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Press Release following the Visit of Patriarch Bechara Peter Rai with United Nations' Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki Moon

On Friday October 21, 2011 at 11:30 am His Beatitude, Bechara Peter Rai, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, accompanied by his Vicar General, Archbishop Paul Sayah, Bishop Gregory Mansour of the Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn, along with a Maronite delegation met with United Nations' Secretary General, Mr Ban Ki Moon. The meeting was arranged by Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, Holy See Permanent Observer to the United Nations.

The Patriarch expressed the following points:

After thanking the Secretary General he expressed hope that Lebanon and the Middle East will benefit from their joint efforts.

The Patriarch expressed that the issues facing Lebanon and the Middle East are many. The **Arab Spring** holds much promise of greater freedom, democracy and human rights in the countries concerned, but it also brings about some real concerns. The Church supports wholeheartedly freedom, human rights, and democratic rule for all, but she is against violence wherever it may come from, be it from the people or the authorities. The Church is concerned about the regional demonstrations. We fear that the strife may degenerate into civil wars along sectarian lines.

While the Church neither supports nor opposes any government *per se* she makes moral judgments about social, economic and political matters based on respect for human dignity and rights. We also fear that the changes that may take place would lead to fundamentalist regimes. In such situations, all factions pay a heavy price, and the heaviest price is usually paid by minorities. The example of Iraq stands in the forefront where the conflict led to the mass exodus of one million Christians, out of one million and a half, and led to their persecution. Change should be brought about through dialogue and not with force or violence. We pray for a spiritual, social, and political renewal in the Middle East that will include all members of society - Christian and Muslim alike.

With regard to **Lebanon**, it has to be said that there is a vital difference between Lebanon and the Arab countries: while all the Arab countries have adopted theocratic systems of government, the Lebanese, Christians and Muslims, agreed in a "National Pact" of conviviality to found a secular country separating religion and state, based on consensual democracy, in which civil liberties and fundamental human rights are guaranteed. This "National Pact" was translated into

what came to be called the "Lebanese formula" based on equal participation of Christians and Muslims in public administration of the state. This special character of Lebanon should be safeguarded and never lost because it constitutes a model for both East and West, as Blessed John Paul II stated in *New Hope for Lebanon*.

Lebanon is a sign of hope for the people of the Middle East as well as a guarantee for the Christian presence there. Arab rulers consider Lebanon to be a necessity for them. In reality, the sons and daughters of Lebanon were pioneers in the Arab Renaissance, in culture, economy, trade and politics, and Lebanon is considered to be a factor of stability and peace in the region.

Lebanon and a son of Lebanon, Mr. Charles Malek, were among the founders of the United Nations and contributors to the writing of the “Charter of Human Rights”. The Maronite Patriarchate values greatly the role that the present Lebanese delegation to the United Nations is playing, headed by His Excellency Ambassador Nawaf Salam, under whose presidency the Security Council was convened this past month. We wish to also mention two prominent Lebanese who played a significant role in the history of the United Nations, Ambassadors Ghassan Tueini and Edward Ghorra.

For all the above reasons and in order to keep Lebanon as an oasis of peace and stability in the region and a venue for the dialogue of civilizations and religions, a meeting point between East and West on the Mediterranean shore, we wish to ask the United Nations to do what is necessary to **declare Lebanon a neutral country**. The neutrality of Lebanon allows it to remain open to all nations in a spirit of friendship cooperation and mutual respect, and a good advocate for the concerns of the region and the world in all matters related to peace, justice, human rights, and progress of peoples.

The Patriarch said that he hopes to see a just and lasting peace take place in the region and the **Palestinian people** have their independent homeland on the basis of UN Resolution 191. Their refugees in Lebanon should not be forgotten by the international community. They should be assisted to guarantee their right of return, in accordance with UN Resolution 194. Lebanon cannot assume the burden of half a million Palestinian Refugees. An Israeli-Palestinian peace must be proactively pursued with every effort. It is essential to all the concerns of the region. Likewise, the safety and security of the state of Israel should be honored by all people.

The Patriarch also placed before the Secretary General with a sense of urgency the concerns of our **Maronite Community in Cyprus**. The Maronite Representative in the Cypriot Parliament, and we as well, wish to respectfully communicate to Your Excellency the following in his own words: “As members of a minority community that has been caught in the middle of the unresolved conflict, we are asking Your Excellency for help and support in securing our culture and traditions and our very existence. Being Cypriots and European citizens, such sustained abuse of human rights cannot be accepted, particularly in light of Turkey’s candidacy for membership in the European Union. These objectives are not only in the interest of our community, but are also of vital importance as they will be considered as an indication of the sensitivity of the two major communities to the protection of all ethnic minorities in Cyprus.

They are also in line with human rights principles recognized and promoted by international conventions and which form part of the policy of the European Union”

Lastly the Patriarch expressed a special word of **thanks for the United Nation’s Peace Keeping Force in Lebanon** serving in complete cooperation and coordination with the Lebanese Army. They have made and continue to make an important contribution for the security and stability of the region. He concluded with a personal word to the **Honorable Secretary General, his Associates, and friends**, of deepest gratitude for their role in defending Lebanon’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Immediately following the meeting, the Patriarch and his delegation paid a visit to the Lebanese Permanent Mission to the United Nations where he met with Ambassador Nawaf Salam and his staff. Patriarch Rai and with his delegation also visited the Residence of the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations where many ambassadors and diplomats were present.