As delivered

SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REMARKS TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

NEW YORK, 18 APRIL 2016

Thank you for this opportunity to brief the Council on the situation in the Middle East.

In just a few days, the Jewish people will celebrate one of Judaism's most important holidays — Passover. I extend my best wishes to my Jewish friends and colleagues for a happy and peaceful holiday.

Allow me to begin with my visit to Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia three weeks ago with the President of the World Bank, Dr. Jim Yong Kim.

Our trip sought to highlight the need to increase development assistance through innovative financing mechanisms for countries like Lebanon and Jordan that are disproportionately impacted by the conflict in Syria.

Last Friday, together with the Presidents of the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank, I co-chaired a ministerial-level conference to garner the financial support for this initiative.

I am pleased to inform you that we had an encouraging response. Eight countries and the European Union generously pledged $1 billion for a concessional loan facility, $141 million in grants, and $500 million for a guarantee facility.

In addition, many other countries expressed support for this innovative initiative and their intention to provide financial support.

I hope donors will continue to respond to this effort to invest in peace and stability in this region.

For over six months, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory have been gripped by a surge in violence, triggered by individual terrorist attacks by Palestinians. Some 30 Israelis and two hundred Palestinians have been killed, with most of the Palestinians killed while reportedly carrying out knife, gun or car-ramming attacks.

I condemn all such attacks unreservedly. There can never be any justification for stabbings, vehicle attacks, shootings, incitements to violence, or the glorification of killers.

I welcome the joint Palestinian-Israeli efforts that have contributed to a reduction of tensions in recent weeks. However, these latest killings have only deepened the divisiveness, hatred and grief.

I also welcome ongoing Israeli-Palestinian security discussions on Area A. I urge all sides to recognise the risks of failing to reach a lasting understanding on this pressing matter.

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I acknowledge the recent public statements by President Abbas, rejecting violence and terror and firmly supporting continued security coordination with Israel.

President Abbas and I discussed the importance of these and other issues in Amman on 27 March. I encourage more such statements, backed by concrete actions.

Israelis and Palestinians need their leaders to elevate public discourse above mutual accusations, and to engage in a constructive dialogue that can rebuild the trust that has all but evaporated.

The Middle East Quartet is moving forward on a report that will review the situation on the ground, the threats to a two-state solution, and provide recommendations on how to advance peace.

The report is intended to help inform international discussions to advance the two-state solution: a sovereign and independent State of Palestine living side by side in peace and security with the State of Israel.

Tragically, this solution seems more distant than it has for many decades. A twenty-year-old Palestinian living under occupation has seen no political progress at all during his or her lifetime.

Impatience and despair at that fact is one of the root causes of the violence that blights Israeli and Palestinian communities, prevents economic development and growth, and denies the human potential of millions of people.

It is incumbent on all of us to do everything in our power to secure lasting peace.

Our collective efforts face dynamics in Israel and Palestine that call into question the willingness of the parties to overcome the hurdles to peace.

Israel continues to demolish Palestinian structures in the occupied West Bank at an alarming rate. The total number of demolitions in 2015 was exceeded in early April this year. More than 840 people have been displaced.

Most of the structures concerned are deemed "illegal" by Israel, because they were built without permits. Yet Israel makes it almost impossible for Palestinians to acquire permits.

These acts raise concerns that Israel intends to implement over 11,000 outstanding demolition orders in Area C of the West Bank.

I am also concerned by the continued punitive demolitions of homes belonging to families of alleged Palestinian perpetrators of attacks against Israelis.

Punitive demolitions are a form of collective punishment, which is prohibited under international law. They are unproven as a deterrent; and they fuel tensions by exacerbating feelings of injustice and hatred.

Meanwhile, settlement plans and retroactive legalizations continue to advance in almost untraceable steps through the complicated planning process.

These steps, together with last month's declaration of "state land" – the first in over 18 months – signal that Israel's strategic settlement enterprise continues to expand on land intended for a future Palestinian state. I once again reiterate that settlements are illegal under international law and undermine the two-state solution.

The creation of new facts on the ground through demolitions and settlement building raises questions about whether Israel's ultimate goal is, in fact, to drive Palestinians out of certain parts of the West Bank, thereby undermining any prospect of transition to a viable Palestinian state.

On the Palestinian political front, I regret the continued failure of intra-Palestinian discussions to achieve genuine unity on the basis of non-violence, democracy and the PLO principles.

I reiterate my call on Palestinian factions to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation, which is integral to reaching the goal of Palestinian statehood and to securing a just and lasting resolution of the conflict. It is imperative for all factions to ensure that both Gaza and the West Bank are returned to the control of a single, democratic and legitimate Palestinian authority.

I am extremely concerned by today's announcement on the uncovering of a tunnel crossing from Gaza into Israel – the first such discovery since the 2014 Gaza conflict. I strongly condemn the construction of attack tunnels as dangerous and provocative moves that not only threaten the lives of Israelis and Palestinians, but also undermine efforts to rebuild Gaza. Further, three rockets were fired from Gaza on 14 April towards Israel, all of which landed short of Israel. No injuries were reported.

I call upon all parties to refrain from any actions that could lead to renewed conflict in Gaza.

The Palestinian Government has laid out an ambitious $3.8 billion agenda for stabilizing Gaza, repairing damage from the 2014 conflict, and getting a recovery underway.

Economic development and rebuilding critical electricity and water infrastructure are essential. On 8 April, the Gaza Power Plant shut down, meaning that residents of Gaza are now supplied with electricity for just four to six hours per day.

More than a year and a half after the conflict in Gaza, these conditions are intolerable. I strongly encourage all Member States to fulfil their commitments to support the reconstruction and development of Gaza.

More positively, on 3 April, Israel expanded the Gaza fishing zone from six miles to nine nautical miles. I welcome this development and encourage Israel to expedite further easing measures to support the long-suffering people of Gaza.

Turning briefly to Lebanon, I had the opportunity to address political and security issue with Lebanese leaders in Beirut on 24 and 25 March, consistent with the concerns of this Council.

These include:

The importance of preserving Lebanon's model of pluralism and coexistence from regional tensions;

The urgency of electing a President without further delay;

The need for all parties to work with Prime Minister Tammam Salam to enable the Government to function effectively and to continue to engage in political dialogue;

The importance of sustained international support for the Lebanese Armed Forces;

And the expectation that both Lebanon and Israel work to consolidate stability along the Blue Line and advance the implementation of resolution 1701.

I also discussed the importance of actively supporting the work of UNRWA, particularly in light of the recent build-up of tensions in Palestinian camps, including a car bomb on 12 April which killed a camp official near Ein el Hilweh.

Turning to the Golan, I note the statements made yesterday by Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel. This is a longstanding issue that all parties have a responsibility to help resolve. I remind Israel of its obligation to implement Security Council Resolutions 242 and 497 in all of their parts.

The path out of the current political deadlock requires commitment, compromise, mutual respect and leadership on both sides.

It also requires the acceptance – demonstrated by deeds as well as words – that the two-state solution is the only road to peace that meets the national aspirations of both peoples:

Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace, security and mutual recognition.

Thank you.