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# Press Conference by Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace Process

Addressing a Headquarters press conference via video link from Jerusalem, Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said that as Israel’s military offensive in the Gaza Strip entered its seventh day, much of the enclave’s infrastructure had been destroyed amid mounting death and injury tolls, while Hamas rockets were now reaching deep into southern Israel.  It was imperative to find an immediate and lasting way out so as to avoid an “even deeper and deadlier conflict”.  From day one, the Secretary-General had repeatedly called for an end to the violence, and an immediate ceasefire respected fully by all parties.

He said the diplomatic efforts under way involved many players, including the United States, the European Union, the League of Arab States and Turkey, adding that the roles of the Quartet and the Security Council would be very important.  The Secretary-General was doing everything he could to ensure that intensified and better coordinated efforts would lead to immediate results.  The Secretary-General had publicly and privately urged “key” world leaders with influence over the parties to end the violence.  Diplomatic activities were shifting to New York with a number of Arab leaders heading there to seek a solution to the crisis.

While an immediate cessation of hostilities was absolutely vital, it was clear that new conditions must be created on the ground to prevent a repeat of the conflict, he said, emphasizing that a simple return to the status quo ante would not be enough.  After a ceasefire, further arrangements must be found to solidify it.  To that end, certain elements that had previously not been on the table should be discussed, including the reopening of border crossings on an uninterrupted basis.  “Of course, this will require commitments from Hamas that all rocket attacks and weapons smuggling will end.”  It would also require bringing Gaza back into the fold of the Palestinian Authority.  The international community must now be prepared to put structures on the ground to make that happen.

Both the Security Council and the wider United Nations had an important role to play in that regard, he said.  “It is now more vital than ever that Israeli-Palestinian peace is achieved.  The underlying issues must be addressed:  end of conflict; end of occupation; and the creation of a Palestinian State alongside a secure Israel.”

Asked about the role of the Palestinian Authority, the Special Coordinator replied that it must be part of the solution if all border crossings, including the one at Rafah, were to be reopened.  The 17 April Agreement on Movement and Access should provide a basis for that, but there was a need to re-examine its elements, including an international presence on Gaza’s borders to facilitate the return of Palestinian Authority personnel.

A monitoring mechanism would also be needed to avoid the mistakes of the past, he pointed out, adding that the United Nations, which was now the only major international player left in Gaza, would play a role in monitoring arrangements.  It was to be hoped that, when the Arab Ministers arrived in New York, the Council would be able to agree on some way forward.  It was important that the Arab leaders demonstrate unity.

Responding to another question, he said that, apart from the draft resolution introduced by Libya on New Year’s Eve (see Press Release [SC/9560](http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/sc9560.doc.htm)), there would be other proposals, including one advocating a protection role for the monitoring mechanism.  A comprehensive approach was needed to prevent a return to the unstable and unsustainable status quo ante, he reiterated.

In response to a question as to whether the United Nations policy of no negotiations with Hamas had been a problem, Mr. Serry said that, as the only international player left in Gaza, the Organization had had contacts with Hamas at the “appropriate level”.  It had communicated messages, the first being that the group should accept the ceasefire in full.  The United Nations had also warned Hamas about what would happen if rocket attacks did not stop.

Asked if he could agree with the term “genocide”, since the United Nations had been blaming Hamas alone for the crisis, he said the Organization was very deeply concerned and working around the clock, both at the political level and on the ground.  The United Nations was clear in its position:  the Secretary-General condemned the indiscriminate and irresponsible firing by Hamas of rockets into Israel, and had been clear and unequivocal about the excessive and irresponsible ongoing Israeli military attacks.

Responding to questions about fatalities and the number of civilians killed, the Special Coordinator said he did not have the latest figures, but the number was “astounding enough”.  There had been far more than 300 people killed, among them a very significant number of civilians, including women and children.

In response to a follow-up question, he said he was not aware that, during a press conference on 29 December, the United Nations system’s figure for civilian fatalities reflected only women and children, a method not used in any other situation monitored.

Asked about the delivery of humanitarian assistance, he said two or three crossings were open and he was satisfied with Israeli cooperation in helping with much-needed humanitarian emergency items, including medicines and grain.  There was an enormous shortage in Gaza in addition to a problem of delivery in adverse circumstances.

The United Nations was gravely concerned about the prospect of a ground attack, he said in answer to a question as to whether such an event would trigger yet another cycle of violence and a further escalation of the conflict.  It was not clear whether Hamas would be willing to accept the terms of an internationally brokered ceasefire, such as the cessation of rocket firing and arms smuggling, and accept an international monitoring force on its borders.  If Hamas had the well-being of the Palestinians at heart, they would be looking for a way out of the “very deep crisis”.

Asked for an update on a request to the Israeli Government for an investigation into the killing of eight students in front of the United Nations building in Gaza and other incidents, Mr. Serry said that he and Karen AbuZayd, Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), had sent a joint letter to Israel’s Defence Minister protesting that incident, as well as the severe damage to the Special Coordinator’s headquarters in Gaza, which was next to the Presidential compound.