

Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East and the Palestinian Question, October 15th 2012, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs to the United Nations.

While the world's gaze of concern points elsewhere in the Middle East, the Israeli- Palestinian conflict drifts dangerously in a direction that must be avoided. Both sides maintain their rhetorical commitment to a negotiated peace; however, the creeping realities on the ground and the stalemated diplomacy portray a more worrying situation. Stated intentions to adhere to a two-State solution are not translating into meaningful steps to renewed dialogue on the core issues to be resolved, and this should be a matter of great concern to the Council.

We heard a restatement of these intentions during the speeches of both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas to the General Assembly on 27 September (see A/67/PV.12). At the same time, citing the absence of a political process, President Abbas announced his intention and initial consultations to seek an upgrade of Palestine to non-member State observer status — a move that Israel rejects as unilateral and an impediment to resuming negotiations. We hope that this development can be addressed in a constructive manner, and we remind everyone that a negotiated two- State solution, to which both leaders are committed, must remain the highest priority. We fear, however, that the door for such a solution may be closing before our eyes.

The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of International Assistance to Palestinians (AHLC) meeting of 23 September brought into sharp focus the severe financial crisis that the Palestinian Authority is experiencing as a result of combined shortfalls in domestic revenue, tax income and donor contributions. In his message, the Secretary-General reiterated the United Nations view that the vision of the two-State solution and the institutional achievements of the Palestinian Authority are key elements of stability. Let me repeat today his call for preserving those achievements and for ensuring the Palestinian Authority's fiscal viability by helping to bridge its immediate funding gap. As we have said before, all those States that verbally support the Palestinian people can demonstrate their commitment in a tangible way by offering financial help that provides the Palestinian people with jobs, services and security

The figures speak for themselves. As of 11 October, the Palestinian Authority had not yet set a date for the payment of Government employees' salaries for the month of September. While recent contributions from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Japan, the Netherlands and France are welcome, they do not suffice. A predictable and immediate injection of new funds is required in order to finance the deficit, which is currently projected to reach \$1.3 billion by the end of the year.

The AHLC also called upon Israel to help facilitate the sustainable growth of the Palestinian economy by taking further steps to improve the movement of people and goods, development and trade and exports in Gaza and the West Bank, including in Area C and East Jerusalem. Such steps ought to include measures to address the lack of adequate planning for Palestinian communities, as well as measures to develop socioeconomic infrastructure, such as support to the agricultural sector in Area C — an area fundamental to the contiguity of the West Bank and the viability of a future Palestinian State.

The United Nations welcomes the recent approval by the Government of Israel of 15 schools and health centres in Area C, and hopes to see similar action in the processing of the 32 master plans submitted to the Israeli authorities. Indications that plans for six Palestinian localities may soon be published for ultimate approval are also encouraging. Yet further progress to address the planning needs of over 200 Palestinian communities in Area C remains essential.

Violence and other sources of tension on the ground make it all the more difficult to overcome the political stalemate. We remain concerned about security in the West Bank. Twenty-nine incidents involving settler violence resulted in injuries to 10 Palestinians, as well as damage to property. The Dormition Abbey in East Jerusalem was desecrated with graffiti on 2 October as part of so-called price tag activities.

The annual olive harvest, which has just begun, is an important economic, social and cultural event for Palestinians. However, in recent years, the Israeli military has limited access of Palestinian farmers to their olive groves next to settlements to mitigate the risk of violence. In a particularly disturbing development, approximately 7,000 Palestinian-owned olive trees have been destroyed, damaged or harvested by Israeli settlers since the beginning of 2012. We note that on 4 October, the Israeli police arrested three settlers allegedly involved in so-called price tag activities. We urge the Government of Israel to take effective measures to curtail such acts in the lead up to the harvest season and, more generally, to hold accountable those responsible for violence.

Settlement activity continued. Of note, the outpost of Migron was evacuated to a nearby settlement and the outpost is now used by the Israeli Defence Forces. The United Nations position remains that settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, whether on private land or elsewhere, is illegal under international law and contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map, and should be put to a halt.

On five occasions between 27 September and 7 October, Israeli extremists entered the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound, intending to perform religious rituals. Clashes with Muslim worshippers resulted in injuries to five Palestinians, while Israeli forces arrested a number of Palestinians and Israelis for violation of visiting regulations and disturbance of public order. Also, on 4 October over 1,000 Israelis entered Joseph's Tomb near the city of Nablus to perform religious rituals. Despite prior coordination, this move resulted in clashes with Palestinians. The status of Jerusalem and the religious sites are sensitive issues that will be fully resolved only in final status negotiations. In the meantime, we strongly urge all sides to exercise restraint and safeguard the sanctity of religious sites.

Palestinian attacks against Israelis were, comparatively speaking, on the rise during the reporting period. Four Israelis were injured and material damage was caused. Incidents of stone and Molotov-cocktail throwing at Israeli vehicles travelling in the West Bank were recorded on four occasions. On 10 October, an Israeli was stabbed and injured near the Gush Etzion settlement by a Palestinian, who was subsequently arrested by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).

Citing security concerns, the Israeli Defense Forces had conducted 226 operations in the occupied West Bank as of 9 October, which resulted in 87 Palestinians being injured and 182 arrested. On 25 September, Israeli forces uncovered a weapons cache near Hebron. Almost daily clashes were reported between Israeli forces and Palestinians at the Qalandiya checkpoint. Most injuries took place during Palestinian demonstrations, including against the barrier, which deviates from the Green Line in contravention to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (see A/ES-10/273). Allow me to say that the right of peaceful protest must be upheld and that all protests should be kept strictly non-violent.

Demonstrations also took place on 2 October to protest the plight of Palestinian hunger strikers in Israeli jails. The United Nations continues to call for a reasonable resolution to those cases and recalls its position that the use of administrative detention must be exceptional and of short duration.

Palestinian security forces continued their efforts to preserve law and order in the West Bank. Between 18 and 19 September, they arrested 57 militants affiliated with Hamas throughout the West Bank, which led to the discovery, on 23 September, of a Hamas underground bunker in the village of Urif, near Nablus.

Palestinian local elections are on schedule for 20 October. The Palestinian Central Elections Commission has been carrying out preparations in accordance with the local electoral law and calendar. Some 4,700 candidates were nominated, nearly a fourth of them women, and electoral campaigning commenced on 6 October. Elections will take place in the West Bank only, as the de facto authorities in Gaza have not allowed the Central Elections Commission to proceed with voter registration and related electoral preparations in Gaza. Meanwhile, in Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu recently announced that he will be presenting a bill to dissolve the Knesset in preparation for early elections.

Turning to Gaza, sporadic eruptions of violence were recorded during the reporting period. A serious escalation occurred when, on 7 October, an Israeli air strike killed an alleged militant and seriously injured another, as well as eight civilians. Some 50 rockets and mortars were fired from Gaza into Israel the following day. Another serious escalation took place this past weekend when, on 13 October, an Israeli air strike killed a Salafi leader and his assistant, while two civilians were injured. Yesterday, two Israeli air strikes resulted in three Palestinian militants killed and three injured, including two critically. Overall for the reporting period, a total of 72 rockets and mortars were fired into Israel, resulting in some material damage.

During the same period, Israeli forces conducted three incursions and 11 strikes into Gaza, resulting in the death of 8 alleged Palestinian militants and 1 civilian, as well as injuries to 5 Palestinian militants and 17 civilians, including 4 children. That latest episode demonstrates the continuing fragility of the situation in Gaza and highlights the vulnerability of the civilian population. We continue to condemn all rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel. The de facto authorities have the responsibility to prevent and stop all such attacks. We also urge Israel to show maximum restraint.

We must all work to ensure that calm is realized, the closure regime is lifted and the Palestinian divide ends. Regrettably, there is no new progress to report in ending that divide.

Lifting the closure regime in accordance with resolution 1860 (2009) and Gaza's recovery and longterm economic growth remain fundamental objectives of the United Nations. In that regard, we note the recent transfer of an order of school furniture from Gaza to the West Bank commissioned by the Palestinian Authority. On 19 September, the World Food Programme (WFP) transported 1.2 million fortified date bars produced in Gaza to its West Bank school meals initiative. That WFP initiative was the first such delivery from Gaza to the West bank in five years. Those are positive steps towards reinstating commercial transfers to the West Bank. However, much more is required. Lifting restrictions on the entry of aggregate, iron bar and cement would not only enable the growth of private sector but also provide an additional source of revenue for the Palestinian Authority.

In the meantime, a steady flow of approvals for works involving dual-use material should be maintained. We welcome the recent approval by the Government of Israel of an additional \$38 million worth of project work, including schools, shelters and solidwaste treatment infrastructure, raising the value of United Nations implemented works involving material subject to approval to approximately \$400 million since May 2010.

Turning to the region, tensions on the border between Israel and Egypt raised concern when, on 21 September, three terrorists attacked an IDF position on the Sinai border, and were killed in the ensuing exchange of fire. One IDF soldier was also killed, and another seriously wounded.

A worrying development took place on 6 October, when a drone penetrated Israeli airspace in the northern Negev before being shot down by Israeli forces. Hizbullah Secretary-General Nasrallah has since claimed responsibility for that incident. We note that, in comments reported in the Lebanese media, Lebanese Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour stated that "Lebanon. will definitely assume responsibility for Hizbullah's recent action, because the country is in a confrontation with Israel".

The conflict in Syria, now entering its twentieth month, has reached new and appalling heights of brutality and violence. Available estimates, which the United Nations is not in a position to verify, put the number of people killed at more than 30,000. Syrian cities and villages — some of which are part of our world's heritage — are turning into ruins, and archaeological treasures have been looted and destroyed. Such violence is creating fertile ground for terrorism and criminal actions of all kinds. Human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, torture and summary executions, continue unabated. That includes the continued captivity by the armed opposition of Iranian pilgrims abducted in August. The voices of the peaceful protests that emerged so proudly last year have receded in the tremor of fighting.

Long-standing predictions of the conflict spiralling beyond its borders are coming true, as illustrated by the recent escalation along the Syrian-Turkish border, rounds of small arms fire in the occupied Golan, exchanges of fire into northern Lebanon, as well as a surge in belligerent rhetoric. The Secretary-General has expressed his alarm at the heightened tension between Syria and Turkey following a wave of crossborder shelling that resulted in the death of several Turkish nationals, including children. He has called on the Syrian Government to respect fully the territorial integrity of its neighbours, as well as on all concerned to abandon the use of violence and exercise the maximum restraint.

The Secretary-General has expressed his utmost concern at the continuing militarization of the conflict. He has urged the Syrian Government to declare a ceasefire, to be reciprocated by the opposition armed groups. To succeed, that must be a collective effort by all inside Syria, in the region and beyond. All Governments should desist from supplying arms and military assistance to any party in the conflict, some of which may violate Security Council resolution 1747 (2007). After all the deaths and destruction Syria has suffered, it is plain to see that the conflict cannot be won militarily. And if it were, it would be at an excruciating cost unlikely to lead to a lasting solution that respects the will of the Syrian people.

Our priority remains a political solution, and that is what Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi is trying to help bring about. The Council heard his assessment three weeks ago. He is back in the region as we speak, continuing his discussions with a great sense of urgency and trying to identify the path to a political solution. In his current trip, which has taken him so far to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq and Iran, he is reiterating the Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire and an end to arms transfers to all parties.

Despite growing insecurity and significant challenges on the ground, the United Nations continues to expand aid deliveries. We must press all parties to allow unhindered humanitarian access. As winter approaches, we are very concerned at the continued shortfalls in our appeals for funding. As of 11 October, the \$348 million United Nations revised humanitarian plan for Syria was only 40 per cent funded. We urge donors to contribute more generously to address the growing needs of over 2.5 million civilians inside Syria, including over 1.2 million internally displaced persons. Those numbers are increasing by the day. Resources are also urgently required to assist the over 330,000 refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

It is important to preserve calm in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) area of operations, where there is a risk of increased tensions, as illustrated by several security incidents since our last briefing. UNDOF observed an exchange of weapons between groups crossing the border into Syria from Lebanon on 27 September. Deadly incidents involving armed elements from Lebanon and Syrian security forces were also observed by UNDOF in its area of operations on 20 and 29 September.

Finally, on 9 October, soldiers from the Syrian Arab Armed Forces fired shots at two members of Observer Group Golan in a clearly marked United Nations vehicle in the northern part of the area of limitation. Syrian authorities were informed and are investigating the incident. Separately, while the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan has remained relatively stable, the Syrian Arab Republic has sent an official

letter complaining about several incidents, including injuries sustained by Syrian children from a landmine explosion on 4 October.

Despite overcoming a spate of security incidents and tensions over the summer, Lebanon continues to be dangerously exposed to spillover from the conflict in Syria. Areas bordering Syria remain volatile, with regular cross-border shelling, including close to Lebanese villages in the northern region of Akkar, some of them several kilometres from the border. The Lebanese Armed Forces stated that it would not allow any side to use Lebanese territory to draw Lebanon into neighbouring tensions, and reaffirmed its determination to confront any violations of Lebanese territory.

However, there continue to be reports of crossborder arms smuggling. On 25 September, for example, a truckload of weapons and military equipment was seized by the Lebanese Armed Forces en route to the Lebanese-Syrian border. After the release on 25 September of a second member of the group of Lebanese pilgrims abducted in Syria in May, nine still remain held.

Of great concern are fresh reports suggesting involvement by Lebanese political forces in support of the parties to the conflict in Syria. Moreover, the explosion on 3 October of an arms depot in the Beka'a Valley town of Al-Nabi Shayth, in which three Hizbullah militants were killed and several other people wounded, was also a reminder of the risk posed by the presence of arms held by non-State actors.

Lebanese public opinion is deeply polarized regarding developments in Syria. Against that backdrop, it is all the more important that the Lebanese Government and political leaders across the spectrum continue to work to preserve Lebanon's unity and stability. Prime Minister Mikati's reaffirmation on 27 September before the General Assembly of Lebanon's policy of disassociation was welcome (see A/67/PV.14). We hope that Hizbullah, too, will fully respect the disassociation policy of the Government in which Hizbullah participates.

We also welcome President Sleiman's initiative in the national dialogue on 20 September to present a first vision for a national defence strategy, including in respect of Hizbullah's arms, which participants agreed to consider as a basis of discussion. The next session of the national dialogue is set for November. We hope that all Lebanese leaders will seize the opportunity to overcome outstanding divergences with a view to realizing such a strategy in the national interest. In the current regional context, it is in the interest of Lebanon's continued stability that all Lebanese parties continue to exercise restraint and work cooperatively in preparation for the 2013 parliamentary elections.

In contrast with the ongoing volatility in the region, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) area of operations remained generally calm. The number of air violations and mostly inadvertent ground violations of the Blue Line, however, remained relatively high. Despite the temporary redeployment of units of the Lebanese Armed Forces from the UNIFIL area of operations to address security requirements elsewhere in Lebanon, the level of cooperation between the two forces has remained broadly the same. Both parties have an interest in building on this period of calm to protect the achievements along the Blue Line from regional tensions and to take steps to strengthen the cessation of hostilities.

Let me conclude with a reminder that, amid the seismic shifts being felt throughout the Middle East, we cannot afford to be complacent to the persisting deadlock between the Israelis and Palestinians. Despite their apprehensions, understandable in part, neither the parties nor the Council can be impervious to the warning signs of a fading two-State solution. We were all sobered by last month's events in the West Bank. The window of opportunity for taking constructive action to preserve the two-State solution may now be becoming more limited. There is no alternative, sustainable and just solution to negotiated peace. We must therefore continue to make every effort to work towards the fundamental goal. We now collectively need to

rediscover with the parties the determination to forge a credible political path forward. We must not let the urgency elude us.