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MIDDLE EAST LIVING 'DANGEROUS AND TRAGIC DAYS', ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS

SECURITY COUNCIL, STRESSING NEED FOR COURAGEOUS COMPROMISES FOR ALL

Continuing Efforts towards Diplomatic Solutions Described During Briefing

Despite significant challenges and escalating tensions on the ground, the United Nations must not let a "collective sense of impotence" erode its sense of responsibility in the Middle East, warned a top political official as he briefed the Security Council this afternoon.

Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, warned the Council that "the Middle East is living dangerous and tragic days, as the scourge of war is, once again, destroying lives and burying hopes". Courageous and mutual compromises were needed to resolve both the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rapidly escalating crisis in Syria, he added.

"The whole region is feeling the reverberations" as the bloody Syrian conflict continued to unfold, he stated. Earlier this month, "Group of 8" leaders had reached an understanding on achieving a political solution, and had committed to bringing the sides to the negotiating table. The Secretary-General had reiterated his readiness to convene the Geneva Conference on Syria as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, in his message to the International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace in Beijing, the Secretary-General had stressed that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and safeguarding the two-State solution was no less urgent. The current regional turmoil made it even more imperative to build on the opening created by the recent diplomatic push by the United States, and to create a positive momentum towards peace.

Since March, he said, United States Secretary of State John Kerry had made several rounds of visits to the region — including one this week, calling it the "first real opportunity" since October 2010 that was a serious effort to reach a final status agreement. Calling for broader regional support, he also welcomed a reaffirmed willingness on a number of Arab States' part to revive the Arab Peace Initiative. "We hope that the Israeli Government will respond positively," he said.

Nevertheless, he cautioned that "rushing the parties back to the table without having the necessary framework in place, and buy-in from both sides, would be counterproductive". A substantive and well-prepared framework, a credible timeline and confidence-building steps were needed for talks to have a chance of success.

Describing the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, he said that the de facto settlement restraint observed earlier this spring had shown signs of unravelling. He noted with disappointment that, during the first quarter of 2013, there had been 865 "building starts" of housing units in settlements, representing a 176 per cent increase compared to the equivalent period in 2012.

A new Palestinian Cabinet had been sworn in on 6 June to carry out the administration of State affairs until a national consensus Government was formed. However, Prime Minister Hamdallah had tendered his resignation on 20 June, creating renewed uncertainty. There were also fiscal concerns, including the Palestinian Authority's total reported debt of \$4.2 billion and its deficit of \$612 million at the end of May.

Important meetings had taken place during the reporting period, including several on the margins of the World Economic Forum in Jordan last month, he said. The "Breaking the Impasse" initiative was unveiled, marking a serious expression by influential business and public opinion leaders from both sides for a two-State solution. At the same time, Secretary Kerry had announced a large-scale initiative aimed at spurring economic growth through private investment for the West Bank and Gaza.

Turning to Syria, he said that the overall situation continued to deteriorate as a result of continued violent military confrontation. Direct involvement by Hizbullah fighters had given a new momentum to the Syrian Government's military approach and contributed to sectarian and political tensions throughout the region. "Statements of increased military support to both sides of the conflict only promise further escalation," he said, noting that the Secretary-General had repeatedly stressed his opposition to the transfer of arms and fighters to either side.

He also underscored the efforts of the Secretary-General who continued his engagement with Member States and regional organizations in building on the diplomatic opportunity offered by the understanding reached between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary Kerry on 7 May. Meanwhile, Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi and Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman were exploring ways to ensure the success of the Geneva Conference on Syria, he said.

Nonetheless, he pointed out, the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic had, so far, been unable to conduct its fact-finding mission inside Syria due to the lack of authorization by the Syrian Government.

Further, he said, the negative impact of the conflict in Syria on Lebanon had been more sharply evident in recent weeks, noting a “very real danger” of a spread of the Syrian conflict to that country. Following the launching of shells and rockets from Syria into Lebanon, Lebanese President Michel Sleiman had sent a letter to the President of the Security Council protesting the infringement by the conflicting Syrian parties on Lebanon’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The meeting began at 3:03 p.m. and ended at 3:31 p.m.

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