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'UNSETTLING' EVENTS IN WIDER MIDDLE EAST MUST NOT OBSCURE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL CAUTIONS DURING SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING

Despite many unsettling developments in the Middle East, it was important not to lose sight of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupation which had scarred the lives of far too many for far too long, the Security Council heard today.

The urgent situation in the region should be a "wake-up call" on the need to restore the prospects for a durable peace, said Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, as he briefed the 15-member body. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, the situation on the ground "has turned highly volatile", he added, urging its rapid containment and a return to peace negotiations suspended since April.

Providing details, he said the intensive search for three Israeli students abducted near Hebron in the West Bank continued, as did a hunger strike by Palestinian detainees, now in its sixty-first day. New settlements had been announced and the fragile calm in the Gaza Strip had been interrupted by multiple rockets fired into Israel, as well as the Israeli military response.

Setting forth the United Nations position, he emphasized that both sides must meet their responsibilities because that was the only way for them to "find their way back" to meaningful negotiations, adding that international support should be unwavering.

Reporting on recent political developments, he noted the 2 June announcement by President Mahmoud Abbas of the formation of the Palestinian Government of National Unity, and his pledge that elections would be organized within six months. On 10 June, Israel had elected long-time Member of Knesset and two-time Speaker Reuven Rivlin as its next President.

Voicing concern over the worsening situation in the West Bank, he highlighted the abduction of the three Israeli youths, noting that Israel had blamed Hamas, which had reportedly denied the charge. Nonetheless, the latter's statements glorifying the perpetrators were outrageous, he said, stressing that it would be a grave development if the involvement of Hamas was corroborated.

He went on to cite the arrest of more than 350 Palestinians and the killing of four others, including a minor, on 20 June. Also alarming was the rising death toll resulting from Israeli security operations in the West Bank, he said, urging an investigation. At the same time, 50 Palestinians had been released as part of the "Shalit deal", and on 5 June, Palestinian security forces had reportedly uncovered and seized explosives, knives, flags and military uniforms in Hebron City, allegedly belonging to Hamas.

Providing additional details, he said Israeli security forces had carried out 607 search-and-arrest operations and detained 928 Palestinians; five had been shot dead and 291 injured, including during demonstrations against the barrier and in support of Palestinian prisoners in detention. A total of 12 Israeli security personnel had also been injured, he said, sounding the alarm over the "significant" increase in all those statistics since his last briefing.

Attacks by settlers had also risen, he said, adding that settlement activity, illegal under international law, continued apace with the 4 June announcement of more than 1,400 new units in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem. There were also reports that some 1,000 settlement units had been announced due to a decision by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to unfreeze the planning for 1,800 units. On 18 June, 172 units had been announced for Har Homa, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and the demolition of 65 structures had displaced 112 Palestinians, including 56 children.

Returning to the hunger strikes among Palestinian prisoners, he expressed concern about an amendment before the Israeli Knesset, which, if passed, would permit force-feeding and medical treatments against their will. Passage of that amendment would contravene international standards, he warned. Regarding holy sites in the Old City, he said ongoing tensions and new restrictions on access had resulted in clashes between worshippers and Israeli security forces, in which tens of Palestinians had been injured and detained.

The calm prevailing in Gaza had started to unravel, especially since the abduction of the Israeli students, he said. He detailed the firing of rockets and mortar shells towards Israel, which had conducted a total of five incursions and 38 air strikes into Gaza. He condemned the rocket firing and called upon Palestinian factions to adhere to the calm that was based on understandings reached in the lead-up to the unity agreement. Of chief importance was support for the Palestinian Authority's efforts to assume security functions in Gaza.

He said the persisting dire socioeconomic situation had seriously complicated prospects for the new Government of National Consensus. Additionally, many of Gaza's challenges still required structural solutions, which remained unaddressed. There was an urgent need to open border crossings for both goods and people in order to "kick-start" the economy, he said, adding that Rafah had only been open for seven days during the reporting period. The United Nations would continue to deliver assistance to Gazans, in close cooperation with the newly appointed Ministers.

Turning to Lebanon, he said the constitutional deadline for electing a new President had expired on 25 May, underlining the urgent need for national leaders to ensure that the election occurred without further delay. The overall situation in the country remained relatively calm, except for a suicide car bombing at the airport which had killed a member of internal security forces. Also in the past month, Syrian aircrafts had conducted five airstrikes in Lebanese territory, and there had been three cross-border shelling incidents originating from that country. As for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), its areas of operation along the "Blue Line" were generally stable, despite Israel's near-daily violations of Lebanese airspace.

Turning to Syria, he said more than 1.1 million refugees were now registered in Lebanon, whose Interior Minister had announced on 31 May that those who had returned to Syria would lose their refugee status in Lebanon. Restrictions on the entry of Palestine refugees from Syria had been re-introduced, and the situation in the Palestinian camps remained worrying. He reiterated the six points offered by the Secretary-General on Friday as a way forward: end the violence; do everything possible to protect the human rights, safety and dignity of the Syrian people; develop new efforts to start a serious political process, and a new envoy would soon be named in that regard; address the question of accountability for serious crimes; complete the destruction of chemical weapons; and address the prolonged conflict that had created a fertile ground for radical armed groups.

The meeting began at 10:04 a.m. and ended at 10:26 a.m.

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