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SECRETARY-GENERAL, BRIEFING SECURITY COUNCIL ON MIDDLE EAST,

CALLS FOR END TO CREATION OF 'NEGATIVE FACTS'

Regional Approach to Peace Efforts Crucial, He Says Ahead of Arab League Summit

Regional support for renewed Middle East peace efforts was now urgently needed, as was continued strong consensus among international partners and an end to the creation of "negative facts" on the ground, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the Security Council today.

"Regional support for the peace effort, and a regional approach to peace as a whole, are both crucial," Mr. Ban said as he briefed the Council following his return from a trip to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and a meeting of the Middle East diplomatic Quartet in Moscow. He departs tomorrow for Sirte, Libya, to attend the Summit of the League of Arab States.

He stressed that those missions were taking place amid continuing efforts to start Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks and a "crisis of confidence" spurred by Israel's announcement of its intention to advance planning for the construction of 1,600 new settlement units in East Jerusalem.

"There have been too many negative facts being created on the ground, and these need to stop," the Secretary-General said. "We need more positive facts such as calm and restraint, reconstruction in Gaza and transformative change in the West Bank."

Reaffirming that there was no alternative to negotiations, he emphasized that talks must not be disrupted by provocations. "No doubt there will be tests. The parties themselves must take steps to meet obligations and build trust. Extremists and spoilers must see that the parties are determined to press ahead."

Reporting on the Moscow leg of his trip, he said the statement issued by the Quartet reflected strong agreement on the need for talks to move ahead and become direct negotiations as soon as possible, and, in order for that to happen, the necessity of fulfilling Road Map commitments and improving conditions in Gaza. "I carried these important messages to the Israeli and Palestinian leaders and their publics," Mr. Ban said.

Outlining his visit to Ramallah on the West Bank, the Secretary-General said he had met with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who had assured him of President Mahmoud Abbas's commitment to proximity talks, and emphasized the Palestinian Authority's wish to see a greater Quartet role in "defining the endgame".

Mr. Ban said the Prime Minister had shown him Israeli encroachment on areas envisioned as part of an eventual Palestinian State. "Palestinians need to be able to use more of their land — for housing, agriculture, industry, water, construction materials and more," he stressed, adding that he had strongly advised the Israeli authorities of that need when addressing their security concerns.

He said that, while visiting the West Bank, he had been impressed by "the Palestinian determination to build positive facts from the ground up as a complement to the political process", and had confirmed United Nations support for those efforts. He had also expressed concern about the displacement of Palestinians and continuing violence where Israeli forces were present in Palestinian-populated areas.

As for Gaza, Mr. Ban said he had driven nearly "a full circuit of the Strip", seeing much that still lay in ruins as well as "a visible security presence by the de facto authorities". Meeting with civil society and business leaders in Khan Younis, he had agreed with them that the closure of Gaza was morally unacceptable and counterproductive. Briefed by United Nations staff about difficulties in every sector, he had been struck by the situation of youth, whose numbers were increasing rapidly amid high population growth. More schools were needed, but materials were lacking, he said, welcoming recent Israeli decisions to allow in some more materials, but noting that they represented "only a first and very modest step".

Visiting Israel, the Secretary-General said he had met with President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior officials, who had

stressed that there was no alternative to direct talks if core issues were to be resolved, and pointed to positive steps taken by Israel, including its call for direct negotiations, its removal of obstacles to movement, the Government's commitment to a two-State solution and its policy of partial settlement restraint.

However, the Prime Minister had reiterated that Israel would not freeze the construction of settlements in East Jerusalem, said Mr. Ban, stressing that all parties must do everything possible to facilitate proximity talks. The Israelis had acknowledged significant progress by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, pledging their readiness to do more to enable progress, while expressing their concern that peace protests not turn violent.

Recalling that his Israeli interlocutors had expressed frustration with the situation in Lebanon, where they believed Hizbullah was "rearming at an alarming rate", he said he had conveyed his understanding of their legitimate security concerns, as well as those of all parties, amid continuing efforts for the implementation of United Nations resolutions on Lebanon. "At the same time, I conveyed my belief that a genuine and viable peace process, leading to the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as envisaged in other resolutions of this Council, is the key to long-term stability in the region."

The Israelis had also related their concerns about the Iran nuclear issue, the Secretary-General said, adding that he had pointed out the existence of an international consensus to address that question, and the crucial diplomatic process under way. "I emphasized the need to approach the matter in this context," he said.

The meeting began at 10:17 a.m. and ended at 10:35 a.m.

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