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UN envoy: Peace process needs action

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Ten months after Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed to try to reach a peace settlement this year, the UN's Mideast envoy said Thursday that the peace process requires stepped-up action to reach an agreement in 2008.

"While there are some positive developments, there are also several factors that cause concern," Robert Serry told the UN Security Council. "The important period ahead must see decisive advances towards peace."

Despite continuing negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, he said, "it appears so far that no agreement has been reached on the core issues."

"However, it also appears that there have been substantive discussions, the potential of which must be built on with a continuation of intensive negotiations," Serry said.

"We look to an urgent continuation of the negotiations, and for all parties to honor their Annapolis and road map commitments," Serry said.

Ministers from the Quartet are scheduled to meet Sept. 26 on the sidelines of the annual high-level session of the UN General Assembly. At the Quartet meeting, Serry said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is hoping to consolidate gains and push Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and Palestinian reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.

"Ten months after negotiations were relaunched at Annapolis, and with just over three months until the end of the year, the Middle East peace process stands at a crossroads," Serry said. "We must continue to strive for agreement on all core issues in accordance with the agreed timeframe of Annapolis."

"It is clear that the only way to begin addressing the overall crisis, and indeed to lay the basis for a two-state solution, is for Gaza to be peacefully reunited with the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority in a manner which allows the peace process to advance," Serry said.

He noted that Egypt has started consultations with the Palestinian factions "to formulate a proposal that could serve as a common national platform."

Serry called "the gradual but systematic process of Palestinian self-empowerment" in the West Bank a "largely unsung success story."

"The Palestinian Authority continues to make real strides in the implementation of its security plan," he said. "A reflection of improved security is that the casualty rate from violent clashes this past month is one of the lowest in recent years."

At the same time, however, Serry said violence by settlers intensified, and construction in settlements has continued despite Israeli commitments under the road map and the Annapolis agreement.

In Gaza, he reported one piece of positive news - "the cease-fire has continued to hold..." But he said that "on all other fronts, there is little positive to report," and he called the humanitarian situation in Gaza "extremely grim."