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ISRAELI, PALESTINIAN SIDES MUST INTENSIFY BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS.

CONDITIONS IN GAZA, WEST BANK MUST IMPROVE, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

Despite ongoing bilateral contacts between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as efforts by, among other concerned parties, the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East peace process, the situation on the ground was not improving "in the way that is required" to ensure a durable settlement, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs told the Security Council today.

At his monthly briefing to the Council on the situation in the Middle East, B. Lynn Pascoe said that Israel's Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, and lead Palestinian negotiator, Ahmad Qurei, had met on 23 September. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli President Shimon Peres met on 26 September in New York, he added. The process of political transition in Israel was ongoing with coalition negotiations continuing.

On 26 September, he said, the Quartet – comprising the United Nations, European Union, Russian Federation and United States – called on the Palestinian and Israeli sides to make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008. Among other things, the Quartet commended Egypt for its efforts to help reunite the West Bank and Gaza. Quartet members and Arab League representatives also held a constructive discussion on how to work together in the crucial period ahead. He added that the central importance of the Arab Peace Initiative had been reaffirmed during that meeting.

He said that, on 22 September, the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee and Quartet Representative Tony Blair had met in the margins of the General Assembly's annual general debate. That meeting commended Prime Minister Fayyad's efforts to implement his Government's reform and development agenda, and encouraged ongoing security and institution-building efforts. The security efforts of the Palestinian Authority had focused on progress in the Jenin governance and efforts in Hebron, where Palestinian security forces had discovered a tunnel allegedly used by militants. Progress had been made in defining a strategy for the development of the judicial sector, and the number of judges and prosecutors had doubled.

Israeli-Palestinian violence over the month, however, had claimed the lives of seven Palestinians, two of them children, while injuring 116 Palestinians and 34 Israelis, he said. Violent incidents included Israeli border police reportedly firing tear gas at a civilian delegation including a European Commission official, and physical assaults by settlers against Palestinian farmers, as well as the burning down of an olive grove.

He said that, while the Government of Israel had taken some positive steps aimed at easing internal movement of Palestinians in the West Bank, there were currently 630 obstacles to Palestinian movement. Barrier construction had also continued, contrary to the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice. The United Nations continued to engage the Israeli authorities on access restrictions imposed on its staff and on the import of materials required for the resumption of stalled United Nations projects in Gaza.

There had been no progress on Israel's key Road Map and Annapolis commitments regarding a genuine settlement freeze, removal of outposts and opening of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, he continued. The month of Ramadan had passed with smoother coordination in the Old City of Jerusalem than in previous years, but a majority of Palestinian Muslims had not been able to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque due to permit and access restrictions. On 12 October, under increased Israeli security presence, settlers had opened a synagogue in the Muslim Quarter. The Secretary-General continued to call for an end to unilateral action in Jerusalem, and to remind all parties that the status of the city remained an issue for permanent status negotiations.

He said that the calm brokered by Egypt between Gaza and Southern Israel was "by and large holding", despite yesterday's rocket fire into the Negev and the subsequent closure of border crossings. Unfortunately, there had been no improvement in the movement of goods and people in and out of Gaza. Further, fuel was still in short supply, the importing of goods had decreased, construction projects were still on hold, entries to Israel for medical treatment decreased, and some 150 students had been denied permission to leave Gaza to study abroad.

Fourteen Palestinians, he said, had been reportedly killed as a result of accidents in tunnels along the Gaza-Egypt border, with reports adding that several thousand Palestinians gained income from the tunnel industry regulated by Hamas. In addition, the continued split between the West Bank and Gaza was having

“increasingly adverse effects”. Two Palestinians, including one child, had been killed in Gaza in internal violence; a teachers’ strike affected around 250,000 students; and on 21 October, a student had been declared clinically dead after an altercation involving a Hamas-appointed teacher. A health workers’ strike and a dearth of medications had threatened the health of the population, he added.

The Egyptian mediation process aimed at the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank was ongoing, following a round of meetings with Palestinian factions earlier this month and the submission of a draft proposal. He hoped all regional States would lend their support to Egypt’s efforts, particularly at the ministerial meeting of the League of Arab States next month. He reiterated his call for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to be granted access to Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, as well as for his release along with a number of Palestinian prisoners.

No further indirect Israeli-Syrian negotiations under Turkish auspices had taken place, he said, and he hoped they would resume soon. The Syrian Golan remained quiet, but a car bomb that exploded in Damascus on 29 September reportedly killed 17 civilians and injuring over a dozen others. On 16 October, Lebanon and Syria signed a landmark agreement towards the establishment of diplomatic ties.

In another milestone, the Lebanese Parliament passed a new electoral law, as agreed at Doha, he said. Meanwhile, the first phase of rubble removal began on 17 October at Nahr el-Bared, the Palestinian refugee camp that saw fighting last year, and funding was urgently required to meet reconstruction costs and the humanitarian needs of the displaced.

He said that security incidents continued in the northern city of Tripoli and alleged members of a terrorist cell, believed to be affiliated with Fatah-al-Islam, were arrested on 12 October by Lebanese security forces. The situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) remained tense but generally quiet, and Israeli air violations continued at an average of 10 per day. Michael Williams, the Special Coordinator for Lebanon, began work as of 1 October.

“Notwithstanding the transition currently under way in Israel, we hope that Israeli-Palestinian negotiations will not only continue but intensify between now and the end of the year within the Annapolis framework,” he said. Conditions on the ground in the West Bank must improve through parallel actions and meeting of Road Map commitments, especially on settlements. Conditions in Gaza must be eased, and unity pursued under Egyptian auspices. He also encouraged the intensification of indirect Israeli-Syrian talks, as well as further work to build on recent developments in Lebanon.

The meeting started at 10:10 a.m. and adjourned at 10:30 a.m.

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