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'IMPORTANT JUNCTURE' REACHED, AS INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PREPARES TO STEP UP

DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT WITH MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

In Briefing, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Says For Sake of Region's People 'There Must Be Peace and Not Simply Further Process'

As the international community prepared to step up its diplomatic engagement towards the Middle East peace process, the region and the world had once again reached an important juncture, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs told the Security Council this morning.

"For the sake of the people of the region there must be peace and not simply further process", B. Lynn Pascoe said during his monthly briefing to the Security Council. "We, therefore, encourage the early resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on all core issues without exception as agreed by the parties and as called for in Security Council resolution 1850 (2008)".

Underlining the international community's commitment to achieving a two-State solution, he highlighted the nexus of recent and upcoming international diplomatic activity, particularly noting United States Envoy George Mitchell's recent regional tour of the Middle East and welcoming the former Senator's stated commitment to "vigorously pursue the creation of a Palestinian State" as part of the Obama Administration's comprehensive regional peace strategy, which aims to integrate and develop the Arab Peace Initiative.

To this end, he said Jordan's King Abdullah was scheduled to meet President Obama next week during the first official visit to the United States by an Arab leader to discuss the regional peace process. A visit by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was also expected soon, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu planned to visit Washington following Israel's internal review of its national security priorities.

The Secretary-General strongly supported a reinvigorated role for the Quartet, he said, noting that its envoys had agreed to hold regular meetings in the region when they met in the United Nations offices in Ramallah on 17 April to discuss plans to advance the peace process. The Secretary-General had also welcomed the formation of the new Israeli Government and expected that the Middle East peace process would resume.

Turning to the situation in Gaza and southern Israel in his detailed briefing on the past month's developments, he said there had been very little progress on the key elements outlined in resolution 1860 (2009), including on the parties' commitment to a durable and sustainable ceasefire; the opening of crossings for humanitarian access and recovery materials; and intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Nevertheless, those principles were indispensable for the international community's sustained commitment to the peace process.

Despite a significant drop in violent incidents, the situation remained fragile in the absence of a proper ceasefire regime, he said. Thirty rockets and mortars had been fired by Palestinian militants at southern Israel and the Israeli military had carried out two air strikes in the Gaza strip. On 13 April the Israeli Army reported that a Palestinian vessel had exploded near an Israeli naval ship without causing injury. On 15 April, Egyptian police reportedly found 900 kilograms of explosives along its Gazan border. Five days earlier, its security forces had arrested 18 people for allegedly smuggling weapons and cash into Gaza.

Israel's policy of near total closure of the Gaza Strip, in force since Hamas's takeover in June 2007, had continued in the wake of Operation "Cast Lead". Over 73 per cent of all imports during the reporting period had consisted of foodstuffs and cleaning materials. The population's basic emergency needs had largely been met. Food distributions remained at the same levels as last month, with the World Food Programme (WFP) reaching 365,000 beneficiaries and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reaching 750,000.

But, while he welcomed the Israeli Cabinet's decision to allow all kinds of food into Gaza without restriction, he noted each food shipment still required coordination with Israeli authorities and that assistance to Gaza should not be limited to food, blankets or medical supplies. Broader humanitarian assistance

and early recovery were impossible without adequate entry of fuel, cash, and materials for repairing schools, clinics, sanitation networks and shelters. Moreover, except for small quantities delivered to UNRWA, the total ban on petrol and diesel imports had continued since 2 November 2008, with Israel allowing the transfer of approximately half of the industrial fuel needs of Gaza's power plants in the past month.

As a result of these restrictions, he said many Gazans continued to face intermittent power cuts. The ban on the import of spare parts for the electrical network's maintenance exacerbated the situation, with 10 per cent of the population lacking any electricity. Only two truckloads of electrical transformers and cables had been allowed entry since the network was damaged during Israeli's military offensive.

Other limitations on cash entering Gaza also made many humanitarian relief programmes impossible, he said. Out of 250 million shekels requested for the salaries of 65,000 Palestinian Authority staff, Israel had allowed a transfer of only 50 million on 7 April. Meanwhile, only one truck of cement and a limited quantity of plastic piping, needed to improve water and sanitation projects, had been allowed to enter Gaza over the last month. Records from primary health-care clinics in the Khan Younis area showed that water and sanitation-related infectious diseases were increasingly prevalent in 2009 compared to 2008.

Against this backdrop, "the lack of access to Gaza is deeply frustrating", he said. The international community had pledged some \$4.5 billion for the Strip's reconstruction at the 2 March donor conference in Sharm el-Sheikh. But, the Palestinian reconciliation process that, it was hoped, would provide a framework for reconstruction had not moved forward. Nevertheless, the United Nations had and would continue to support early recovery and reconstruction and was working to ensure support programming once the conditions allowed for it. To that end, the Special Coordinator for the Peace Process and his Deputy were intensifying their visits to Gaza, but without the material needed, that recovery and reconstruction process could not begin. A substantial easing by Israel of its closure policy, including steps to return to the framework of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, was required.

He noted that Palestinian reconciliation talks had adjourned for the third time on 2 April with no agreement on the composition or political platform of a transitional Government. With talks scheduled to resume later this month, Egyptian efforts aimed at uniting the Palestinian factions under one Government led by President Abbas on the basis of PLO principles must be supported. The divide between Gaza and the West Bank continued to grow, at the expense of Gaza's population.

Five United Nations Mine Action Teams also continued to work in Gaza conducting risk-assessments and training, he said, but noted that there had been no developments regarding the location of the unexploded bombs that went missing in February. Although the Secretary-General had met on 8 April with members of the Gaza Board of Inquiry to hear their conclusions and recommendations, no further comments would be made until their finalized report was received. Also, Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit remained in captivity.

Turning to the Palestinian Authority's efforts regarding institution building and security reform, he noted ongoing discussions to convene the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee in the next several weeks. The Palestinian Authority had also begun revising and upgrading its budget process ahead of the 2010 budget and the 2011-2013 Palestinian Reform and Development Plan. But, despite the large sums of money pledged at the donor conference, the Palestinian Authority continued to face great difficulties paying monthly salaries. That severely impacted its long-term planning and undermined its reform agenda. Palestinian Authority forces had, however, stepped up their security activities over the last month, targeting criminal gangs, making numerous arrests, recovering weapons and stolen cash, and shutting down a reported explosives manufacturing lab in a mosque in Qalqilia.

He reported that over the last month 10 Palestinians had been killed and 95 injured in the West Bank due to clashes with Israel Defense Forces and settlers. There had been a decrease from 26 to 7 instances in which Israeli settlers targeted Palestinians and their property. On 2 April, a 13-year-old Israeli was killed in an attack in a settlement in which another Israeli child was injured. On 8 April, clashes had erupted between the residents of the Palestinian village of Safa where the killer had reportedly sought refuge and approximately 200 Israeli settlers. Fifteen Palestinians were injured – 11 by live fire – when the Israeli Army intervened. Six other Israelis were injured during the reporting period.

Elsewhere, Israeli settlement activity continued in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, with major construction under way in three settlement blocs in the latter, he said. Road infrastructure was ongoing and, on 31 March, Israeli settlers in the Efrat settlement began constructing their own road. Such settlement activity ran contrary to the basis of the two-State solution and should be frozen. The obstacles to movement in the West Bank remained constant at more than 600 and construction of the barrier continued within the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

But, in contravention of its [Road Map](#) obligations, the Government of Israel had taken no action to evacuate settlement outposts during the reporting period nor had it allowed the opening of Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, he said. Rather, Israeli authorities had demolished two Palestinian structures and undertaken a so-called "deterrent" demolition of the family home of a Palestinian who had carried out a terrorist attack on 2 July 2008. During that demolition, a Palestinian man was shot and killed as he drove his car into Israeli security forces and three Israeli border police were injured.

Turning to regional affairs, he reported that the Secretary-General had attended the League of Arab States summit on 30 March in Doha, which recommitted its members to the Arab Peace Initiative and called for Israeli steps toward that initiative. The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Peace Process had met with the new Jordanian Foreign Minister Naser Joudeh on 8 April and with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem to discuss efforts to move the peace process forward.

He said the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan was quiet, despite continuing Israeli settlement activity. In Egypt, it was announced that a cell of 49 persons led by an alleged Hizbullah member had been arrested in November 2008, while the search for additional cell members continued. In Lebanon, the overall situation remained stable, despite a number of disconcerting security incidents, many of which appeared related to the 27 March shooting in Baalbek between gunmen suspected of drug trafficking and the Lebanese Armed Forces that resulted in the death of an alleged drug baron. Armed gunmen had ambushed an Lebanese Armed Forces patrol in a nearby area on 13 April, leaving four soldiers dead and one critically injured. As the Lebanese Armed Forces continued to search for the perpetrators, Syria had deployed troops along the border to prevent their escape.

Meanwhile, relations between the local community and the Lebanese Armed Forces had recently improved, he said. Construction of an additional 232 temporary shelters near the Nahr al-Bared camp was completed in March, bringing the total number of temporary UNRWA shelters housing some 650 families to more than 800.

In the political arena, he said the five-week registration period for candidates in the June parliamentary elections ended on 7 April, with 702 candidates having registered. The Lebanese ambassador to Syria had arrived in Damascus today following the establishment of diplomatic ties between Lebanon and Syria in October 2008 and the approval of the first Syrian ambassador to Lebanon.

The overall situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) remained generally quiet, he said. UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces continued to carry out intensive joint operational activities with a particular focus on possible rocket launching positions. Israeli air violations continued on an almost daily basis.

The meeting, which began at 10:15 a.m., concluded at 10:35 a.m.

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