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GAZA CRISIS MUST BE TURNED INTO 'OPPORTUNITY FOR REAL CHANGE ON THE GROUND'.

SPECIAL COORDINATOR TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

The current Gaza crisis must be turned into an opportunity for real change on the ground while proximity talks were sustained with a view to holding direct talks as soon as possible, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process told the Security Council this morning.

"This body clearly stated two weeks ago that the situation in Gaza is not sustainable," said Robert Serry in the regular briefing on the Middle East conflict, which this month focused on Gaza in the aftermath of the Israeli navy's fatal interception on 31 May of a six-ship aid flotilla en route to that territory.

He said there is a welcome consensus among the diplomatic Quartet (United Nations, European Union, Russian Federation and United States) on that, and on policy changes expected from Israel to its closure regime in Gaza in a manner consistent with its legitimate security concerns, which could be a catalyst for addressing broader issues.

At the same time, he underlined precisely how "delicate and urgent" the proximity negotiations were. He said that Israel's settlement restraint policy would expire in three months, while Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' support from the Arab League for continuing negotiations had a similar time frame.

Within that time, he said, there must be sufficient progress at the table, buttressed by meaningful progress on the ground, to enable a move to meaningful direct negotiations, otherwise it was difficult to see how a political process could be sustained and made to converge in an agreement on core issues. "This, ultimately, is the only path to peace," he said, adding: "I call on the parties to keep up their cooperative approach [...] and count on the support of this Council to help maintain a climate conducive to peace."

He reported that United States Special Envoy George Mitchell had held a further round of talks with President Abbas on 19 May and with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 20 May, and both sides had reaffirmed their commitment to continue the exercise in the aftermath of the flotilla incident. Mr. Mitchell had held a further three days of what he called constructive and substantive talks starting 2 June, and was due to return to the region again this week.

Turning to Gaza, he said that, following the Council's 1 June presidential statement on the flotilla incident (see Press Release [SC/9940](#)), which now appeared to have resulted in the deaths of nine civilians and injuries to at least 30 others, along with seven Israel Defense Forces soldiers, he and the Secretary-General had been active in addressing the immediate aftermath and urge a "fundamentally different" approach.

Reiterating the Secretary-General's regret for the loss of life in the use of force during the Israeli military operation, he said that, by 2 June, 682 detained civilians had been repatriated. Five Israeli citizens had been questioned in Israeli custody and unconditionally released between 1 and 3 June. The vessels remained in Israeli ports. Another vessel — the *Rachel Corrie* — had been intercepted by Israeli naval forces as it sailed for Gaza on 5 June, without violence, and had been rerouted to the Israeli port of Ashdod.

In its 1 June statement, the Council called for a prompt, impartial, credible investigation conforming to international standards, he said, and the Secretary-General, having consulted with the Council's permanent members, among others, had proposed an international panel under the aegis of an impartial third party and in which both Turkey and Israel actively participated.

Mr. Serry said the Secretary-General had taken note of Israel's 14 June announcement of the formation of a public commission to examine the flotilla incident, to be comprised of three Israeli members and two international personalities, participating as observers. The two combined would fully meet international expectations for an impartial investigation.

Consistent with the Council's wish for cargo to reach its destination, he announced that the United Nations was ready to accept that responsibility on an exceptional basis. It had obtained consent of the cargo owners of the three Turkish-registered vessels to take possession of their entire cargo and ensure its timely distribution in Gaza for humanitarian purposes.

Israel had agreed to release the entire cargo to the Organization and he had reason to believe that the de-facto authorities in Gaza would respect the independence of United Nations programming in that regard. Work to carry out that understanding would begin as soon as possible. He said that the amount of material on the vessels in question, which included medical and construction supplies, was modest compared with what was needed in Gaza.

"It is these needs which must be the focus of immediate action," he stressed. "The flotilla crisis is the latest symptom of a failed policy." The Quartet principals had engaged with the Israeli leadership, and he had been informed that Israel was now reviewing its Gaza policy. It would be vital that such a review end measures that punished civilians, he said.

He said the basic principle that should guide policy on Gaza was clear: everything should be allowed into the area, unless there was a legitimate security reason. Israel should move from a policy in which only some 116 items were approved for entry to one in which all goods were able to enter. Moreover, Israel should fast-track United Nations projects on a large scale, notably those related to water and sanitation, energy, education and health. "Needs are immense in these sectors," he said. Other key development projects should also be approved on a similar basis.

To implement such measures, it would be crucial to expand capacity at commercial crossings between Israel and Gaza, he said, noting that a policy change would also empower moderation in Gaza, ensuring that civilians did not rely on an illicit economy that empowered smugglers and militants.

He said that, between 16 May and 13 June, an average 566 truckloads had entered Gaza per week, a 6 per cent drop versus the prior reporting period. Between 15 and 20 May, the Rafah border-crossing with Egypt had been exceptionally opened for six days, and since 2 June, it had been opened for pedestrian passengers to and from the Gaza Strip.

On 25 June, he said, Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit would have been in captivity for four years, and he called on Mr. Shalit's captors to urgently allow third-party access to him, and to release him immediately. He also noted the detention of over 9,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails.

He said that, while the de facto authorities had maintained "comparative calm" with Israel since the flotilla incident, militant groups had fired 29 rockets into southern Israel during the reporting period, causing no injuries. Israel Defense Forces had conducted 10 incursions and 12 air strikes, killing 13 Palestinians, all of whom were alleged militants. He urged full respect by all parties of international humanitarian law, and wished to make clear to interlocutors in Gaza that, just as Israel should significantly change its policy at the crossings, Hamas should significantly change policies, especially in declaring an extended ceasefire and preventing violence in Israel.

Recalling a spate of attacks on international and civil society organizations in Gaza, he reiterated the Secretary-General's condemnation of the 23 May vandalism of a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) summer camp for Gazan children. However, he was pleased to report that the UNRWA Summer Games, which provided much-needed recreation for some 250,000 children, had been under way in 144 locations since 12 June.

He said he had called for a reversal of "unacceptable" actions by Hamas security forces in early June, which had shut down various non-governmental offices in Gaza City and Rafah, adding that the United Nations would continue to actively engage with its non-governmental organization partners.

He said that there had been no progress in Palestinian reconciliation as Hamas continued to refuse the Egyptian-mediated proposal. He reiterated that Palestinian unity was a key component to ending the crisis in Gaza.

On the other hand, he said that the holding of the second successful Palestinian investment conference in early June in Bethlehem, resulting in pledges of almost \$1 billion in investments, was an encouraging sign of trust in the Authority's institution-building efforts. The Authority had received almost half a billion dollars, in addition, to ensure continued support to its reform agenda, but a total of \$1.2 billion in external financing was required in 2010.

In other areas, he noted continued tensions in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and reported no developments in progress towards a regional peace. The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan was stable despite continued settlement activity and despite a fire set during Israeli military exercises.

Lebanon as well remained stable, he said, with municipal elections held in a mainly peaceful manner. Funding for reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp remained a major concern. The situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) remained quiet, despite daily Israeli air violations of the Blue line, he concluded.

The meeting began at 10:18 a.m. and ended at 10:41 a.m.

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