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ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT 'NO LESS URGENT', SECRETARY-GENERAL STRESSES AMID FEARS THAT SYRIA CRISIS COULD ENGULF ALREADY TENSE REGION

He Says Coming Weeks 'Critical' for Resuming Peace Talks as Committee Chairman Calls Meeting Attempt to 'Salvage Two-State Solution'

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

BEIJING, 18 June – With regional tensions rising over relentless fighting in Syria, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said today that “we must not lose sight of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict”, the resolution of which was no less urgent, as he called for a clear political horizon to break the impasse and maximize the present momentum.

“The coming weeks will be critical,” Secretary-General Ban said in a message delivered by Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to the United Nations Asia and Pacific International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace.

“I cannot stress enough the risk of missing the current window of opportunity,” he told the dozens of Government representatives, academics, regional experts and civil society representatives gathered in Beijing to discuss reviving the collective international engagement towards a two-State solution.

He told the Meeting, organized by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People on 18 and 19 June, that it was imperative that the international community work collectively to make 2013 a positive year for Israeli-Palestinian peace and for peace across the whole region.

Similarly, Mr. Fernandez-Taranco said in his keynote address he hoped that with the decisive momentum created by the United States and support from the international community, the parties would demonstrate the political courage necessary to overcome decades of mistrust and conflict, and engage in meaningful negotiations. However, “the odds are not favourable”, he cautioned, pointing out that the gap between the parties was widening, with mistrust and scepticism at an “all-time high”. Peacemaking in such conditions was daunting, and some would say that the “time is not right and the situation is not ripe, or that it is already too late”.

While that might be true, “we have no other choice than keep trying”, he said. Providing a credible diplomatic horizon required the concerted action and support of the international community as well as key regional stakeholders, he said, pledging United Nations support for any credible initiative. At the same time, he warned that rushing the parties back to the table without the necessary framework in place, as well as “buy-in” from both sides, would be counter-productive. “The risk and price of failure are too high.”

Bassam Al-Salhi, Secretary-General of the Palestinian People’s Party, member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and representative of the State of Palestine, welcomed the Chinese vision for peace and

the role it could play, alongside the Russian Federation, the European Union and all Security Council members, in achieving peace “on the ruins of occupation, aggression and racism”. He expressed profound appreciation for China’s principled position in declaring its support for the 2011 application by the State of Palestine for admission to full United Nations membership.

“The international community cannot allow the current regional and international efforts to fail,” he declared. There was an urgent need to salvage the prospects for peace. Good intentions alone would not suffice under the current circumstances, and the international community must be firm in demanding Israel’s compliance with all its legal obligations while making clear that continued violations “will be met with measures of accountability”.

Stressing that continuing on the current path was unsustainable, he said: “Either we change course, where the law and rights are primary, or we must face the closure of the window of opportunity that remains to realize the historic compromise of two States and the onset of a new era and a search for alternative solutions to achieve peace and freedom, rights, justice and dignity” that the Palestinian people had too long been denied, and for which they would never give up striving.

Ma Zhaoxu, Assistant Foreign Minister of China, said the Palestinian question “is the core of the Middle East issue”. To realize peace between Palestine and Israel, in accordance with the two-State solution, was the expectation of people across the region and the international community. The Government and people of China firmly supported the just cause of the Palestinian people as well as the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, he said. They also supported the establishment of an independent State of Palestine enjoying full sovereignty on the basis of the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, as well as the peaceful coexistence of Palestine and Israel through peace talks and enhanced peace and stability in the Middle East.

He recalled that last month, having hosted the Palestinian President and Israeli Prime Minister on separate visits, President Xi Jinping had raised a four-point proposal for settlement of the Palestinian question. They included a redoubling of efforts to promote peace talks; upholding principles and consensus; accomplishing easier tasks before moving on to more difficult ones; and seeking a comprehensive solution while advancing, simultaneously, the dual tracks of political negotiations and improving livelihoods. Ending the violence and embracing peace was the shared aspiration, he said, expressing hope that the Meeting would help pool the wisdom of all parties, boost confidence in peace and advance the talks.

Abdou Salam Diallo (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, commended China for its historically staunch support of the Palestinian people and the Committee. He said the Meeting’s official theme of reviving collective engagement towards a two-State solution might well be thought of as “salvaging” the two-State solution, which was “on life support”, a victim of ever-expanding illegal settlements, public disillusionment, the international community’s impotence, intractable domestic politics and the changing regional environment.

Opening Remarks

BAN KI-MOON, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said the parties must sustain and translate the fragile hope created by the renewed efforts of the United States into action. Encouraged also by “the recent commitment by Arab leaders to revive the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, with its promise for regional stability”, he urged the Government of Israel to “respond positively to this offer”.

Achieving a negotiated two-State solution that ended the occupation, in line with Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), and resolved the core issues was long overdue, he said, adding, however, that he was “deeply troubled” by Israeli’s settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which “is illegal under international law”. Indeed, settlement activity was “deepening the Palestinian people’s mistrust in the seriousness of the Israeli side about achieving peace”.

It also risked rendering a two-State solution impossible, he warned, emphasizing that Israel must abide

by its commitments under the Road Map to freeze all settlement activity and dismantle outposts erected after 2001. Of particular concern was the situation in East Jerusalem, where continuing settlement expansion was accompanied by home demolitions, forced evictions, land expropriation and displacement of Palestinians. "The international community does not recognize Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, which remains part of the Occupied Palestinian Territory subject to the terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention," he pointed out.

Progress towards peace, he said, required tangible confidence-building measures and ensuring the viability of Palestinian State-building efforts and improved living conditions for all Palestinians. Appealing to the international community to ensure "continued and predictable financial support" for the Palestinian Authority, he said special attention was also needed to sustain the efforts of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), including contributions beyond those of traditional donors.

He went on to note that the deteriorating conditions of the Gaza Strip's civilian population remained a source of alarm, adding that the seven-year closure continued to cause serious humanitarian consequences, including, but far from limited to, a lack of sufficient safe drinking water. "I call for a complete opening of crossings into Gaza to allow legitimate trade and movements of people," he said. At the same time, Israel's legitimate security concerns must be addressed by continuing to thwart militant attacks and preventing the smuggling of weapons.

Last November's ceasefire remained the best opportunity to start changing the negative dynamics in Gaza, he continued. All sides must exert maximum effort to preserve the ceasefire and its basic tenets, adhering to a full calm and lifting the closure. The United Nations continued to support Egyptian efforts in that regard as well as all efforts to promote Palestinian reconciliation within the framework of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) commitments and under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas, which was an indispensable part of a permanent settlement.

BASSAM AL-SALHI, Secretary-General of the Palestinian People's Party, member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and representative of the State of Palestine, affirmed his gratitude for China's long-standing support to the Palestinian people over the decades – politically, developmentally, and morally – and expressed appreciation for that country's role in facilitating the revival of a substantive, credible peace process. In that connection, serious efforts were being made to salvage the two-State solution, following decades of Israel's relentless pursuit of illegal policies aimed at the colonization and de facto annexation of Palestinian land, as well as the oppression of the people, leading to "repeated failure" of the peace process. The prospects for reviving that process were once again in jeopardy as Israel continued to disrespect international law, violate United Nations resolutions and disregard the international consensus.

ABDOU SALAM DIALLO (Senegal), Committee Chairman, commended China's historically staunch support of the Palestinian people and the Committee, saying that the energetic shuttle diplomacy by Secretary of State John Kerry of the United States "might be a last-ditch effort to resuscitate the peace process and the two-State vision". That was why a collective push was needed to remove obstacles, support peace talks, coordinate initiatives, rebuild confidence and increase assistance to the Palestinians.

"Some pieces of the puzzle are falling into place," he said, noting that the "retooled" peace initiative of the League of Arab States reaffirmed a supportive regional framework for renewed Israeli-Palestinian engagement. The four-point proposal advanced by President Xi Jinping during visits to China by President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in May offered an important blueprint for peace. The tireless shuttle diplomacy by Chinese Special Envoy Wu Sike also deserved appreciation. "The ball is now in the Israeli court to present its vision for peace," he said.

Meaningful progress also required Palestinian unity, but admittedly, other pieces of the puzzle were still missing, he acknowledged. For example, there was little reason for the Palestinians to pursue new agreements as long as Israel was allowed to get away with ignoring its existing commitments in the spheres of settlements, prisoners and the 1967 borders. Countries professing support for international law should go beyond rhetoric, such as criticizing settlements, and consider practical steps to discourage their expansion,

he stressed.

Keynote Address

OSCAR FERNANDEZ-TARANCO, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said it was a historic moment for the region and potentially a turning point for long-standing efforts to reach a negotiated two-State solution. The United Nations Secretariat firmly believed that achieving a two-State solution was “more urgent than ever in the increasingly unstable regional context”, and negotiations were the only way forward. The status quo was “not acceptable and cannot be continued – especially at a time when the region is re-awakening to the people’s legitimate aspirations to freedom, justice and dignity and undergoing profound transformations, but also grappling with deepening social and geopolitical divides and the dangerous consequences of the Syrian conflict”.

Failure to make substantial progress would only prolong the suffering, violence and instability, he continued. The re-engagement by the United States in March represented the first real opportunity since October 2010 to reach a final status agreement. That would require enormous political will and courage from each side, a meaningful framework and time frame, as well as a conducive environment. What was at stake was the fate and viability of the two-State solution and of the Middle East peace process as it had been envisaged since the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo Accords, now almost 20 years old.

It would be a mistake to think the current situation could be sustained or simply managed, he said, warning that it was not static, but steadily eroding and at risk of brutally deteriorating at any time. Palestinians were faced with the continuing reality of military occupation, illegal settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and closure in Gaza. Israelis continued to live in fear of indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza and had understandable and legitimate security concerns in a complex and difficult regional context.

He said tensions had been mounting in the West Bank over two critical issues: Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, and settlement expansion. There were also troubling tensions around the sensitive issue of Jerusalem, including restrictions of access to holy sites. It remained the view of the United Nations that Jerusalem – a final status issue – should emerge through negotiations as the capital of two States, living side-by-side in peace and security, with arrangements for the holy sites that were acceptable to all.

In the absence of a final status agreement, the financial and political viability of Palestinian institutions, and of the Palestinian State, was at stake, he said. That was a source of social tensions in the West Bank, which had witnessed a series of strikes by civil servants, particularly in the education sector. He called on donors to accelerate the provision of timely and predictable assistance to stabilize the Palestinian Authority’s finances and to support UNRWA’s indispensable assistance to vulnerable Palestinian refugees “at this critical moment in the region”.

He said the recent “Breaking the Impasse” initiative, led by Israeli and Palestinian businessmen, as well as Secretary of State Kerry’s announcement of a large-scale initiative intended to spur economic growth through private investment in the West Bank and Gaza were hopeful signals. However, sustained growth and private investment would not be forthcoming, and the accomplishments of the Palestinian State-building programme and donor funding would be difficult to maintain, in the absence of progress on the political track.

Difficulties and uncertainties were no less pressing in Gaza, he continued, noting that the ceasefire reached last November “has shown worrying signs of fragility in the last few months, with repeated rockets fired into Israel from Gaza”. Palestinian civilians had been injured by Israeli forces in the buffer zone over the same period, and Kerem Shalom, the only functioning crossing for goods going from Israel into Gaza had periodically been closed in response to rocket fire. Furthermore, the fishing limit had been cut back to three nautical miles for an extended period.

“ Gaza borders should be fully opened for the legitimate movement of persons or goods,” while

respecting and properly addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns, especially on arms smuggling and rocket fire, he said. While none of the steps required was easy, "the risks of missing the current window of opportunity" could not be stressed enough.

Discussion

The representative of Senegal said that China, as a permanent Security Council member, was surely able to have a positive influence on the parties. Re-launching and revitalizing the international commitment to the two-State solution had clearly emerged as the most viable and coherent way to end the crisis when all the historical, political and legal parameters were taken into account.

The representative of Qatar said that despite previous failures, the window of opportunity remained open in the form of the Arab Peace Initiative. Israel must put an "instant end" to its settlement projects, release the prisoners, open Gaza and loosen its grip on the Palestinian economy. The international community, for its part, could not turn a blind eye to Israel's efforts to Judaize Jerusalem, he said, emphasizing that there would be no Palestinian State without Jerusalem, and no Jerusalem without Al-Aqsa Mosque. The international community must discharge its duty and pressure Israel to start genuine negotiations towards a fair settlement based on the two-State solution.

The representative of Malaysia said Israel must realize that its future lay with the establishment of a Palestinian State under the two-State solution based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The representative of Guinea expressed dismay at the fragmentation of Palestinian territory, which, among Israel's other illegal actions, deliberately undermined the two-State solution and raised serious doubts about Israel's commitment to the peace process. Encouraging the parties to resume direct negotiations, he said that he understood that they required renewed international support to overcome the lack of confidence, halt the deterioration of the situation and create the conditions necessary for the resumption of negotiations.

The representative of Pakistan, declaring that the continuing support of the international community was extremely important, said a resumed peace process must have clear benchmarks and deadlines. A sustainable resolution of the conflict lay only with the establishment of an independent, viable and contiguous State of Palestine within the pre-1967 borders and with Al-Quds as its capital. If international actors did not act now, the two-State solution would not remain viable, she said, echoing the view expressed this morning that it was the last chance to take action on a two-State solution. That would benefit not only the Palestinians, but also correct imbalances for Israel, she said, adding that peace would remain elusive in the face of inaction.

The representative of the League of Arab States urged an end to the violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the removal of checkpoints and the cessation of construction of the separation wall. It was also imperative that the Judaization of Jerusalem stop. The future of the Palestinians and of the West Bank and Gaza should be discussed with the States of the region, such as Egypt and Jordan, he said. All indications pointed to Israeli unwillingness to reach peace with the Palestinians, yet the only way to resolve the conflict was through settlement of final status issues.

The United Nations Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace will resume this afternoon.

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