

U.N. Envoy Critical of Gaza Living Conditions, Threats to Annapolis Initiative

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UNITED NATIONS, Feb. 26 -- Living conditions in the Gaza Strip have deteriorated significantly as a result of Israeli restrictions on travel and trade, threatening the health of Gazans and impeding the peace initiative the Bush administration launched three months ago in Annapolis, according to the United Nations' top Middle East envoy and humanitarian relief official.

"There is a growing sense of disquiet about the state of the political process," Robert H. Serry, the U.N. special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, told the Security Council on Tuesday. Serry warned that developments in Gaza have created a "dangerous cocktail" that is both deepening the suffering on the ground while "damaging prospects for a two-state solution."

The U.N. envoy applauded Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas for pursuing peace talks in the face of widespread public skepticism over the prospects for success. He proposed that Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority take the lead in developing a strategy to dampen tensions in Gaza by ending the Israeli siege and the expansion of Israeli settlements, as well as halting the Palestinian rocket attacks against Israel. "The Annapolis process can only be sustained by real changes on the ground," he said.