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UPCOMING MIDDLE EAST QUARTET MEETING OFFERS 'IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY' TO LAY BASIS

FOR PROGRESS TOWARDS RESUMED NEGOTIATIONS, DURABLE PEACE, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

Robert Serry, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process told the Security Council this morning that the upcoming meeting of the Middle East Diplomatic Quartet on 24 September presented an "important opportunity to lay the basis for progress" towards a durable peace.

"It is above all for the parties to take responsibility and seize this opportunity", Mr. Serry said during the monthly briefing on the Israeli-Palestinian situation. "Now is the time to make the commitments necessary to relaunch negotiations and to see them through to a two-State solution," he added.

The current moment was particularly important because the Palestinian Authority had grown stronger, he said. He recounted his attendance last week at the Palestine-Jordan soccer match in Hebron, where, despite all the problems of the unresolved conflict and occupation, "so much of what I witnessed that evening filled me with hope". The Palestinian security forces provided exemplary public security. The Palestinian flag flew proudly. The Palestinian people, in their thousands, cheered the home side to an honourable draw with their neighbour, Jordan, whose very presence was symbolically powerful.

"Today, we have a Palestinian Authority that is more than a partner for peace – we have a player ready to meet its responsibilities, determined to insist on its rights and desperately in need of support and enablement – from Israel, from the region, from the world," he said. The Palestinian Government was resolved to complete preparation for statehood in less than two years. "I am convinced they can do it, if indeed they haven't already."

For negotiations to be enabled, it was critical that the parties commit to and implement their [Road Map](#) obligations, he said, stressing that continued Israeli settlement activity remained a source of "deep concern" in that regard, with both ongoing construction and the recent authorization of a further 455 housing units in several West Bank settlements.

He voiced his hope that, in the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative, countries in the region would stand ready to take positive steps towards Israel, if indeed negotiations resumed. He strongly re-emphasized the importance of fostering peaceful coexistence throughout the region through the conclusion of peace agreements between Israel and Syria and Israel and Lebanon.

On 25 August, the Palestinian Authority had announced its agenda to complete the building of institutions of a State apparatus within the coming two years. It had continued to ensure law and order in West Bank cities and towns. Between 20 August and 15 September, however, 50 Palestinians had been injured and 3 killed by the Israel Defense Forces in the West Bank. United Nations staff had recorded 35 settler attacks on Palestinians. In addition, 619 obstacles to movement remained in place in the West Bank. Qualitative improvement in movement and access had occurred, however, because of Israeli steps to ease closure measures. Yesterday, Israel had announced that it would begin the removal of 100 earth mounds in West Bank cities.

He said the Palestinian Authority had continued its reform and fiscal stimulus efforts. The economy had grown by 5.4 per cent in the second quarter. Shortfalls in recurrent budgetary needs persisted, however, and timely donor support was vital to help the Palestinian Authority avoid borrowing from domestic banks and enable it to sustain its reform agenda.

On 26 August, the Palestinian National Council had met in Ramallah for the first time since 1988, during which six new members had been elected to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee, he said. President Mahmoud Abbas had indicated his intention to decree presidential and legislative elections to be held in the West Bank and Gaza in January 2010. Hamas had stated, however, that it would not permit the holding of elections in Gaza before an agreement on national unity was reached. On 10 September, Egypt had presented a comprehensive proposal to resolve the outstanding issues dividing the Palestinians. He urged all factions to engage positively in internal dialogue under Egyptian auspices.

The situation in Gaza, he said, remained unsustainable, with an uneasy, informal calm. During the reporting period, 2 rockets and 11 mortars had been fired from Gaza and there were 18 shallow Israeli incursions and 3 air strikes, as well as firing by the Israel Defense Forces on Palestinian fishermen. Six

Palestinians, including two children, were killed, while one Israeli soldier was injured by a mortar. He called for an end to all violence.

He noted with grave concern that Hamas continued to buy, manufacture and smuggle weapons, and extreme radical groups continue to be active. Discussions were continuing to secure the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit and nearly 10,000 Palestinians currently in detention in Israel.

Due to Israel's blockade, there were no exports from Gaza and "no significant progress" in access, he said. He stressed again that agricultural inputs, water and sanitation equipment, material for shelter repair and educational material were urgently needed and must be facilitated by Israeli authorities. The United Nations had left "no reasonable stone unturned" in the matter, but Israeli had not responded positively, which was "deeply regrettable".

More positively, Israel had announced the approval of three urgently needed United Nations water and sanitation projects, he said, though he maintained that much more work was needed if urgent water and sanitation needs were to be met.

He noted that the [report](#) of the Human Rights Council-mandated fact-finding mission on possible violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Gaza during the recent military operation had been released on 15 September and would be formally presented to the Human Rights Council on 29 September.

Turning briefly to Lebanon, he said that, three months after the parliamentary elections of 7 June, efforts to form a Government had stalled again on 10 September, when Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri had stepped down after the opposition rejected his Cabinet proposal. As a result of consultations in the past few days, Mr. Hariri had been reappointed, however. He urged that a Government be speedily formed. He also described the rocket launchings into Israel from southern Lebanon that had occurred on 11 September, saying that the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had investigated those violations, adding that Israeli air violations continued on a daily basis.

The meeting began at 10:12 a.m. and ended at 10:31 a.m.

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