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PALESTINIANS, ISRAELIS REMAIN FAR APART, TOP OFFICIAL TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

WHILE NOTING EXISTENCE OF 'BUILDING BLOCKS' FOR MORE EFFECTIVE TALKS

'Give Diplomacy a Chance,' He Urges, as Lebanon's Prime Minister Hails 'Winds of Change' Heraldizing 'Palestinian Spring'

Palestinian and Israeli positions remained far apart after a week of "intensive diplomacy", but the existence of some "building blocks" — a clear timetable, expectations that the parties must put forward proposals and an active role by the Quartet — could make negotiations more effective, the senior United Nations political official told the Security Council today.

"It will not be easy to chart a way forward, but now is the time for everyone to give diplomacy a chance," said B. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, as he delivered his monthly briefing on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

With Prime Minister Najib Mikati of Lebanon presiding, Mr. Pascoe said that the past week, during which the Palestinian President had applied for membership of a State of Palestine in the United Nations, "has underscored the institutional readiness of the Palestinian Authority to run a State". The diplomatic Quartet — United Nations, European Union, United States and Russian Federation — had noted the application while calling for resumed negotiations and concrete proposals on territory and security within three months of resumed talks, reaffirming its support for the vision of a peace settlement outlined by President Barack Obama of the United States.

The goal would be to make substantial progress within six months, convene a conference in Moscow at the appropriate time and to reach an agreement not later than the end of 2012, he continued. The Quartet would now work for a preparatory meeting of the parties within a month to agree on an agenda and a method of proceeding. Appealing to both parties to agree to move forward, he said that "despite frustrations and lack of trust, each leader extended his hand for peace and both parties have undertaken to review carefully the Quartet call".

He commended President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad on the growing international consensus on the success of the Palestinian state-building programme, he said the achievement "must be noted, preserved and built upon". Reporting a \$150 million financial gap in the Palestinian Authority's budget for the remainder of the year, he appealed for additional, timely donor support, noting that the Quartet had proposed a donors' conference to further support the state-building programme while calling for the identification, as part of negotiations, of additional steps that could secure greater independence and sovereignty for the Palestinian Authority.

However, the main obstacles to a Palestinian State were not institutional, but political, he stressed, citing the unresolved issues between the parties, the continuing Israeli occupation and the ongoing divide splitting the Palestinians. Noting that the Palestinian application for United Nations membership was now before the Council, he stated: "It is your issue to decide." As the deliberations continued, however, no effort must be spared to help the parties back to the negotiating table.

Turning to developments on the ground, he reported that during the past month, the human cost of the ongoing conflict continued to be evident: a total of two Palestinians, including one militant, had been killed while 102 had been injured, including 12 children, while two Israeli security personnel and 10 civilians had also been injured. Stressing that it was essential in the current atmosphere for all sides to impress on their security forces and civilian populations the need to act responsibly, he said they must do their utmost to avoid escalation and take early action to defuse possible tensions. He commended the peaceful nature of the large public demonstrations held in support of the Palestinian application in the West Bank.

Emphasizing that extremists on both sides must not be allowed to inflame the situation, he said Israel must enforce the rule of law to counter the upsurge in settler violence, which on 5 September had resulted in the fifth arson attack against a mosque in the past two months. At the same time, Israel's need for security

was underscored by attacks in Tel Aviv on 29 August, and by reports of a foiled suicide attack in Jerusalem. He expressed concern that more housing units had been approved and more land was slated for expropriation in the West Bank, he reaffirming that settlement activity was illegal and contrary to Israel's Road Map commitments.

Turning to the situation in Gaza, he said that despite the restoration of an "uneasy calm" in late August, some 18 rockets had been fired into Israel during the reporting period. Condemning those attacks, he said Israeli forces had conducted four incursions and two air strikes into Gaza, killing six Palestinian civilians, including three children, during the same period. He urged Israel to show "maximum restraint", adding: "We continue to call for further easing of Israeli closure measures on Gaza, particularly in regard to imports of construction materials, exports and freedom of movement of people."

He said there had been no movement on Palestinian reconciliation based on Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) commitments, although President Abbas had expressed hope that implementation of the reconciliation accord would be accelerated in the coming weeks. There had also been no progress on access to or the release of Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit, who remained a captive of Hamas.

Regarding the Lebanese track, he said the overall security situation remained calm. On 20 September in the west Bekaa, Lebanese security forces had arrested four men and killed two others suspected of having links with the kidnappers of seven Estonian nationals abducted in March and released in July. The situation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) area of operations had also remained generally stable. However, the mission's freedom of movement had been impeded in an incident on 13 September that had resulted in a minor injury suffered by a UNIFIL soldier. He added that Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued almost daily, but had diminished somewhat.

On the situation in Syria, he said the increase in the number of Syrian nationals seeking refuge across the Lebanese border was a reflection of the escalating political and human rights crisis in that country, which had resulted in at least 2,700 deaths since March. The polarization continued to deepen between the Syrian regime, "which appears determined to pursue its policy of violent repression despite international and regional calls to change course", and a growing popular opposition that continued to organize protests across the country.

He went on to note that on 15 September, a coalition of Syrian opposition leaders had announced the formation of the Syrian National Council, and had released a "national consensus charter" affirming the peaceful, inclusive, non-sectarian character of the Syrian uprising and committing to the establishment of a modern State that would guarantee the rule of law and respect for human rights. "We are aware of reports of increased defections within the army amid continued violence against and mistreatment of activists and their supporters," he added.

On 12 September, he continued, the President of the Human Rights Council had appointed three experts to the International Commission of Inquiry mandated by that Geneva-based body in August. They would meet this week in Geneva to discuss their programme of work and establish contacts with relevant stakeholders. "We underline the importance of accountability for all human rights violations committed in Syria since March," he said, expressing hope that the Government would extend its full cooperation to the Commission.

Prime Minister Mkatini then addressed the Council in his national capacity, saying the "winds of change" were blowing in the Middle East, heralding the "Palestinian Spring" that had resulted in last week's application for an independent State that would enjoy full membership in the United Nations — an expression of the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. Palestine already fulfilled all the criteria of a State — a people, a land, a Government and an ability to establish relations with other States. However, it was an occupied State, and the occupation must end, he stressed. The Palestinians had reaffirmed their willingness to negotiate, but the negotiations were still clashing with Israeli intransigence and violations of international law, he added.

He went on to call for Israel to withdraw from all other Arab lands, as laid out in the Arab Peace Initiative, including the Golan Heights in Syria and all parts of the still occupied Lebanese south. At the same time, he reaffirmed his Government's commitment to the complete implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), while calling for pressure on Israel to stop violating Lebanese sovereignty by land, sea or air, and for a full ceasefire and cooperation with UNIFIL in completing the demarcation of the "Blue Line".

Finally, he reiterated Lebanon's right to delineate its legitimate maritime borders and exploit the resources within them. Condemning attacks on UNIFIL, he reaffirmed his country's support for the mission and its commitment to upholding all provisions of international law, declaring that Lebanon stood for justice, peace and moderation.

The meeting began at 10:15 a.m. and ended at 10:40 a.m.

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