



Secretary-General

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IN MESSAGE TO CIVIL SOCIETY CONFERENCE IN GENEVA, SECRETARY-GENERAL ENCOURAGES

PALESTINIAN EFFORTS TO FORM NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

Following is the text of the message by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the United Nations International Conference of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People in Geneva, delivered today by Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva:

It is a pleasure to extend my greetings to all the participants in the United Nations International Conference of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People, which is being held under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

While much of the world's attention has recently been focused on developments in Lebanon, the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory continues to worsen. The recent hostilities and Israeli incursions have inflicted further hardship on Palestinians, exacerbating already high levels of poverty and unemployment, destroying vital civilian infrastructure and exposing them to new and more serious shortages of water, electricity and, in Gaza, of food. An elaborate system of checkpoints and closures makes the movement of people and goods next to impossible. All of this combines only to foster bitterness and hatred. During my recent visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and in my talks with regional leaders, I stressed the need to act with urgency to prevent any further deterioration and violence.

Since the end of June, more than 200 Palestinians, including women and children, have been killed. This must stop immediately. Moreover, beyond preserving life, we have to sustain life. Crossing points must be opened to allow goods into Gaza, and so that Palestinian exports can reach their markets. It is also important for there to be progress in releasing Palestinian Authority officials recently arrested by Israel, and in President Abbas's long-standing efforts to secure prisoner releases.

Achieving these goals requires Palestinian efforts, including the release of the captured Israeli soldier, the provision of security at crossing points and an end to rocket fire against Israel from Gaza. As President Abbas rightly points out, quite apart from there being no justification for attacks that indiscriminately target Israeli civilians, such attacks serve absolutely no Palestinian interest.

I encourage Palestinian efforts to form a National Unity Government. If the Palestinians can unite around a realistic and acceptable programme, and, if this can help ameliorate Palestinian suffering and bring the security situation under control, it would be a positive step.

The United Nations will do whatever it can to support these efforts. Indeed, the international community continues to have a responsibility to work towards a comprehensive, just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. With the political dialogue now at a standstill, renewed efforts should be undertaken without delay to restart the peace process in the region.

Civil society has a key role to play in that regard. We in the United Nations have always attached great importance to the efforts of Palestinian and Israeli grass-roots organizations to engage in people-to-people initiatives, which can help trust and mutual understanding take the place of suspicion and fear. Civil society organizations also work closely with United Nations humanitarian and development agencies, often in difficult and even dangerous conditions, to provide basic services to the Palestinian people. Your unremitting efforts also help in upholding the basic principles of international law, and in heightening awareness of the question of Palestine.

In that spirit, I thank all the civil society representatives from around the world who are participating in this event, and offer my best wishes for a successful and productive conference.

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