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MOMENTUM SLIPPING FOR TWO-STATE SOLUTION, BUT RECENT ‘RESOUNDING ENDORSEMENT’

OF PALESTINIAN GOALS WILL MAKE 2013 DECISIVE YEAR, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

As 2012 drew to a close, momentum was slipping for a two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and tensions on the ground were worsening after the upgrade of Palestinian status in the General Assembly last month, the United Nations political affairs chief told the Security Council today, calling on all stakeholders to put bitterness aside to focus on the hard, practical work of forging an agreement in the year ahead.

“Whatever it may mean in a practical sense, the General Assembly vote last month symbolizes the growing international impatience with the longstanding occupation and a resounding endorsement of Palestinian aspirations to live in freedom and dignity in an independent State of their own, and side by side with Israel in peace and security,” said Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs in the regular monthly briefing on the situation, which also included an update on the crisis in Syria and its effects on Lebanon.

He predicted that 2013 would be “a decisive year in the peace process”. Noting the pain and anguish, disillusionment, fear and frustration on both sides, he called for empathy for both peoples. “At the same time,” he cautioned, “we must not allow the airing of bitterness and grievance, however strongly felt, to be a substitute for the constructive, hard work of practical, tangible conflict resolution”.

He said that recent events showed the degree to which the momentum towards the two-State option had declined. Recounting the 29 November status vote, he stressed that there remained no substitute for negotiations for the two-State solution. Rather, the vote underscored the urgency of a resumption of meaningful talks.

He also recalled that the Secretary-General, “dismayed by some of the language used by various parties on the occasion of this vote”, also appealed to all concerned to act responsibly, and that he expressed, in addition, grave concern and disappointment at the Israeli announcement, in the wake of the vote, of approvals for 3,000 housing units in the West Bank and acceleration of other settlement construction. He strongly urged the Israeli Government to heed the wide international calls to rescind the plans, maintaining that they presented a further obstacle to peace.

Further, a unilateral Israeli decision to use Palestinian funds to pay for electricity services undermined the integrity of the Palestinian Authority, he said. In addition, withholding Palestinian revenues casts doubt about Israeli compliance with previous agreements and came at a time when the Authority already faced a dire fiscal situation. It also provoked demonstrations. He called on Israel to resume the revenue transfers without delay, affirming the importance of direct talks to resolve any outstanding financial claims, and he conveyed the Secretary-General's hope that Arab States and others who pledged to compensate the Authority for any revenue lost as a result of retaliatory measures for the Assembly vote would swiftly disburse such funds.

A dangerous standoff, he said, had emerged after Authority President Mahmoud Abbas stated that the Israeli announcement related to section E1 of the West Bank had crossed what he described as a "red-line", in the context of approaching other international bodies following the Assembly vote. It was vital that the parties avoided confrontational statements and negative steps that further complicated a return to negotiations, he said. On 12 December, Quartet envoys had met to discuss to head off escalation diplomatically and on the ground and how new impetus for negotiations could be engendered. He pledged the continued United Nations active engagement towards that end.

The backdrop to such efforts was a worsening security situation in the West Bank, a fragile calm in Gaza after last month's hostilities and a "shifting geopolitical landscape in the region", he stated. From 27 November to 17 December, a total of 182 Israeli operations had resulted in two Palestinians killed, 159 injured and 182 arrested, while seven Israeli soldiers were also injured. Of particular concern were the reported arrests of several members of Palestinian security forces and intelligence.

He described confrontations between Israeli soldiers in Nablus and Hebron, the latter of which had resulted in the shooting of a Palestinian teenager. Riots had followed and more than 20 Palestinians had been injured. Confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli settlers occurred almost daily. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed revulsion over a spate of Israeli vandalism, he said. Israeli security forces had demolished 14 structures in the occupied West Bank, displacing 41 Palestinians and raided the Ramallah headquarters of three Palestinian non-Governmental organizations.

Three members of the Palestinian Legislative Council had been sentenced to six months of administrative detention, he said, expressing alarm over the November arrests of more than 500 Palestinians in the West Bank. He also expressed continued concern over the approximately 4,400 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention, particularly those reportedly continuing hunger strikes. He noted that Israeli authorities had resumed family visits for Gazan prisoners jailed in Israel.

On 12 December, he said, the Palestinian Cabinet had announced that the second round of local elections would take place on 22 December after being postponed due to the outbreak of violence in Gaza. The calm brokered by Egypt on 21 November had largely held but remained tenuous. Since the last briefing, rocket attacks, tank shelling, two Israeli incursions and other violent incidents had been reported. On the humanitarian front, an estimated \$80 million was needed until through the first months of 2013, he said.

He added that the ceasefire provided an opportunity to address the underlying causes of conflict captured in resolution 1860 (2009), which stressed the urgency of an immediate, durable and fully respected cessation of violence, leading to the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. The parties must agree on policy changes that addressed the causes of

instability in the enclave and must include an end of weapons smuggling and a full opening of crossings.

While the United Nations commended Palestinian reconciliation, he said, it condemned Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal's inflammatory remarks regarding Israel and rejected any attempt to promote violence as a way to achieve political goals or deny Israel's right to exist. Israel had legitimate security concerns, and ignoring or dismissing those undermined the prospects for a two-State solution.

Turning to the Syrian situation, he said as violence and military confrontation had escalated dangerously, the Council should remind those engaged in the hostilities of their obligations to abide by international humanitarian law and stress the consequences for those who failed to do so.

Two days ago, he reported, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos had briefed the Council in private consultations, stressing the severity of the crisis and noting that more than half a million people had fled the violence, with refugees flooding neighbouring countries. While it was important that Syria's neighbours continued to allow those fleeing violence to enter their countries, the international community's priority should be helping those welcoming States, he said, asking donors to contribute more generously since only half the funding needed had been received.

The military approach pursued by both sides had devastating costs in terms of human lives and destruction and bred a serious risk of sectarian and communal strife, he said. "If nothing is done to change the current dynamic and to move towards a political solution, the destruction of Syria, will be the likely outcome," he said.

In addition, fears that the Syrian conflict would threaten stability and security in neighbouring countries had intensified and had already directly affected the mandate of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), which monitored the ceasefire in the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria. Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous told the Council on Monday of reports of daily clashes between the Syrian army and armed opposition and direct or indirect fire on UNDOF positions or envoys, including one incident on 29 November that had injured five peacekeepers. The Syrian Government was responsible for the safety and security of UNDOF personnel in relevant areas.

The situation in Lebanon remained severely affected, with border shelling and arms smuggling, he said. Reports suggested that there were Lebanese implicated in Syria's violence, violating the Lebanese Government's "dissociation" policy. Clashes near the town of Tal Kalakh in Syria killed 14 Lebanese fighters on 30 November, he said, commending the Lebanese Armed Forces for containing threats to the country's security and stability.

The situation in the area of operations of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) remained generally quiet except for an explosion on 17 December near the village of Tayr Haifa, which was being investigated. The increased operational tempo of UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces during recent hostilities in Gaza had reverted to previous levels, and UNIFIL maintained its enhanced presence across its area of operations as the Lebanese forces continued to operate at a lower strength level. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace had continued on an almost daily basis.

The meeting began at 10:18 a.m. and ended at 10:51 a.m., at which time Council members were invited into consultations on the Middle East, as previously agreed.

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