parties to immediately implement their respective obligations under the "Road Map". However, on 4 December, tenders had been announced for the construction of 307 new housing units in the Israeli settlement of Har Homa. The Secretary-General had reaffirmed the United Nations position on the illegality of settlements. The Quartet had expressed its concern over the tenders, calling on the parties to refrain from steps that undermined confidence, and underscoring the importance of avoiding any actions that could prejudice the outcome of permanent status negotiations.

The Palestinian Authority had recently deployed some 500 police officers to the West Bank city of Tulkarem in an effort to seize unlicensed weapons, he said. Tensions had arisen between Palestinian security forces and armed militants, which underlined that there was a need for support to, and reform of, the Palestinian Authority security forces. Continuing and enhanced security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian security forces was also essential. Obstacles to movement in the West Bank now stood at 563. Construction work on the barrier within Occupied Palestinian Territory, in deviation from the Green Line and in contravention of the International Court of Justice advisory opinion, continued.

Figures during the reporting period underscored the insecurity facing civilians on both sides of the conflict, he said, noting that 37 Palestinians were killed and 71 injured by the Israel Defense Forces, two Palestinians were killed and 21 injured in internal violence, and 11 Israelis were injured by Palestinian militants. The worst violence took place in, or emanated from, Gaza, from which 216 rockets and mortars had been fired by Palestinian militants. The Israel Defense Forces had conducted deadly raids into the Gaza Strip, targeting militants allegedly responsible for rocket attacks. Islamic Jihad had threatened to resume suicide attacks inside Israel. Israel soldier Gilad Shalit was spending his nineteenth month in captivity in Gaza, and Israel continued to express concerns about alleged smuggling of weapons and material into Gaza.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip remained of grave concern, he said. Only 13 basic categories of food and household items, medical supplies and some water sanitation equipment were allowed into the Strip from Israel. Reductions in fuel announced on 28 October continued and cash was not allowed in, except for specified disbursements, such as salaries for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the Palestinian Authority. Exports from Gaza had virtually stopped since June. The November 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access set a target of 400 trucks

per day to exit Gaza with exports, but only a total of 77 trucks, carrying potatoes, flowers and strawberries, had left Gaza since June. At least 14 Palestinians had died after permission to exit Gaza for medical treatment was denied or delayed.

Without the resumption of regular trade flows, Gaza's socio-economic situation and humanitarian conditions would continue to deteriorate. He welcomed Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's stated willingness for the Palestinian Authority to man reopened crossings, and called on all parties to take up that proposal with a sense of urgency and responsibility.

Turning to Lebanon, he said there appeared to be agreement in principle on the presidential candidature of General Michel Suleiman. However, the parties remained deeply divided over how to bring about the election of Suleiman, who was currently Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. The Lebanese Constitution required a two-year lapse before a senior state official could be elected President. The opposition had called first for agreement on the composition of the new Government, before the Parliament could meet to elect Mr. Suleiman. According to the 14 March coalitions, any agreement should come after the presidential election. There had been further postponements to the parliamentary session to elect the new President. The next session was scheduled for 22 December.

He said the Secretary-General and his representatives in the region were in close contact with Lebanese leaders, as well as regional and international leaders, to try to find a solution to the crisis. On 17 December, the Secretary-General had called a meeting on Lebanon, which followed with a statement that reaffirmed the strong and non-negotiable support for Lebanon and urged that the Lebanese Parliament be allowed to convene immediately to fulfil its constitutional duties and insisted that outside powers act in compliance with the Council's decisions and fully respect Lebanon's Constitution and democratic institutions.

While the situation in south Lebanon remained calm, an increased number of Israeli air violations were recorded at the end of November. The request for the Israel Defense Forces to provide technical strike data on cluster munitions was still pending.

The next few months were critical for the renewed peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, he said. Solid progress would be essential in bilateral negotiations. That, however, was unlikely to be achieved or to be sustainable without serious improvements on the ground. Donors must follow through on their commendable Paris commitments and the parties must fulfil their responsibilities so that a new climate of confidence, security and physical mobility was established. The Quartet and Arab League must remain in close contact to support the bilateral process and coordinate closely on the broader, regional dimensions of peace, bearing in mind the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative. The Secretary-General and the United Nations would continue to work for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, based on Security Council resolutions.

The meeting started at 10:25 a.m. and adjourned at 10:45 a.m.

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