

UNSCO — Walking a Fine Line in the Middle East

In a year of feverish diplomatic efforts for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, crisis management has been a constant preoccupation for Robert Serry, who in December 2007 was appointed as United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East peace process. 'The violence and on-going humanitarian emergencies in and around Gaza, have kept me very busy', he says from his office overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem.

FRAGILE CALM

At the time of this writing, a fragile Egyptian-brokered ceasefire had taken hold. But UN agencies have faced a very difficult situation in recent times with restrictions upon fuel into the territory

by the Israeli authorities as well as the occasional halt to activities following attacks by Palestinian militants on the crossing points into Gaza. Prior to the ceasefire there were frequent rocket and sniper attacks on Israel, particularly on the town of Sderot, and the Israeli army carried out regular military operations within the Gaza Strip.

Additionally, internal Palestinian divisions have seen Gaza become increasingly separated from the West Bank. In the midst of all this, Serry has gained first-hand knowledge of the situation on the ground and been heavily engaged in working with the parties to try to improve it, while

navigating a careful diplomatic path in a notoriously difficult diplomatic environment.

FOCUS ON GAZA

'After I arrived in the region I decided that I must go and see the situation for myself,' Mr Serry says, 'I went to Gaza and saw the half-finished housing of halted UN development projects as well as the very difficult situation Gazans

Eighty per cent of Gazans are dependent on UN assistance.

find themselves in, eighty per cent of whom are dependent on UN assistance.

I also visited the nearby Israeli town of Sderot and was shown how the then almost daily rocket attacks were affecting the lives of the people there. It was clear that a different and more positive strategy for Gaza was needed."

The ceasefire which took effect in June marks an important milestone. "The calm must be respected. We need to get more supplies into Gaza. We need to work for the crossings to be

reopened with the presence of the Palestinian Authority," says Mr. Serry. "Ultimately, Gaza must be reunified with the West Bank within that framework, while the Annapolis track is pushed forward. Otherwise the situation threatens to worsen for the Palestinians, their Israeli neighbors, and for Egypt and the wider region."

UNSCO, as the office headed by Mr. Serry is known, is a political mission overseen from headquarters by the



An officer in the Israeli town of Sderot showing Robert Serry fragments of rockets fired frequently on the town by Palestinian militants in Gaza

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Department of Political Affairs. It maintains a permanent office in Gaza, as well as others in Jerusalem and Ramallah. Its staff has an extensive network of contacts on all sides. The role of the Special Coordinator is to bring together the UN country team and give political direction.

Robert Serry visiting a housing project in Gaza of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees of the Near East

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EXPERIENCED

Prior to taking up his post at the start of the year, Robert Serry had considerable experience as a Dutch diplomat in Europe and elsewhere, as well as with NATO where he worked on crisis management, peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction. He worked on the Middle East as head of the regional desk at the Dutch Foreign Ministry in the 1990's. "In the 1980's and 1990's I was involved in trying to get exports out of Gaza, to create a viable economy, and sadly I now see things going in reverse, with little getting in or out. I also perceive on the Israeli side a sense of disillusionment that after their disengagement from Gaza, rockets kept coming."

REGIONAL MANDATE

UNSCO has a regional mandate given its responsibility to address the Arab-Israeli conflict comprehensively. Since taking up the post, the Special Coordinator has visited Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

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Shuttling between Jerusalem, Ramallah and Tel Aviv, Mr Serry regular meets with senior Palestinian and Israeli figures as they continue with their peacemaking efforts following Annapolis. He also acts as the Secretary-General's envoy-level representative in the Quartet for Middle East Peace, which comprises the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and the Russian Federation.

"This is a vital time, and I believe that both sides are serious about trying to make it succeed, despite the considerable difficulties," he says. "My job is to offer the UN's support bilaterally and through our position on the Quartet, to find ways to bring the parties closer together, and where necessary to remind them of their commitments and obligations."

Mr Serry believes that changes on the ground are essential, such as further easing Israeli closures

in the West Bank, freezing settlements there and increasing the presence of a reformed Palestinian security force. 'Progressing with a political agreement becomes very difficult if you don't close the gap between the negotiations and the reality of daily life.'

COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS

Security Council resolutions remain the benchmarks by which the international community sees a way to end the decades of strife. Their end goal: to end the occupation that began in 1967, the establishment of an independent, viable, and democratic Palestinian state living in peace and security with Israel, as part of just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

"Palestinian statehood will help Israel achieve its aims and Israeli security will help the Palestinians achieve theirs," said Serry, adding: "Both sides need the support of the international community to do this."

* Contributed by Richard Miron/UNSCO