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PAST WEEKS OF VIOLENCE IN GAZA MUST BE FOLLOWED QUICKLY BY BROAD POLITICAL ACTION.

SAYS SECRETARY-GENERAL, BRIEFING SECURITY COUNCIL ON MIDDLE EAST TRIP

Tells Council Needs Assessment Will Begin Tomorrow, Report Next Week; Says for Many in Gaza, This 'Remains an Hour of Despair, Grief and Desperate Need'

"Yes, the recent crisis in Gaza and southern Israel requires conflict management and containment," United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said during his briefing to the Security Council this afternoon, following his visit to the region. "But, it is also a symptom of broader problems and deeper conflicts demanding conflict resolution. If the past weeks of violence are not followed quickly by broad political action, we face the real risk of greater polarization and frustration in the region."

In his statement, which was read out by B. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, he said that declarations of unilateral ceasefires and today's withdrawal of Israeli troops represented an important achievement and offered a much-needed respite for suffering civilians, especially in the Gaza Strip. But conditions were still fragile, and much more remained to be done on both the humanitarian and diplomatic fronts.

In that regard, he looked to Egypt and others to continue vital efforts to seek understandings and mechanisms to ensure a durable and sustainable ceasefire. He also looked to regional and international leaders, including members of the League of Arab States, the Quartet and Security Council, to come together to help sustain those guarantees and arrangements, as called for by Security Council resolution 1860 (2009). Unilateral ceasefires must be translated into a lasting arrangement that would prevent illicit trafficking in arms and ammunition, and ensure sustained reopening of the Gaza crossings on the basis of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access.

"For many in Gaza, this also remains an hour of despair, grief and desperate need," he continued. They had been caught between Hamas' unacceptable and irresponsible actions and Israel's blockade and use of excessive and disproportionate military force. Yesterday, he had seen part of the destruction and suffering caused to that small and densely populated area by more than three weeks of heavy bombardment, shelling and street fighting, which had followed on top of months and years of occupation, conflict and economic deprivation. "I was deeply affected by what I saw," he said.

In Sderot, he had met with the civilians of southern Israel, who had been exposed to indiscriminate rocket and mortar fire for too long, he continued. In both places, he had underscored the urgent need for international humanitarian law to be fully respected and for civilians to be protected. Where civilians had been killed and there were allegations of violations of international humanitarian law, there should be thorough investigations, full explanations and, where required, accountability.

Regarding United Nations staff on the ground, "I cannot praise and thank them enough, and I pay tribute to the United Nations staff members and contractors who have been killed or injured," he said, adding that he had assured the people of Gaza that the United Nations would work urgently and diligently to provide urgent humanitarian assistance and start a daunting and challenging process of recovery and reconstruction.

Tomorrow, Special Coordinator Robert Serry and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes, would visit Gaza to begin an urgent needs assessment focusing on immediate humanitarian priorities, he continued. Mr. Holmes and the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Karen AbuZayd, would report to the Council directly next week, and there was an intention to launch a flash humanitarian appeal within 10 days of that first mission. The United Nations was also working to support the development of assessments and plans for early recovery and rehabilitation of critical services, even as it supported ongoing emergency repairs. It would coordinate closely, in that regard, with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. There were plans for a comprehensive report to be presented at a conference in Cairo, and feed into the work of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee thereafter. It would be critical for major donor countries to take part and contribute generously to the humanitarian and early recovery efforts ahead. In that regard, he emphasized the need to work together in close coordination and consultation.

The United Nations was already in close contact with key partners, including Egypt and Arab countries, the European Commission and World Bank, Norway as the Chair of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, Turkey and Quartet members, he said. He would continue to urge the new President of the United States and his team to make peace in the Middle East one of their top priorities. Also, with immediate and increased access to Gaza being key to any humanitarian effort, let alone reconstruction, in his meetings with Israeli leaders, he had insisted on the importance of increased access to the Gaza Strip. He had asked Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to ensure that Rafah was open for humanitarian material.

Turning to "several incidents of outrageous attacks against UN facilities", he said that the attack during which UNRWA's main warehouse burned down had taken

place the day he had been in Israel. From the outset, he had protested the attacks against United Nations facilities in the strongest possible terms and had called on all combatants to respect the sanctity of United Nations premises. In Israel, he had been given personal assurances by the authorities that such attacks would not happen again. Despite that, a mere two days later, there had been an attack against a United Nations school that served as a refuge to those who had nowhere else to hide, and two little boys had been killed.

In his meetings with the Israeli leadership, he had demanded a thorough investigation by Israel into every single one of those incidents, he said. He expected to receive a full explanation of each incident and that those responsible would be held accountable for their actions. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had promised to provide him with the results of their inquiry on an urgent basis, and he would then decide on appropriate follow-up action.

Turning to numerous challenges ahead, he said that, while an immediate priority now might be humanitarian relief and early recovery, it was also necessary to continue work to ensure sustainable arrangements underpinning a durable ceasefire and the longer-term effort to achieve peace. It was clear that, for any sustainable political process to occur and for Gaza to properly recover and rebuild, Palestinians must face the challenge of reconciliation. In both Gaza and Ramallah, he had made a passionate appeal for Palestinians to overcome divisions and work to restore one Palestinian Government within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. He had stated clearly that the United Nations would work with a united Palestinian Government encompassing Gaza and the West Bank. In Kuwait, he had appealed to the Arab world to unite in support of that endeavour, and had taken note of the efforts of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in that regard. He appealed to the international community as a whole to do the same.

In Lebanon, he had met with the President, Prime Minister and Speaker, and addressed the Parliament. Prior to his arrival, he had been "very aware" of the risk that Lebanon might enter into a new conflict with Israel, as a result of the situation in Gaza. However, he had been encouraged by the condemnation by the Government of Lebanon of the incidents of rockets fired from south Lebanon into Israel, and by the prompt action taken by the Lebanese Armed Forces and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). In Israel, he had asked the political and defence leadership to exercise restraint, and to take steps to implement outstanding elements of resolution 1701 (2006), especially the withdrawal from Ghajjar. He had also visited UNIFIL in the south and discussed Lebanon in Syria with President Bashar al-Assad.

A true end to violence and lasting security for both Palestinians and Israelis would only come through a just and comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he said. That effort must have at its centre the implementation of Security Council resolutions and the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative. No new plans and processes were needed. "We have all the tools we need. We need only political will and action. Peace has eluded us for far too long."

He added that the violence, destruction and suffering in the region had been a mark of "collective political failure". Nothing short of a massive international effort was now required to support, and insist on, a resolution of the conflict. The peoples of the region, and indeed the international community, could afford no less.

"As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I will continue to uphold the need for an end to the occupation that begun in 1967, the creation of a Palestinian State, to coexist in peace and security alongside Israel, and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace between Israel and all its Arab neighbours. I am more determined than ever to see this achieved," he said.

At the outset of the meeting, Council President Jean-Maurice Ripert (France) bid farewell to Giadalla Ettalhi, Permanent Representative of Libya, wishing him continued success in his personal and professional life.

In response, Mr. Ettalhi, thanking Council members for their "boundless cooperation and their efforts to achieve common understandings", said the world was faced by enormous challenges and dangers, to be confronted together. "We must be aware that our destiny is a shared destiny. We are all on the same ship and we have to work for a world of peace and prosperity."

The meeting was called to order at 3:12 p.m. and adjourned at 3:35 p.m.

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