



Secretary-General SG/SM/10115

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TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE ON MIDDLE EAST, BY SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI ANNAN,

QUARTET FOREIGN MINISTERS, AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, 20 SEPTEMBER 2005

The Secretary-General read out the following statement on behalf of the Quartet:

The Quartet met today to discuss the Israeli withdrawal and the prospects for movement towards peace in the Middle East. The Quartet welcomed the successful conclusion of the withdrawal, and the opportunity it brings to renew efforts on the [Road Map](#). The Quartet paid tribute to the political courage of Prime Minister Sharon, and expressed its appreciation for the responsible behaviour of the Palestinians. The withdrawal is an important step towards achieving the vision of two democratic States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

The Quartet applauded the close coordination between the Israeli and Palestinian security services and their cooperation with the United States Security Coordinator, General Ward. While noting that the Palestinian Authority has condemned violence, the Quartet further urges it to maintain law and order and dismantle terrorist capabilities and infrastructure, and reaffirms the continued importance of comprehensive security sector reform.

The Quartet encouraged the work of James Wolfensohn, the Quartet Special Envoy for disengagement, to facilitate discussion between the parties to build on the success so far. The Quartet will continue to lead international efforts to support the sustainable growth of the Palestinian economy and to help strengthen the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to assume its responsibilities through an aggressive pursuit of State-building and democratic reform efforts. The Quartet urges an easing of the system of movement restrictions that prevent Palestinian economic recovery, consistent with Israel's security needs.

Beyond disengagement, the Quartet calls for renewed action in parallel by both parties on their obligations under the Road Map. The Quartet urged both sides to return to the cooperative agenda reached at Sharm el-Sheikh. Contacts between the parties should be intensified at all levels.

The Quartet discussed armed groups and the political process. The Palestinian Authority leadership has condemned violence and has sought to encourage Palestinian groups who have engaged in terrorism to abandon this course and engage in the democratic process.

Ultimately, those who want to be part of the political process should not engage in armed group or militia activities, for there is a fundamental contradiction between such activities and the building of a democratic State.

The Quartet reaffirms that any agreement on final status issues must be reached through negotiations and that a new Palestinian State must be truly viable, with contiguity in the West Bank and connectivity to Gaza. The Quartet believes that settlement expansion elsewhere must stop, and Israel must remove unauthorized outposts. The Quartet continues to note with concern the route of the barrier, particularly as it results in the confiscation of Palestinian land, and undermines Palestinians' trust in the Road Map.

The Quartet reiterates its commitment to the principles outlined in previous statements, including those of [May 4, 2004](#), [2004](#), [May 9, 2005](#), and [June 23, 2005](#), and reaffirms its commitment to a just, comprehensive, and lasting settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict based upon U.N. Security Council Resolutions [242](#) and [338](#).

We will now take your questions.

Question: I'd like to thank you all for this briefing and to welcome you on behalf of the United Nations Correspondents' Association.

My first question will be in Russian, because I am asking it as a reporter for the Russian News Agency, TASS. And I address both the United States Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister.

[Interpretation from Russian] How do you evaluate the prospects for the proclamation of the Middle East as a zone free of nuclear weapons, in view of the Egyptian initiative? Do you not believe that this issue – with regard to various Governments in the region – is an approach that is based on a dual standard?

Condoleezza Rice , United States Secretary of State: Well, the question of weapons of mass destruction or nuclear weapons in the Middle East, I think, is a long-standing question. But our perspective is that this is a region where, as the peace process goes forward and as security is assured for all of the participants, there should be a circumstance in which the security is based on political circumstances in which there are two States living side by side. And we have generally believed that such a Middle East should not need, certainly, weapons of mass destruction.

But I think the primary question here is to deal with getting to a circumstance in which you have a Middle East in which there is confidence, in which there is security and in which the parties – all of the parties, not just the Israelis and Palestinians but the Israelis also with their Arab neighbours – are living in a state of peace. This is really an issue of politics. And I think the questions of the actual security arrangements are secondary to that.

Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation : [Interpretation from Russian] I, for my part, would like to add that Russia supports the proposal to declare the Middle East a nuclear-weapon-free zone, or free of weapons of mass destruction. That, in fact, is the position of the Security Council of the United Nations, because that support, in fact, was to be found in a resolution that took stock of the war in Iraq in 1991, namely, resolution 667 (1991), which clearly states that it supports the idea of proclaiming the Middle East a zone that is free of nuclear weapons.

I agree with my American colleague, the Secretary of State of the United States, that in order to achieve this initiative, of course, we have to build up trust in the region. And only in that context will we be able to make progress with regard to the whole series of issues in the Middle East. And I think that the complexity of the situation in the Middle East is such that we should not overdramatize the situation, if we are to consistently make progress in the direction of a settlement. That way we will achieve our goal.

I would like to emphasize that a good additional condition for such work is the Arab initiative with regard to relations between the Arabs and Israel. And, of course, in that context we could have some practical steps taken in connection with the proposal to establish the area as one free of weapons of mass destruction.

Question: As you well know, the economic and social situation in Gaza remains dire, in spite of the recent Israeli withdrawal. Gaza has no air or sea ports. Its border with Egypt remains closed. In fact, many would argue that Prime Minister Sharon's withdrawal from Gaza is tantamount to giving the Palestinian Authority a powder keg.

How concerned are you that, if the situation is allowed to continue, it could undermine the authority of the Palestinian Authority and strengthen the hand of Hamas? And what is the United States doing to ensure that Prime Minister Sharon complies with the recent Supreme Court ruling in Israel with regard to the separation wall, which is creating facts on the ground and further complicating negotiations?

Ms. Rice: First of all, I believe that the Quartet's assessment of the Gaza withdrawal is that, in fact, it has been a successful withdrawal; that it demonstrated that the Israelis and the Palestinians can work together in the most detailed circumstances and the most difficult circumstances. I think there has been excellent security coordination and cooperation that allowed the withdrawal to take place peacefully and effectively.

Our task now is to build on the momentum of that withdrawal, to help the Palestinians create in Gaza a model for a Palestinian Authority that can indeed govern.

The international community is very actively involved in that. We talked today about security reform and the Ward mission that has been trying to improve the capabilities of the Palestinian security forces. We did discuss the need for freedom of movement, not just in Gaza, where the Israeli forces have gone, but also in the West Bank, and we are working on that issue. We talked also about the plans of Special Envoy James Wolfensohn for projects that will improve the economic prospects of the Palestinian people – so-called quick-action projects – to which all of us have contributed substantial sums of money so that job activity can be created rather quickly in the Gaza.

As to Rafah and the passage between Egypt and the Palestinian territories, it's a somewhat more complicated issue, but Egypt, Israel and the Palestinians have been working towards a solution. I believe there will be a solution for Rafah. It is extremely important that the Palestinians be able, with the Egyptians, to control that international border so that movement of people and goods is not a security risk for anybody in the region. But they are well under way to try to come to that conclusion.

As to Israeli activities that might try and prejudge a final status, we have been very clear. President Bush has been very clear that we do not expect Israel to engage in activities that will prejudge a final status, because questions about the final border are indeed final status issues. We have been clear that activity in the settlements – for instance, at E-1 or with the separation barrier – has an effect on Palestinian livelihood, that the international community expects Israel to live up to its Road Map obligations and to its obligations not to engage in that activity.

So, I think the messages are clear, but this meeting was very focused on how to move ahead, how to take the momentum of what has been a successful disengagement from Gaza to build the institutions that will form the foundation of a Palestinian State and to make the lives of the Palestinian people better.

Question: You said this meeting was very focused on how to move ahead and that there was some specific discussion of ways to improve the economy in Gaza, but how does that momentum translate beyond Gaza? Was there specific discussion and what is your current view of how fast there could be dismantlement or changes in settlements in the West Bank?

The Secretary-General: We did discuss that, and obviously we have a series of events on the ground. The Palestinian election is coming up. There is political development on the Israeli side – we are not sure whether it leads to elections or not. Obviously, we are monitoring these events very closely and we would want to see that settled before one takes any other bold initiatives. But what happens in the West Bank is very much on our mind.

For us, the Quartet, it's Gaza first, and then the next stage will be West Bank – not Gaza first and Gaza last. And so, prospectively, we are looking forward. We realize that the Palestinians have to be given hope and a sense of horizon, and that is very much our approach, too.

Ms. Rice: If I may just add, we did also talk about, for instance, the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings, which could improve substantially movement in the West Bank. That is a programme that was laid out when the Prime Minister met with President Abbas, and so we would encourage that those understandings be put into place. But we also talked about the fact that the security situation simply has to improve, that you cannot have a sense of lawlessness, that the Palestinians have to do a better job on the security front and in beginning to deal with terrorism. We talked about that. I believe we think that, between the Road Map obligations and the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings, there is plenty to do to sustain momentum.

Question: First of all, Secretary Rice, we just got the statement, but basically you said in the statement something about militias, about militias not being candidates for elections. So let me put it another way. Prime Minister Sharon said last week that Israel will not help if Hamas is part of the election. What is your view on that? And also, for the Europeans, what is there... Maybe Foreign Minister Straw... since the EU said yesterday that it is about to... I think €250 million was the number to Gaza... What do we do to assure that money that goes into the Palestinian territories will not go into failed projects that might go to waste?

Ms. Rice: Before turning to my European colleague, let me just say that I think the Secretary-General has said very well that there is concern that any democratic process must observe that you cannot have an armed option within the democratic process. But we understand that the Palestinian political system is in transition, that it is in transition towards a democratic system, and that that has to be a Palestinian process. We would hope that the elections can go forward and that everyone will cooperate to make those elections go forward, because elections are fundamental to the continued evolution and development of the Palestinian process.

That said, again, we have noted that, ultimately, it is the case that there is a fundamental contradiction between armed activities and the political process. Armed activities are outside the monopoly of the State on violence and the political process. And so that is a matter of principle, ultimately. We understand that this is a transition, and I think everybody understands this transitional process. This is going to be a Palestinian process, and I think we have to give the Palestinians some room for the evolution of their political process.

Jack Straw, Foreign Minister, United Kingdom: I am asked whether money put in by the European Union and other donors might end up as "failed projects which might go to waste". I say this: In recent years, not least thanks to the work of Salam Fayed, the Finance Minister of the Palestinian Authority, there have been higher and higher levels of accountability for the spending which has been financed by external donors, including the European Union. For the European Union's part, there has been intensive scrutiny, too, to ensure that the money is spent for the purpose intended. We are always alive to complaints that it is not being spent in the way intended, but Commissioner Patten and Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner, his successor, are very tough in ensuring that the money that is allocated is spent properly.

Question: We are talking about movement towards peace in the Middle East. Yesterday, you met to discuss the international conference on Lebanon. The main conditions were the issues of political, economic and institutional reforms, and also the implementation of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1595 (2005). Are there hidden requests, such as the implementation [sic] of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and also, the signing of an agreement or a peace treaty between Israel and Lebanon?

The Secretary-General: The dismantling of Palestinian militia in Lebanon does come under resolution 1559 (2004). But this is something that the Lebanese authorities will have to handle. And, of course, we have discussed this issue with them, and they will do it their way, in time, and organize themselves to do that. The other aspects of resolution 1559 (2004) that we have implemented we've discussed here in this house and in this room.

As to the signing of a peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel, that is a matter that the two countries will have to discuss. I'm not sure that on the Lebanese side they are ready to do that, as long as they believe that Shaba'a Farms is still under contention. And I think, in time, that may happen. But I don't see it in the cards today.

Question: This question is for Secretary Rice and for Foreign Minister Lavrov.

Just one day after North Korea, during the six-party talks, agreed to suspend, and eventually dismantle, its nuclear programme, it's coming out and saying that it expects this agreement ... first they expect to get the light-water reactor for a civil nuclear programme. Does this mean that the deal is sort of null and void, as it stands right now? Do you have to start from scratch?

Ms. Rice: Well, I think we'll just stick with the text of the Beijing agreement to which the North Koreans signed on. The text of the agreement says that we'll discuss a light-water reactor at an appropriate time. There were several statements afterwards that made clear what that sequence is.

This issue doesn't really arise, because, let's remember, that North Korea is not a member of the NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons). North Korea is not in good standing in the NPT. They have not agreed to IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards, and they are running a military programme that is clearly outside of the international obligations that they undertook when they were a member of the NPT.

So, I think that we will not get hung up on this statement. We will stick to the text of the Beijing statement. And I believe that we can make progress if everybody sticks to what was actually agreed to.

Mr. Lavrov: [Interpretation from Russian] I also think that we have to be guided by the text of the agreement. The text was very carefully agreed upon, and it was the subject of very difficult compromises. But it clearly sets forth the consistency of the steps that have to be taken, so that we might talk about cooperation in the development of nuclear energy in North Korea.

I think that we shouldn't rely on oral statements that could in fact be interpreted differently. But we need the text of the agreement itself. The most important thing now is to see to it that this agreement is carried out in practice. And this involves a great deal of work ahead, and we hope that it will begin soon.

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