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IN SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING, DECISIVE EFFORT BY INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

SOUGHT TO EASE TENSIONS, RETURN ISRAELIS, PALESTINIANS TO TABLE

Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Urges Parties To Demonstrate Leadership, Rise to Challenge of Making Historic Peace

Amid a sharp spike in violence between Israelis and Palestinians — including the “alarming escalation” over the weekend of rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into Israeli civilian areas and the ensuing Israel air strikes that left three Palestinians dead — a senior United Nations political official today told the Security Council that the international community must make a “decisive” effort to ease tensions and bring the parties back to the negotiating table.

“The important achievements, especially those related to the State-building agenda of the Palestinian Authority, would be at risk if the impasse in the political process is not overcome,” said Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, citing the increase in violence and tension on the ground since the Council’s last briefing on the situation. He reiterated “a sense of urgency” to break the political deadlock that had stalled direct Israeli-Palestinian talks for months, leaving solid progress made and confidence-building measures taken by both sides hanging in the balance.

He urged decisive action on the part of the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East peace process and the wider international community to bring the parties back to the negotiating table on all final status issues towards implementing the two-State solution. He also urged the parties to “demonstrate leadership and rise to the challenge of making a historic peace”.

The mounting violence exacerbated concerns that attempts to restart the peace negotiations had produced no visible results, he said, urging: “We must not let the recent surge in violence further undermine the possibility of finding a way towards an agreement on final status issues or undermine state-building achievements thus far”.

He noted the dramatic developments under way in the wider region, which he said added to the need to redouble efforts to break the deadlock between Israelis and Palestinians and could be an important stabilizing force in the Middle East.

During the past month, the Quartet had continued its efforts to help the parties find a way back to direct negotiations, he said. As agreed in Munich last month, Quartet envoys had met separately with Palestinian and Israeli negotiators and were giving serious consideration to the views of the parties on how to re-start talks on all core issues, including borders and security. The envoys planned to further engage both sides, and the Quartet principals were scheduled to meet in April, with the hope of setting the stage for the renewed negotiations.

Concerning specific violent incidents, he first noted the “shocking” 11 March murder of an Israeli family of seven in the settlement of Itamar in the occupied West Bank. The Secretary-General and the Quartet had unequivocally condemned the murders, offered condolences and had called for those responsible to be brought to justice. Likewise, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had condemned the killings and had also offered the help of Palestinian security forces in bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Israeli forces had been deployed in the hopes of capturing the perpetrators and containing the attempts by Israeli settlers in the area from attacking Palestinians and their property, he continued. Nonetheless, during the three days following the initial incident, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had recorded eight incidents that had resulted in injuries to Palestinians and 23 that had caused damage to property throughout the West Bank as a result of settler violence. Also, Israeli security forces had reinstated the Hawwara checkpoint near Nablus, which had been removed on 11 February. Overall, settler violence had increased during the reporting period, as 60 incidents had resulted in damage to property and 24 Palestinians had been injured by settlers in 18 incidents in the West Bank.

Providing details of one such incident, he said that, just yesterday, a Palestinian had been stabbed and injured by settlers close to Hebron, and in another incident yesterday, two Palestinians had been shot and wounded by settlers. He urged the Israeli Government to fulfil its obligations to protect the Palestinian population in the West Bank. He also expressed concern about increased tensions and violence in and around the Gaza Strip, noting that 12 missiles and 55 mortars had been fired indiscriminately towards Israeli civilian areas, including some 50 mortar shells in an “alarming escalation” during the night and early morning of 19 and 20 March, which he condemned as a violation of Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

In that vein, he noted that 15 Israeli air strikes and 13 incursions had taken place, resulting in the deaths of three Palestinian civilians and eight injured, as well as two militants killed and five injured. "All parties must exercise restraint and respect international humanitarian law." He noted the interception by Israeli forces on 15 March of a ship 200 nautical miles from the Israeli coasts carrying some 25 tons of weapons and ammunition. Israeli authorities believed the ship's goods were headed for militant groups in Gaza. If that was confirmed, it would be a violation of Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

Mr. Fernandez-Taranco also expressed concern about the Israeli Government's decision on 12 March to approve the construction of some 400 housing units in the West Bank in reaction to the heinous murder in Itamar. Further, on 14 March, the Jerusalem municipality had issued a permit for construction of 14 apartments for Israeli settlers in the Ras El-Amud neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. "These are provocative actions that only serve to exacerbate tensions," he said, once again expressing the position of the United Nations that any settlement activity by Israel in the Occupied Territory was illegal under international law and detrimental to efforts to resume peace negotiations between the two sides.

On a positive note, he said that Israeli authorities had announced the intention to demolish by the end of 2011 all illegal West Bank outposts built on private Palestinian lands. While welcoming that announcement, he noted that it failed to address the existence of more than 100 other West Bank outposts constructed, not only in violation of international law, but also of the Israeli Government's own regulations. "We stress the importance of further enabling steps by Israel to ensure greater progress on the ground in support of Palestinian State-building efforts," he said, adding that measures agreed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Quartet Representative Tony Blair had started to be implemented in several areas, including the release by the Israeli Ministry of Communications on 3 March of the remaining bandwidth to mobile operator Wataniya.

Yet, even with such initiatives on the part of Israel, he said that state-building efforts by the Palestinian Authority were at risk if the political process did not overcome the current impasse in negotiations, and would be further undermined if tensions and violence on the ground continued. The Secretary-General had noted with much interest President Abbas' readiness to visit Gaza in an effort to end Palestinian disunity. He had also discussed the importance of Palestinian unity with the Egyptian Foreign Minister and noted that Government's intentions to step up its focus on that issue. The United Nations welcomed all efforts by all factions to advance Palestinian unity, Mr. Fernandez-Taranco added.

Turning next to the 15 March demonstrations in the West Bank and Gaza — in which an estimated 100,000 people had called for an end to the occupation and to Palestinian in-fighting — he noted with concern that Hamas security forces had clamped down on protesters in Gaza, reportedly injuring seven Palestinians. The following day, Hamas had suppressed a gathering of students, resulting in tens of injuries. Condemning the attacks, he added that Hamas had also attacked local members of the press, and on 19 March had stormed the offices of Reuters, CNN and NHK news channel, attacking journalists, confiscating tapes and destroying equipment.

He said that, notwithstanding such difficulties, preparations for municipal elections were continuing and the Palestinian Central Elections Committee had organized voter registration from 9 to 15 March in the West Bank. Hamas had not allowed the Committee to open its Gaza offices, so while President Abbas had confirmed that the 9 July local elections would be held on time, he had reiterated that there would be no legislative and presidential elections unless the polls could be held simultaneously in Gaza and the West Bank.

The situation of civilians in Gaza remained a concern, he said, with the weekly average of truckloads entering the Strip during the reporting period having increased to 882, compared to 566 in June 2010, but only one third of the June 2007 pre-blockade weekly average. It was important to ensure timely implementation of projects already approved by the Government of Israel. Welcoming the recent movement of nearly 25 tons of aggregate for that purpose, he said, however, that a fundamental upgrade of movement through Israeli crossings was critical for the economy's revival. He estimated that more construction materials for approved international projects entered through tunnels than through Israeli checkpoints.

He reiterated the call for the release of Israeli Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit as well as concern over the continued detention of several thousand Palestinians in Israel. Turning to regional issues, he said that there had been no progress in efforts to promote Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, and that settlement activities in the occupied Syrian Golan had continued. He encouraged the parties to resolve the conflict in the context of the Arab Peace Initiative.

On Lebanon, he reported on Najib Mikati's efforts to form a new non-partisan Government in a climate of increased political polarization. The Secretary-General, he said, renewed his hope that the new Government would meet the aspirations of all Lebanese and he called on it to respect Lebanon's international obligations. Noting the 27 February announcement of the "14 March coalition" that it would not take part in the new Government, he reported on a 13 March rally of the coalition, which had expressed strong support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and had denounced the continued existence of arms outside State control.

He expressed concern over an increase in verbal attacks and even some acts of violence against the staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Lebanon, following the death of a young boy on 8 March in Ein el-Hilweh camp. He called on Palestinian factions to de-escalate the situation and on the international community to step up support to the Agency. He said that the situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had remained generally quiet and stable, despite the high frequency of Israeli air violations. A briefing would be given to the Council on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) on 29 March.

The meeting began at 10:16 a.m. and ended at 10:35 a.m.

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