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EFFORTS TO PROMOTE DIRECT NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN ISRAEL, PALESTINIANS NEARING

'TURNING POINT', TOP UNITED NATIONS OFFICIAL TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

Assistant Secretary General Oscar Fernandez-Taranco Briefs; Says Direct, Meaningful Talks Only Avenue to Comprehensive, Sustainable Solution

"We are nearing a turning point in the efforts to promote direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians," Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Oscar Fernandez-Taranco told the Security Council today, expressing the United Nations conviction that direct and meaningful talks was the only avenue to a comprehensive, sustainable solution to the decades-old conflict.

Since May, he noted in the briefing to the 15-member body, parties had been engaged in seven rounds of proximity talks, mapping out areas of mutual interest and laying out their respective priorities. The parties were now holding internal discussions with a view to deciding whether to enter into direct talks, he said, urging leaders on both sides to seize the opportunity and engage in a path of decisive progress towards a two-State solution within a realistic time frame.

To support them in that work, the United Nations remained in close contact with Quartet partners, he said, adding that success would require sustained regional and international support. The United Nations was ready to support that process, and strong leadership from both parties to make progress at the negotiating table and realize the aspirations of both peoples would be required.

Also crucial was the continuation of the parallel process of Palestinian State-building, sustained regional and international support and the pursuit of a comprehensive regional peace, as envisaged in the Madrid terms of reference, Security Council resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Successful talks also depended on an enabling climate on the ground, with parties adhering to Road Map commitments and international law obligations, he said. The partial moratorium on settlement building in the West Bank should continue beyond its scheduled 26 September expiration and extend to all settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

On the occasion of the Muslim month of Ramadan, he said Israeli authorities had removed three obstacles to movement in the West Bank, extended operation hours of some checkpoints and slightly eased access to Jerusalem for Friday prayers on the Temple Mount. With 500 remaining obstacles to movement throughout the West Bank, access should be expanded. He also expressed concern at the increased demolition or dismantlement of Palestinian-owned structures in "Area C" that had affected 212 people.

During the reporting period, Israeli security forces had conducted 313 incursions into the West Bank, he said, which had led to the shooting death of one Palestinian on 22 July. Overall, 15 Palestinians had been injured and 162 Palestinians arrested, while three Israeli soldiers had been injured. There were 22 incidents of violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians, which had led to seven Palestinian injuries.

He said that on 15 August the Palestinian Authority had issued a report taking stock of the two-year State-building agenda and observing substantial progress in building sound institutions and a stable society. But, he added, without "significant" additional external financing, the Authority would face a serious liquidity crisis in September, with difficulties paying August salaries. Financing to date of \$507 million fell almost \$200 million short of the budget.

In Jerusalem, the comparative restraint in recent months had been eroding, he said, as announcements of construction, demolitions and evictions had resumed. That had included Israeli settlers' forcible takeover of a building housing nine Palestinian families on 29 July. Further, the situation of the four lawmakers from the Hamas-affiliated Change and Reform bloc also remained unresolved, with the trial of one postponed until November. He called on Israeli authorities to find

a positive resolution to that unsustainable situation.

Turning to the impact of the new Israeli policy on Gaza, he said the volume and variety of supplies entering Gaza continued to increase in the reporting period, with the weekly average of 1,006 imported truckloads representing an almost 30 per cent increase over the average from the last reporting period and an 80 per cent increase over the 2010 weekly average before the policy change. He welcomed the Israeli decision to allow 100 million New Israeli Shekels in cash into Gaza, as well as the exchange of the 31.5 million worth of spoiled New Israeli Shekel bank notes since mid-July, as an important step in alleviating Gaza's immediate liquidity crisis.

However, imports into Gaza were still far below the weekly average of truckloads before the 2007 closure, he said, noting that the current easing could not meet Gazans' longer-term rehabilitation needs. To achieve that, the Quartet had called on 21 June for a solution that ensured the unimpeded flow of humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons to and from Gaza; addressed Israel's security concerns; and promoted Palestinian unity based on the Palestine Liberation Organization commitments and the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under the legitimate Palestinian Authority. While welcoming Israel's approval of 11 United Nations construction projects in Gaza, he voiced concern at implementation bottlenecks if approval procedures were not streamlined. He looked forward to continued dialogue with Israeli authorities to facilitate smooth implementation.

Urging Palestinian parties to resolve internal disputes and restore a reliable electricity supply to Gaza, he also noted that 4 August marked 1,500 days since the capture of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit. He expressed much regret that international calls for his release, immediate humanitarian access and completion of a prisoner exchange agreement had not been heeded. During the reporting period, Palestinian militant groups had fired six rockets and three mortars from Gaza into Israel, causing no injuries. Israeli Security Forces had conducted 11 air strikes and 11 incursions into Gaza, resulting in the deaths of three militants, as well as injuries to two militants, 22 civilians and five policemen. He urged calm and full respect by all parties of international humanitarian law.

He said he was disappointed to report lack of progress in intra-Palestinian reconciliation within the framework of the Egyptian-mediated proposal, in spite of mediation visits to Gaza by prominent independent Palestinian figures. He urged Palestinian factions to work together to overcome Palestinian internal divisions. In a positive development, on 11 August, several prisoners had been released in Gaza as a humanitarian gesture for the start of Ramadan, in parallel with a release of prisoners in the West Bank.

Drawing attention to the Secretary-General's announcement on 2 August of the launch of a panel of inquiry on the flotilla incident of 31 May, which he called an "unprecedented development", he said the panel would examine and identify the facts, circumstances, and the context of the incident, as well as recommend ways of avoiding future incidents. For the conduct of its work, the panel would decide what steps it would take and would work with the national authorities. "It is not designed to determine individual criminal responsibility," he added.

He said that the Secretary-General had thanked the leaders of the two countries — Turkey and Israel — for their spirit of compromise. The Panel was composed of former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Geoffrey Palmer, as Chair; former President of Colombia, Álvaro Uribe; an Israeli panel member, Joseph Ceichanover; and a Turkish panel member, Özdem Sanberk.

He added that the Secretary-General had expressed his hope that the Panel would fulfil its mandate in light of the Council's presidential statement on the matter (see [Press Release SC/9940](#) of 1 June) and with the fullest cooperation of the relevant national authorities of the two countries. The Panel had convened in New York for two full days on 10 and 11 August, and its members had met with the Secretary-General, who had outlined the nature of the task he envisaged for them. The Secretary-General had stated his hope that the agreement on the Panel would impact positively on the relationship between Turkey and Israel, as well as the overall situation in the Middle East.

The Panel would begin its substantive discussions on how it would conduct its work, said Mr. Fernandez-Taranco, adding that the panel members would meet again in early September. They would strive to produce for the Secretary-General an interim report on 15 September. Under the chairmanship of Justice Jacob Turkel, the Israeli Commission tasked with examining the maritime incident of 31 May had continued its work and heard the testimonies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Minister of Defense Ehud Barak and Army Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi during the week of 9 August. On 12 August, the Turkish Government had announced the establishment of a national commission of inquiry on the 31 May events.

Elsewhere in the region, he said that, while the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan had remained stable, amid ongoing settlement activity, there had been several serious incidents. On 2 August, five rockets had been fired towards Eilat, Israel, and Aqaba, Jordan, killing one Jordanian civilian and injuring three others. He urged countries concerned to cooperate in bringing those responsible for that "act of terrorism" to justice.

As the Council had already been briefed, another serious incident had occurred on the Blue Line in an exchange of fire on 3 August between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces, he said. That incident had been the "most serious one since the adoption of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006)". An investigation by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was under way and the Council would be briefed on its outcome accordingly.

Expanding on the situation in Lebanon, he said that, throughout the month, aerial overflights of Lebanon's territory had continued, almost daily, constituting a violation of [resolution 1701](#) (2006) and of Lebanese sovereignty. On 20 July, the Prime Minister of Lebanon had asked the Council to extend UNIFIL's mandate for a further period of one year, without amendment. (The Security Council has scheduled a meeting on 30 August to consider renewal of UNIFIL's mandate, which is due to expire on 31 August).

He said that some significant political and security developments had also taken place in Lebanon during the reporting period. On 31 July, Lebanon's President Michel Suleiman had hosted a joint meeting in Beirut with the King of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad. Also, the Emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, had conducted an official visit to Lebanon from 31 July to 2 August, including a tour of villages in the South of the country. Those visits, signalling a strong commitment by Lebanon's Arab neighbours to the maintenance of calm in that country, had taken place against a background of growing tension generated by speculation, rumours and allegations regarding potential indictments by Lebanon's Special Tribunal.

On 14 August, he continued, the alleged leader of Fatah al-Islam, Abdel al-Rahman Awadh, and his associate, Abu Bakr Mubarak, were killed in an ambush set in the Bekaa Valley by the intelligence branch of the Lebanese Army. Fatah al-Islam, a radical Islamist group, had become notorious as a result of a three-month-long conflict against the Lebanese Army in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared in 2007.

He said that the Lebanese Parliament had met today and considered a draft law granting some civil rights to Palestinian refugees. That had followed a month of intense debates over the scope and applicability of the law. The United Nations had urged all political parties to improve the legal regime applicable to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, without prejudice to their right of return.

The United Nations had also been working closely with the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee on several pending issues pertaining to the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, such as restrictions on access to the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp and the situation of Palestinians with no official identification papers, he reported. While the camp's reconstruction was progressing, he remained concerned about the shortfall in funding requirements for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), both for the camp's reconstruction and the Agency's general fund. It was

imperative that the generous financial contributions of donors towards basic social services such as health and education not be cut back and for the reconstruction of Nahr el-Bared to continue.

The meeting, which was called to order at 10:11 a.m., adjourned at 10:34 a.m.

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