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ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT NOT IMMUNE TO CHANGES SWEEPING ARAB WORLD

SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPRESENTATIVE TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

Citing Reconciliation Accord, Impending Statehood Bid, He Calls for 'Purpose Rather than Paralysis', in Quest for Middle East Peace

Deadly Israeli-Palestinian clashes, along with the Palestinian reconciliation and state-building efforts, showed that the conflict between the two sides was not immune to the political changes sweeping across the Arab world, a top United Nations official told the Security Council today.

"One way or another, change will come to it too," said Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, adding: "This change must be shaped to positive ends."

Unfortunately, the search for a two-State solution was "stuck", and there was a genuine lack of trust between the parties, he said in a briefing to the Council. In the absence of negotiations and amid the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements, the Palestinians were preparing to approach the United Nations in September to seek recognition as a State.

Recalling that the Secretary-General had called for Palestinian unity within the framework of previous commitments concerning the peace process, Mr. Serry said he had attended the signing of the accord between Fatah and Hamas, as well as other factions, in Cairo on 4 May. Though it had been widely welcomed, the accord would clearly be a process rather than an event, he added.

Under the agreement, he said, a unity Government of technocrats chosen by consensus would prepare for elections to be held in one year for the Palestinian Legislative Council, the presidency and, where possible, the Palestinian National Council. The accord also envisaged a committee to address political issues, but stated explicitly that its work would not infringe upon the jurisdiction of the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which was recognized internationally as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. President Mahmoud Abbas had reiterated at the Cairo ceremony that PLO remained committed to existing agreements, he noted.

While the agreement also envisaged professional reform of the Palestinian security forces, the process was likely to be gradual, Mr. Serry said, adding that it was understood that security cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel must continue in the West Bank, to be respected by all parties. Equally, there was an intention to continue the calm between Israel and Gaza.

Some Hamas statements suggested that the faction was ready, within the framework of the accord, to assume moderate positions, he continued, cautioning, however, that others reasserted extreme positions in worrying terms, such as those calling on PLO to renounce its recognition of Israel, lauding Osama bin Laden, or stressing resistance. Such statements "are a reminder of why deep international concerns remain and why we must follow developments vigilantly", he said.

Noting that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel had expressed serious concerns about the agreement, he counselled against any "predetermined view" of its prospects, emphasizing that the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank was vital for peace, and that a non-factional Government under President Abbas must be encouraged. He welcomed Israel's decision to resume the transfer of VAT and customs revenues withheld after the announcement of the accord, saying that adherence to its international obligations was the right way to promote cooperation with a Palestinian partner.

Regarding the confrontations of 15 May between Israeli forces and Palestinians in Syria, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he said that in one serious incident, Syrian authorities had allowed between 1,000 and 1,200 mostly Palestinian civilians into the area of separation under their control. An estimated 200 to 300 demonstrators had crossed the ceasefire line, broken through the Israeli fence and crossed a clearly marked minefield despite attempts by Syrian police to block them. Israeli forces had initially fired warning shots, and then opened fire as the protesters kept advancing. Early reports indicated that 4

people had been killed and approximately 48 injured by bullets, with 87 suffering from gas inhalation, he said, adding that 13 Israeli soldiers had been injured. Most of the civilians who had crossed the line had returned to the Syrian side, and one of three infiltrators apprehended remained in Israeli custody.

He went on to state that in a similar incident in southern Lebanon, with some 300 to 400 demonstrators "interfering" with the fence on the Israeli side of the Blue Line and throwing stones, both Israeli and Lebanese forces had fired shots to disperse them. According to official Lebanese figures, 10 protestors had been killed and 112 injured. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) had remained in close contact with the parties throughout the incidents, trying to restore calm, and were separately investigating them.

Mr.erry also described incidents in the West Bank that had left 164 people injured, in Gaza, where 80 injuries had been reported, in the Gaza buffer area, where 1 Palestinian had reportedly been killed by Israeli fire, and in Tel Aviv, where an incident involving a truck had left 1 Israeli dead and 17 injured. The Secretary-General had called for restraint and stressed the importance of Governments in the area ensuring respect for disengagement lines.

Besides the 15 May events, two fatal incidents had occurred, he reported. A Palestinian child had apparently been killed by a settler in East Jerusalem, and a settler had been killed by Palestinian security forces during an unannounced visit to a religious site in the West Bank. Otherwise, security cooperation continued, with the number of newly trained security personnel in the area exceeding 3,500. It was important that the process continue under any future Government, he stressed.

Mr.erry appealed, in addition, for donors to remain fully engaged, as the Palestinian Authority had received about \$30 million less per month than what had been budgeted for the first four and a half months of 2011, which could undermine the state-building agenda and efforts by President Abbas to empower moderates during reunification. He also reiterated calls for Israel to freeze settlement activity, further measures to support Palestinian efforts and assist vulnerable communities in Area C and East Jerusalem.

Turning to Gaza, he said there had been relative calm, with three mortar shells fired from the enclave, while Israel had launched five incursions. One alleged militant and five Palestinian civilians had been injured, he said, calling on both sides to maintain the calm. He also reiterated calls for significant steps to end the closure of Gaza, and for measures to ease the entry of construction materials for two housing projects of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Affirming that all such materials should enter Gaza through official channels, he urged action to combat the smuggling of weapons, and called on Governments to discourage flotillas, appealing for responsible action to avoid violent incidents. At the same time, he renewed calls for the opening of Gaza to the world and the release of Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit, while underscoring the importance of releasing Palestinian prisoners to the Palestinian Authority.

Turning briefly to the situation in Lebanon, he said the overall situation in the UNIFIL area of operations had remained stable, although Israeli air violations continued on an almost daily basis. He stressed the critical need for a "Government supported by all" in Lebanon, noting that no agreement had been reached on the composition of the next Government.

In conclusion, he urged all parties to give the unification process a chance, while reminding the Palestinians of the importance of agreeing on a Government that could "live up to the expectations of the people and meet the concerns of the international community, and support negotiations with Israel". He warned, however, that in the absence of a meaningful political initiative to restart negotiations on a two-State solution, the arrival of the September deadline for the completion of the Palestinian state-building agenda could bring about renewed confrontation between the parties, either in the diplomatic arena or on the ground. For that reason, he agreed with President Barack Obama of the United States that resolving the conflict was more vital than ever, pledging to continue seeking enhanced engagement by the Quartet to that end, and to shape the process between now and September. "We must show purpose, rather than paralysis, as we approach a critical period in the search for peace in the Middle East," he said.

The meeting began at 10:07 a.m. and ended at 10:30 a.m.

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