

Gaza truce could create conditions for UN force

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By Adam Entous

JERUSALEM, June 19 (Reuters) - An Egyptian-brokered truce and reconciliation talks between rival Palestinian factions could create conditions for the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers in the Gaza Strip, the United Nation's envoy said on Thursday.

Robert Serry, the world body's special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, said the idea of sending peacekeepers was "premature" at this stage but that it could become "very practical" later if security and political conditions improve.

An Egyptian-brokered ceasefire between Israel and the Hamas Islamist group took hold on Thursday, but both sides voiced doubt over how long it would last.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, cross-border fighting is meant to stop and Israel will gradually ease its economic blockade of the coastal territory, tightened after Hamas seized control a year ago from more secular Fatah forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

"I know there is a great deal of scepticism already," Serry told Reuters in an interview. "We should all realise that this ceasefire is still fragile, particularly in the coming weeks. And that's why we will be looking to all sides to act with care and responsibility to ensure that this calm endures."

Serry said U.N. agencies could give a quick "kickstart" to the Gaza Strip's moribund economy by restarting construction projects that were frozen last year due to Israeli restrictions on imports of building materials.

"We want a controlled and sustainable reopening of the crossings," Serry said, adding that this should involve "the legitimate Palestinian Authority," referring to Abbas's government in the occupied West Bank, led by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

In addition to easing the Gaza blockade, Serry said the security concerns of Israel and Egypt must be quickly addressed.

Israel has demanded a halt to arms smuggling into Gaza and has conditioned the reopening of the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt on militants releasing captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Fayyad's government and U.N. officials have in recent months discussed the idea of U.N.-led peacekeepers being deployed in a sparsely-populated southern corner of Gaza -- between Rafah, the nearby Kerem Shalom crossing on the Israeli-Egyptian border and the main Karni commercial crossing with Israel.

Israeli officials and Western diplomats said international forces could be based at Gaza's now-defunct airport.

If the truce holds and the crossings remain open and under control, "then this idea you have referred to may become relevant," Serry said.

He called renewed reconciliation efforts between Abbas and his Hamas rivals an "internal Palestinian matter" but said "the outside world cannot be indifferent to it".

"It's very important that we see steps in that direction, and there again, then maybe this (peacekeeping) idea may be a very practical way for the parties to start to engage each other," Serry said.

Western diplomats said Israel has shown increasing willingness to consider an international force in the Gaza Strip but remained deeply sceptical, both that the truce will hold and that countries will agree to send troops into a potentially hostile environment.

Serry said a peacekeeping mission would only be possible under certain conditions, chief among them agreement between Israel, Egypt and "all the parties" on the need for such a force. "That I think would be a very important consideration for any future troop contributing country," Serry said.