Continue ‘Historic Step’ Taken in 1979, Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace Process Tells Israelis, Palestinians, in Security Council Briefing

May 25, 2016

UN Press Release

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Following an invitation by the President of Egypt to mediate between Palestinian factions, and ahead of a Paris meeting to reaffirm commitment to a two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process today called upon both sides to “continue the historic step taken towards peace by Israel and Egypt” 37 years ago.

“I urge Palestinians and Israeli leaders to engage, through the initiatives that have been put forward, to bring a just, comprehensive and enduring peace to the people of Israel and Palestine,” Nickolay Mladenov told the Security Council via video teleconference from Jerusalem, during its regular monthly briefing on the issue.  “The will to advance towards peace clearly exists,” he said, noting that, according to a recent study, 60 per cent of the Jewish population and more than 70 per cent of Palestinians remained in favour of peace negotiations.  What remained glaringly absent was the political will and bold leadership to make genuine progress a reality.

In addition, he continued, the Paris meeting and other efforts could not be divorced from the “stark reality on the ground that is affecting the lives of Palestinians and Israelis alike”.  Despite a general downward trend in violence, a bomb attack on a bus in Jerusalem that had caused serious injuries had been criticized by President Mahmoud Abbas, but unfortunately praised by some Palestinian factions.  Days later, a pregnant Palestinian mother and her young brother had been shot and killed under questionable circumstances, he said, urging a swift and transparent conclusion of the investigation already initiated.

The beginning of May had seen the biggest escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas since the 2014 conflict, he said.  The Israelis had found tunnels coming from the Gaza Strip and carried out 14 incursions to destroy them; militants had fired 40 mortar rounds and 8 rockets; and Israel had conducted 13 air strikes on targets in the enclave.  A Palestinian woman had been killed by shrapnel, he said, emphasizing that those incidents pointed up the fragility of security.  The ceasefire in Gaza must be vigorously upheld by all sides if another devastating conflict was to be avoided.

In the West Bank, talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials on security arrangements for Area A had all but reached an impasse, he said, urging both sides to work on bridging the gaps.  It was important to strengthen the capabilities of the Palestinian security forces so that security coordination could continue to help in reducing violence, he stressed, welcoming the announcement that Israeli authorities would upgrade the efficiency and capacity of checkpoints, and urging them to make further efforts to ease movement between communities in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

He went on to note that, while the pace of demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian structures had slowed compared to April, more such actions had occurred in 2016 than in the whole of 2015, displacing at least 900 people and otherwise impacting 2,500 others.  In addition, Palestinians faced mounting financial and institutional challenges.  He said he was encouraged, however, that the parties had agreed to work with donors in building a more sustainable Palestinian economy following a meeting in Brussels of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee on 19 April.

Turning to Gaza’s humanitarian situation, he said the international community had a responsibility to help Palestinians there recover from the physical and emotional trauma of war, rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and ultimately to see Gaza and the West Bank reunited and the closures lifted.  In early April, he recalled, Israel had suspended the private importation of cement following the diversion of a substantial amount from its intended legitimate beneficiaries.  However, the suspension had been lifted after 45 days following intense efforts by the United Nations team on the ground.

Noting that Gaza residents currently received only 8 to 12 hours of electricity per day, he said the enclave’s chronic energy and water crisis must be tackled without delay.  Three Palestinian children had died when their house had caught fire from a candle lit during a power cut.  With the additional spectre of violence looming, it was not a question of if, but when another escalation would occur unless more was done to address Gaza’s chronic realities, he warned, calling upon donors to fulfil their commitments to support Gaza’s reconstruction, recovery and development.

In another worrying development, he said, Hamas had recently announced its intention to implement a number of death sentences.  Noting that international law limited the application of the death penalty to the “most serious crimes”, and only pursuant to a trial and an appeals process that scrupulously followed fair-trial standards, he said he doubted that would be the case in that instance.  According to media reports, the sentences could be carried out in public, which was prohibited by international law, he said, urging Hamas not to proceed while calling on President Abbas to establish a moratorium on the death penalty.

Turning briefly to the situation in Lebanon, he said the Council and the Secretary-General had reiterated yesterday their calls for Lebanese political parties to build on the holding of municipal elections by electing a President of the Republic, a post that had now remained vacant for two years.