

UN Special Coordinator briefs Security Council on Middle East negotiations and latest developments

Bethlehem - Ma'an - In his briefing to the UN Security Council on Thursday, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Robert Serry claimed that current regional negotiations have the potential to "change the conflict-fraught face of the Middle East," but noted the need for further political progress and "action on the ground, particularly on the Israeli-Palestinian track."

Serry welcomed the active role of several regional countries in negotiations, including Turkish involvement in Syrian- Israeli talks, Qatari mediation in Lebanon, and Egypt's efforts towards an agreement between Fatah and Hamas on Gaza.

Positive developments cited by Serry include additional budgetary support for the Palestinian Authority (PA) from some Arab countries, finalization of the PA development plan, and the recent investment conference in Bethlehem, where investments worth \$1.4 million were pledged. He also noted the deployment of 500 PA security personnel in the Jenin district and recent Israeli approval for the opening of twenty additional Palestinian police stations around the West Bank.

On the other hand, Serry stressed that "much more remains to be done," noting the continuing restrictions on movement and access in the Palestinian territories, where over 600 closures are now in place. He noted that Israel has yet to meet its obligations to freeze settlement activity and dismantle outposts under the Road Map, and that Israeli military incursions continue in West Bank areas where PA forces are deployed. He called on the PA to continue its efforts on security as specified in the Road Map.

On Gaza, Serry warned of the dangers posed by the "complex political, security, human rights and humanitarian crisis." He noted the grave humanitarian conditions suffered by Gazans "caught between the closure of crossings due to militant attacks and Israeli measures amounting to collective punishment."

Serry condemned the attacks by Hamas and other resistance groups on the crossing points between Gaza and Israel, and the rockets fired from Gaza into Israel. Regarding Israel's ongoing military operations in Gaza, the UN Special Coordinator stated that Israel should "exercise maximum restraint and comply with international law so as not to endanger civilians."

Serry, who is also the UN Secretary-General's Envoy to the Quartet, stressed the UN and Quartet's active support for a new strategy to end the violence and improve conditions in Gaza, but remained vague on what this initiative would involve.