

## UN says little progress made on key Gaza issues

By EDITH M. LEDERER

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N.'s political chief says he is worried that very little progress has been made in cementing a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip and opening border crossings to rebuild the devastated Palestinian territory.

Two months after Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers declared unilateral cease-fires, Undersecretary-General for Political Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe told the U.N. Security Council on Wednesday that there has also been little progress on preventing illicit arms trafficking into the coastal territory and reconciling the rival Palestinian factions. He said the key impediment is "the intolerable situation at Gaza's crossings."

Israel has banned the entry of nearly all construction materials, spare parts and other industrial goods essential to rebuild the territory, Pascoe said, and the quality and quantity of food and other imports allowed into Gaza "are insufficient compared to needs."

"We face a worrying situation of impasse and uncertainty," he said. "Despite international engagement and support, very little concrete progress has been made on key issues."

Israel launched the 22-day air and ground offensive in Gaza on Dec. 27 in an effort to halt years of militant rocket fire by Hamas on its southern communities. The offensive caused an estimated \$2 billion in damage and killed nearly 1,300 Palestinians, including hundreds of civilians, Palestinian officials have said, while at least 13 Israelis died.

**The U.N.'s top Mideast envoy, Robert Serry, was in Gaza on Wednesday and his meetings with business leaders and representatives of civil society "have underscored the desperate need for a new approach to Gaza based on a cease-fire, open crossings, rejuvenation of the private sector and Palestinian reconciliation," Pascoe said. "Without this, the many unresolved issues combined with the absence of an active negotiations track and continued suffering could portend a quick return to violence," he warned.**

Pascoe called on the four key parties trying to promote Mideast peace — the U.N., the U.S., the European Union and Russia — and the rest of the international community to "act with unity of purpose to help stabilize Gaza and reinvigorate the peace process."

Israel's incoming prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, softened his hawkish rhetoric on Wednesday, saying his government would be a "partner for peace with the Palestinians." His new line came a day after the centrist Labor Party, which supports a two-state solution, joined his coalition in exchange for vaguely worded promises to pursue negotiations with the Palestinians. Separate reconciliation talks between rivals Hamas and President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah-led government, which controls the West Bank, are scheduled to resume in Cairo on April 1.

In the absence of a cease-fire, Pascoe said, violence has continued with more than 100 rockets and mortars fired into Israel, and a dozen Israeli airstrikes on Gaza.