

International efforts towards Middle East peace must be matched by steps on the ground – UN envoy

24 March 2017 – Noting that international engagement on reviving the Middle East peace process over the last three months reconfirmed the consensus that the two-state solution is the only means of realizing the national aspirations of both peoples a senior United Nations official called for continued expansion of the momentum into a concrete vision to end the wider conflict.

“Shaping a credible political horizon through reviving engagement between the parties with intensified international and regional support is essential to advancing this goal,” Nickolay Mladenov, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, told the Security Council today.

In his briefing, the Mr. Mladenov highlighted that the recent increase in rockets fires from Gaza towards Israel was a worrying development and said that such potentially lethal provocations are unnecessary, dangerous and risk devastating escalation.

At the same, he also called on Israel to do more to improve the daily lives of the Palestinians and said that introduction of polices that increase Palestinian civil authority, support Palestinian development and preserve the prospect of a two-state solution, in line with the recommendations of the Middle East Quartet, remained essential.

He also spoke of the general situation over the past few months as well as detailed specific instances that had the potential to escalate the situation.

There had been a marked increase in statements, announcements and decisions related to construction and expansion, he continued.

Israel made two major announcements for a total of 5,500 housing units in settlements in Area C of the occupied West Bank, he said. Within three weeks, some 3,000 housing units had advanced through the planning process and more than 240 units had reached the final approval stage. Eighty per cent of the 4,000 settlement moves in the last three months were concentrated in and around major Israeli population centres close to the 1967 line, while some 20 per cent were in outlying locations deep inside the occupied West Bank.

“While the [Security Council] called upon both parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric, such actions continued during the reporting period,” he noted.

Turning to tangible actions that can help progress the peace process, the UN Special Coordinator underlined that it is essential that international efforts are accompanied by significant steps taken on the ground by the

parties, to create an environment conducive to peace.

“The United Nations will continue to call on and work with the parties and all interested stakeholders to find a just, sustainable and comprehensive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the relevant Security Council resolutions,” he concluded.

Building peace requires culture, education – message of historic UN Security Council resolution

24 March 2017 – Univocally condemning unlawful destruction and pillaging of cultural heritage such as religious sites and artefacts, the United Nations Security Council today adopted an historic resolution that is expected to strengthen protections for such heritage during armed conflicts where they are most vulnerable.

“The deliberate destruction of heritage [...] has become a tactic of war to tear societies over the long term, in a strategy of cultural cleansing,” said Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) following the resolution’s adoption.

“This is why defending cultural heritage is more than a cultural issue, it is a security imperative, inseparable from that of defending human lives,” she added.

Today’s briefing by Ms. Bokova to the Security Council was the first time a head of UNESCO has been invited in that capacity.

In her briefing, she explained that since the adoption of Resolution 2199 (in 2015), which prohibits trade in cultural property from Iraq and Syria, efforts were well-underway to disrupt terrorist financing through the illicit trafficking of antiquities.

“Together, UNESCO, INTERPOL, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), customs services, the private sector and museums are all bolstering cooperation, coordinating new action,” she noted.



Irina Bokova, Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), addresses the Security Council. UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Through the newly-adopted resolution, the Security Council also underlined

that such destruction can hamper post-conflict reconciliation, undermine economic and cultural development and, that, in certain conditions, could constitute a war crime.

“Weapons are not enough to defeat violent extremism. Building peace requires culture also; it requires education, prevention, and the transmission of heritage,” added Ms. Bokova.

“This is the message of this historic resolution,” she stated.

Need for supply chain integrity and stopping illicit trade of cultural property

Also today, the top UN political official said that in addition to making every effort to implement the international legal and normative framework on protection of culture, as well as strengthen international cooperation, a response was needed from global criminal justice to prevent trafficking in cultural property by disrupting organized criminal and terrorist networks.



The Security Council unanimously adopts resolution 2347 (2017), condemning the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage in the context of armed conflicts, notably by terrorist groups. UN Photo/Manuel Elias

“We need to put a stronger focus on investigation, cross-border cooperation and exchange of information, and on bringing in private and public sector partners, including dealers and the tourism sector, to promote supply chain integrity and stop the illicit trade and sale of cultural property.”

Yury Fedotov, the Executive Director of UNODC also welcomed the resolution’s emphasis on international cooperation in crime prevention and criminal justice responses to counter trafficking in cultural property.

“The resolution [...] addresses the vital issue of trafficking in cultural property as a source of terrorism financing, and also sets out ways of protecting cultural heritage during armed conflict where it is most vulnerable,” he said, noting that it strengthened the international community’s ability to tackle the issue and help acts that fund terrorism, and enable yet more destruction and looting of cultural sites and archaeological treasures.

Also speaking at the Security Council, Commander Fabrizio Parulli of the Carabinieri Italiani (the national gendarmerie of Italy) and the UNESCO Unite4Heritage task force shared the latest data on illicit trafficking, and said that over the course of last year, 800,000 artefacts had been seized by Italian forces in the fight against the financing of criminal activities.

AUDIO: The destruction of cultural heritage by terrorists, described as “cultural cleansing” by Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is a war crime.

Press release: Privy Council appointment: Tobias Ellwood MP and Ben Wallace MP

The Queen has been pleased to approve the appointment of Tobias Ellwood MP and Ben Wallace MP as members of the Privy Council.

The Queen has been pleased to approve the appointment of Tobias Ellwood MP and Ben Wallace MP as members of Her Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council.

News story: Baroness Anelay welcomes conclusions of UN Human Rights Council

This was the first Human Rights Council (HRC) session since the UK's successful re-election in November to serve a second term on the Council. The UK, represented at Ministerial level by my colleague Mr Sharma, Minister for Asia, played a leading role on a number of important issues, including Syria, Sri Lanka and South Sudan, as well as supporting on Burma, DPRK and Iran.

I welcome the adoption of a strong resolution on Syria, which includes renewing the mandate of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI). The COI's vital work highlights the unspeakable atrocities being perpetrated in Syria. We will continue to call for those responsible for violations and abuses of international law to be held to account. We remain concerned at the lack of humanitarian access in Syria. We call on the regime to abandon its callous siege and starvation tactics and allow for the immediate, unhindered delivery of aid.

The report presented by the Human Rights Commission in South Sudan was deeply worrying. Following the peace agreement in August 2015, our hope that a transitional government of national unity might turn the tide of violence and begin the process of reconciliation looks to remain just that, a hope. So I welcome the adoption of a resolution, by consensus and with South Sudan's support, that will extend the Commission's work and strengthen its mandate.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report on Sri Lanka highlighted notable improvements in its human rights situation. But much remains to be done in order to address the legacy of Sri Lanka's armed conflict. I welcomed Sri Lanka co-sponsoring a resolution at this session,

sending a strong signal on the importance the Government attaches to reconciliation and human rights. I urge the Government of Sri Lanka to provide the leadership required to fully deliver on its commitments, to develop a comprehensive, time-bound implementation strategy, and to give due consideration to the conclusions of the report of the Consultation Task Force on reconciliation mechanisms.

I thank the Special Rapporteur on Burma for her report to the Council, acknowledging the progress made by the Government in its first year, while outlining the complex human rights challenges that remain, in particular conflict-related violations in Rakhine, Shan and Kachin States. I welcome the establishment of an independent international Fact Finding Mission to look into recent human rights violations, and urge the Burmese authorities to cooperate fully. The UK stands ready to assist the Government in this endeavour and tackling other long-standing human rights challenges. I welcome the resolution on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which draws upon the recommendations made by the Group of Independent Experts on accountability. I hope the UN Special Rapporteur will continue the important task of developing an effective accountability framework with OHCHR in Seoul. The UK will continue to work with partners to maintain international pressure on the DPRK. I call on the Government of the DPRK to take credible steps to address the shocking human rights record and prioritise the welfare of the North Korean people above the country's nuclear and ballistic missile programme.

The situation in Libya remains a grave concern, as highlighted in the latest joint report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya. I condemn the recent upsurge in violence between armed groups both in Tripoli and in the oil crescent, and am deeply concerned by reports of human rights abuses and violations by combatants in Benghazi and elsewhere. Those responsible must be held to account. I welcome the efforts of the Presidency Council and other mediators to de-escalate the situation and secure ceasefires. I urge calm on all sides to avoid further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the country. The UK welcomes the Council's support for the resolution and the emphasis on accountability.

I welcome the renewal of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Iran. The human rights situation within the country is deeply worrying, in particular the continued execution of juvenile offenders. The newly introduced Charter on Citizen's Rights has the potential to make a positive impact and I urge Iran to grant immediate access to the Special Rapporteur so she can work with them to implement it.

I also welcome the adoption of the resolution on the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The human rights situation there is deeply concerning. For too long, international organisations have been denied access by the de facto authorities to these increasingly isolated territories. I welcome the opportunity for detailed and objective reporting by the OHCHR. I trust that the de facto authorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia will grant the mandated access to the High Commissioner and his Office.

The UK once again played a strong role in supporting consensus on the adoption of both the EU's 'Freedom of Religion or Belief' resolution and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's text on the combating religious intolerance resolution. Tackling restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, and addressing intolerance and violent extremism should be a priority for all UN Member States.

This Council has once again reaffirmed the vital role that Human Rights Defenders play in promoting and protecting human rights. The ability of our citizens to hold governments to account, to freely express opinions, to hold and avow their beliefs, is an essential element of protecting our dignity as individuals and societies. In too many parts of the world that ability is being challenged or restricted. During this session, we have also seen attempts by some delegations to restrict the participation of NGOs at the Human Rights Council. Civil society must be able to engage actively in the United Nations – it is in the interests of the international community that they do so. Civil society furthers the UN's ideals, is a source of evidence and expertise, and supports the implementation of the UN's work. We restrict civil society space at our peril.

The UK remains committed to ensuring that the Council's Universal Periodic Review process delivers real improvements on human rights. I am pleased that the UK took the lead alongside Paraguay, Morocco and Brazil on a joint statement this session, outlining commitments to improve implementation of UPR recommendations. We were pleased to lead a joint statement on the Rule of Law, stressing that implementation is as important as the rules themselves.

Finally, in addition to our duty to address egregious human rights issues, I believe we must acknowledge positive developments. We should encourage a "race to the top" as States engage positively with the UN human rights system and support each other in translating political will into action. Alongside Colombia, the UK launched the "Race to the Top" initiative during the September HRC session. This session we delivered a joint statement on the initiative, which we were pleased enjoyed broad support.

At the start of our second term serving on the HRC, the UK was pleased to play a leading role on a number of critical dossiers. We look forward to working with member states on consolidating progress made in this session.

Speech: "What we're witnessing is a systematic and corrosive assault on history, on religion, on the very

fabric of identity”

Let me begin by thanking our briefers this morning, by welcoming the unanimous adoption of resolution 2347, and by paying tribute to France and to Italy for bringing this issue to the Council.

Today all our briefers, and all members of this Council, have really brought home the sheer scale of the problem that we face. Whether in Timbuktu, Palmyra or Bamiyan, this is an issue that goes beyond statues, beyond artefacts and beyond museums. What we're witnessing is a systematic and corrosive assault on history, on religion, on the very fabric of identity. What we are witnessing are, in many cases, war crimes.

This isn't just wanton pillaging and vandalism, this is a matter of international peace and security. Stolen statues in Syria and Iraq don't just line the pockets of opportunists and looters, they provide a source of revenue for Daesh. And in the region, the destruction of religious and cultural sites is about more than just bricks and mortar; sectarian division can be fuelled by pickaxes and sledgehammers just as it can be by bullets and guns.

So let us respond to this cultural destruction with the same intensity and the same unity of purpose as any other threat to international peace and security.

Through this resolution today we have taken a step forward in doing so. This unanimous resolution shows the strength of our resolve and of our condemnation of such actions. It shows our commitment and determination to act against perpetrators so that we can combat terrorism, prevent conflict and protect vulnerable communities. But as with so many issues before this Council, implementation is now needed. The UK will do its utmost to do so.

That is why we have established a \$30 million Cultural Program Fund to support projects which help foster, safeguard and promote cultural heritage in countries affected by conflict.

These projects are helping complete the new museum in Basrah, helping protect heritage and traditional craft skills in Kabul, and supporting advanced archaeological techniques and technology for archaeologists across the Middle East and North Africa.

It's an effort furthered by the British Museum who are training Iraqi heritage sector workers, so that they have the skills needed to assess and record the condition of their heritage sites and carry out "rescue archaeology" as required. It's already bearing fruit; a participant in the training has been appointed by the Iraqi State Board to lead the assessment of the site of Nimrud, recently released from Daesh control. And another participant is looking forward to returning to Mosul Museum soon.

But it isn't enough to train civilians. It's often the brave men and women of

the armed forces who are at the frontline of the threat against culture heritage. That's why the United Kingdom last year set up a Cultural Property Protection Unit so that respect for cultural property is further integrated into training and operations of our armed forces. This includes respecting domestic and international law, as well as the obligations of the 1954 Hague Convention and its Protocols, which we will shortly ratify.

The action we take as a Council or as member states will count for little unless we show there are real consequences for those who carry out these acts. Truly to rid the world of this scourge, we need to deter and punish, as well as prevent.

Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi was the first person convicted by the International Criminal Court for attacking protected sites, but he cannot be the last. If we are to deter others from following his path, we need to see more convictions, more consequences. His story should serve as a warning to all those who choose to attack cultural heritage; a warning that this Council must ensure is heeded.

Thank you.