THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

REMARKS TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST, INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

New York, 15 September 2016
[as delivered]

First of all, I would like to thank Foreign Minister [Murray] McCully for organizing this meeting at a crucially important time.

Before I say something, allow me to begin by wishing all Muslims who celebrated this week, "Eid Adha Mubarak".

I also want to reiterate my hope for a swift and full recovery of former Israeli President Shimon Peres, who has been tireless in seeking peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Twenty-three years ago, almost to the day, the first Oslo Accord was signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

Unfortunately, we are further than ever from its goals. The two-state solution is at risk of being replaced by a one-state reality of perpetual violence and occupation.

Despite warnings by the international community and the region, leaders on both sides have failed to take the difficult steps needed for peace.

Just yesterday, militants in Gaza fired yet another rocket into Israel, which I condemn. Israel fired four missiles at targets in Gaza in response. Once again I reiterate that such attacks and the response they elicit do not serve the cause of peace.

In the past two weeks alone, plans were advanced for yet another 463 housing units in four settlements in Area C of the occupied West Bank. Official Israeli data shows that the second quarter of 2016 had the highest number of construction starts in three years.

The decades-long policy that has settled more than 500,000 Israelis in Palestinian territory is diametrically opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state.

Regrettably, the reporting period also saw the continuation of statements by both sides that only perpetuate an environment of mistrust.

I am disturbed by a recent statement by Israel's Prime Minister portraying those who oppose settlement expansion as supporters of ethnic cleansing. This is unacceptable and outrageous.

Let me be absolutely clear: settlements are illegal under international law. The occupation, stifling and oppressive, must end.

The international community, including the Security Council and the Middle East Quartet, universally views the expansion of settlements as an obstacle to peace.

I continue to be appalled that Palestinian parties choose to praise despicable acts, such as the 1972 terrorist attack against Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. The glorification of terror is disgraceful and the Palestinian leadership must put an end to it.

As Palestinians prepare for the first local elections in over ten years, we see increasing threats to the electoral process and the credibility of elected institutions, including politically motivated attacks and a growing number of questionable rulings.

I am particularly concerned by last week's decision of the Palestinian High Court to suspend all preparations while deliberations continue on a petition to cancel elections.

Local elections in the West Bank and Gaza, if held in line with international standards, could provide an important renewal of Palestinian democracy and a first step towards advancing national unity.

Regional efforts to encourage reconciliation and strengthen moderate political forces can also play a positive role.

Turning to Gaza, there has been progress in the two years since the 2014 ceasefire.

Houses, hospitals, schools and critical infrastructure have been repaired, thanks to generous donors and good cooperation between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the United Nations.

At the same time, 65,000 people remain displaced. More assistance is needed to rebuild nearly 5,000 destroyed houses. More coordination is required to accelerate ongoing reconstruction.

Since 2014, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism has facilitated the entry of more than 1.5 million tons of construction material and helped significantly boost imports into Gaza, positively impacting the private sector.

Israel has legitimate security concerns with regard to the smuggling or seizure of materials. Nevertheless, the mechanism is closely monitored and all sides continue to ensure that appropriate controls are in place for aid to reach its intended recipients.

I encourage Israel and the Palestinian Authority to continue their cooperation with the United Nations, and facilitate the import of reconstruction materials that are so vital to rebuilding people's lives, while ensuring that materials are not diverted for military use.

Apart from reconstruction, Gaza's humanitarian needs run deep.

More than 1.3 million of its 1.9 million people need assistance. Continued humanitarian access and funding services to the Palestinian population in Gaza remain critical.

In this dire context, UNRWA continues to face serious financial challenges. I appeal to Member States for their generosity to ensure that UNRWA can carry out its activities effectively and in a predictable manner.

Looking at the broader situation, Gaza remains under closures and is a ticking time bomb.

Instability and the risk of violent escalation are ever-present. The continued arms build-up and militant activities by Hamas and other radical groups keep both sides of the border in a state of constant alert.

The continued humanitarian deprivations of Gaza's nearly two million residents smother dreams and ambitions, and feed instability and extremism.

The corrosive Palestinian political divide worsens the humanitarian situation and stifles development. And the absence of a government of national unity, espousing the principles upon which to build peace, inhibits the realization of an end to the occupation and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state.

In its July report, the Quartet highlighted these complex political, security and socio-economic dynamics in Gaza as one of the negative trends severely undermining hopes for peace.

Lasting progress in Gaza can only be realized on the basis of Palestinian unity, an end to the illicit arms buildup and militant activities, and a full lifting of movement and access restrictions in line with Security Council Resolution 1860.

Turning to the Golan, I remain concerned by the continued breaches of the ceasefire line, and by fighting in the areas of separation and limitation. These developments undermine the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement, and jeopardise the ceasefire between Israel and Syria.

In particular, recent fire from the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, impacted the Israeli-occupied Golan. On both occasions, Israeli Defense Forces responded with an airstrike. I call on Israel and Syria to abide by the terms of the Disengagement Agreement and exercise maximum restraint.

In a matter of days, the Ad-hoc Liaison Committee will meet here in New York. I encourage both sides to focus on positive policy shifts, consistent with the transition to greater Palestinian civil authority in Area C, contemplated by prior agreements.

To this end, I welcome the parties' recent agreement on outstanding electricity debts and the creation of a new energy market, which will transfer authority to the Palestinian Government for the management of energy infrastructure. Such steps, echoing the intentions of Oslo, are critical to the viability of a future Palestinian state.

At the same time, international stakeholders must continue to work towards a negotiated end to the occupation, now entering its 50th year, and the establishment of a viable, democratic Palestine which lives in peace with Israel — each respecting the other's historic and religious connections to this holy land.

Building on its report, the Quartet will continue its role to promote consensus to that end.

I wish to thank my Special Coordinator, Nickolay Mladenov, for his unwavering commitment and continued engagement with the parties in what remains a challenging context.

For the sake of regional and indeed global peace, we must intensify our efforts to encourage the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to take the difficult steps to change the destructive trajectory currently leading us towards a one-state reality.

Thank you very much.

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