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TOP UN OFFICIAL DESCRIBES 'IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS ON THE GROUND' IN MIDDLE EAST.

CONTINUED EFFORTS AIMED AT RESUMPTION OF ISRAELI, PALESTINIAN NEGOTIATIONS

Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Briefs Security Council

In the Middle East over the past month there had been several important developments on the ground as well as continued international efforts to create the conditions for the "prompt resumption and early conclusion of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations", a top United Nations official told the Security Council this morning.

Briefing the Council this morning, Assistant Secretary-General Oscar Fernandez-Taranco said that, on 29 July, United States Envoy George Mitchell had completed a regional visit to seek commitments and actions from the parties, including regarding implementation of Phase One [Road Map](#) obligations. The Quartet envoys had met in Jerusalem on 31 July. During September, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee and Quartet principals were expected to meet on the margins of the General Assembly's general debate.

He said that, in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority continued its efforts to impose law and order. Although there had been a notable decrease in the number of Palestinians injured by Israeli military activities since mid-June, attacks by Israeli settlers on Palestinians continued, with 24 Palestinians, including 5 children, and 7 Israelis injured. There were no fatalities to report.

As a result of Israel's easing of some movement restrictions, Nablus had seen a slow but significant revival of commercial activity, he continued. Israel's Government had announced that, as of 5 August, passenger crossing hours at Allenby Bridge would be expanded on a pilot basis and that commercial crossing hours – important for Palestinian exports – would also be expanded. Concern continued to exist, however, at the critical budget deficit facing the Palestinian Authority, he said and encouraged all donors to fulfil pledges made in Paris in December 2007 and in Sharm el-Sheikh in March of this year.

He said that continued Israeli settlement activity in East Jerusalem and the West Bank was a matter of "grave concern" and urged the Government of Israel to heed the Quartet's call to freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth, and remove outposts erected since March 2001. The barrier also continued to restrict Palestinian access to East Jerusalem, key social services and agricultural land.

Israeli actions in support of settlers in the heart of East Jerusalem had been a matter of particular concern, he said. On 2 August, following a decision by the Israeli High Court, Israeli security forces had forcibly evicted nine Palestinian families – 53 people, including 20 children – from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood and their property had been handed over to a settlement organization. Two families evicted were now living on the sidewalk near the home from where they had been removed and tensions remained high. He reiterated the United Nations call on Israel to cease and reverse provocative actions, such as demolitions and evictions in East Jerusalem. The Quartet had recently affirmed that unilateral actions could not prejudice the outcome of negotiations and would not be recognized by the international community.

There had been serious developments inside the Gaza Strip, as last week, a radical armed group – "Jund Ansar Alay" – had taken refuge inside a mosque in Rafah and declared an Islamic emirate. Although Hamas and de facto security forces in Gaza had acted against the group – resulting in at least 28 deaths and more than 100 wounded, including unarmed civilians – the events highlighted concerns regarding radicalization, the dangers of continued smuggling of arms and explosives, and the absence of the appropriate legal framework for ensuring public security.

There had been no casualties to Israeli-Palestinian violence in Gaza, he said. A relative calm, enforced on the Gaza side by Hamas, prevailed, but there had been two rocket and mortar attacks against Israel, in response to which Israeli forces had conducted an air raid, shelling the areas of the tunnels under the Egypt-Gaza border. Israeli forces had also conducted six ground incursions during the reporting period. Large-scale smuggling was continuing, however, which, along with the closure regime, was undermining the regular economy and livelihoods in Gaza, as well as forces of political moderation. Security Council

resolution 1860 (2009), which called for mechanisms to prevent illicit trafficking in arms and ammunition into Gaza and the sustained reopening of the crossing points, had yet to be implemented.

Notwithstanding all that, there were some positive developments with respect to access, he said. Those included the shipment of 140,000 litres of fuel into Gaza for private use, the first time in 10 months that such a shipment had been allowed. On 6 August, three truckloads of cement and steel bars had been allowed for the Palestinian water authority's north Gaza wastewater treatment plant. While welcome, those measures were not sufficient to meet the needs.

He also outlined ongoing consultations regarding the United Nations proposal to start early recovery reconstruction of schools, homes and health clinics in Gaza, expressing hope for a clear answer from the Israeli authorities in the near future. It remained unacceptable that no early recovery or reconstruction activities for the Gaza civilian population had been enabled some seven months after "Operation Cast Lead". He reiterated that the United Nations had effective measures in place to ensure the integrity of programming in Gaza. Also, the United Nations continued to call for the release of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, expressing hope that negotiations on a prisoner exchange would be pursued in good faith by both parties to facilitate his release, along with that of a number of over 11,000 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

Following the public hearings in Gaza and Geneva, the Human Rights Council fact-finding mission led by Justice Richard Goldstone was in the process of finalizing its report, which was expected in early September, he continued. The presentation of that document at the Human Rights Council was scheduled for 29 September.

On 3 to 10 August, the Fatah party of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had held its sixth congress, in Bethlehem, the first in 20 years and the first in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he said. Most Fatah members from Gaza had been unable to participate due to the prevention of their travel by Hamas, but had voted by telephone. President Abbas had been elected by acclamation as Fatah leader. The United Nations continued to call for efforts to reunite Gaza and the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority and supported Egypt in its efforts in that regard.

Turning to the occupied Syrian Golan, he said the situation there remained quiet, although Israeli settlement activities continued. During a visit to the area on 10 August, United Nations Special Coordinator Roberterry had expressed the Organization's continued commitment to a comprehensive regional peace and hope for an early resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria.

On Lebanon, he reported continued efforts to form a new Government, with a recent announcement that political leaders had reached an agreement on the distribution of Cabinet seats, but not yet on the names of ministers. He expected the new Government to commit to full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006).

With the overall situation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) area of operations remaining generally quiet, he said that tensions in the area of Khirbat Silim and Kfar Shouba had generally subsided. The investigation into the 14 July incident in Khirbat Silim was ongoing. Separately, in the early hours of 17 August, the Israel Defense Forces had removed the watchtower they had earlier set up south of the line of withdrawal near the village of Kfar Shouba, where there had been protests and the consequent violation of the Blue Line by a group of civilians on 17 July. United Nations Special Coordinator Michael Williams and UNIFIL Force Commander Major General Claudio Graziano had been in constant contact with the Lebanese Armed Forces, Israeli authorities and the Israel Defense Forces Command to diffuse the tension caused by recent incidents in southern Lebanon. Meanwhile, Israeli air violations had continued on an almost daily basis during the reporting period.

The meeting started at 11:07 a.m. and adjourned at 11:25 a.m.

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* The 6181st Meeting was closed.