



Secretary-General
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PRESS CONFERENCE BY SECRETARY-GENERAL BAN KI-MOON AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

Following is a transcript of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's press conference held in New York today, 16 March:

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Third, the Middle East.

As the Quartet said in its statement last week, we are deeply concerned over developments on the ground, and we condemned the Government of Israel's plan for 1,600 new housing units in Jerusalem.

As I have said before, I say again, directly and without equivocation: settlements are illegal under international law.

With regard to today's clashes in Jerusalem, a city holy to three religions: let me remind everyone that the status of Jerusalem is a subject of final negotiation. I call for restraint and calm by all.

As you know, I leave for the meeting of the Quartet in Moscow this evening, and I will work with our partners and the two sides to find a way to resume talks for a just resolution of this conflict. I will also have separate bilateral talks with the Russian leadership.

I am also gravely concerned about the situation in Gaza.

The Israeli policy of closure destroys hope – hope of a better life for all people, hope for recovery from the destruction and pain of the recent war.

As policy it is counterproductive. It undercuts moderates and empowers extremists. It destroys legitimate commerce and encourages smuggling. It blocks the road to a peaceful future for both sides in this conflict.

When I visit Israel and the Occupied Territories immediately after the Quartet meeting, I will go to Gaza so that I can assess the situation for myself, first-hand.

It is time for a change of direction.

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Thank you very much. I am ready for your questions.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, on behalf of the United Nations Correspondent's Association, welcome to this new auditorium, 226. This is the first time – the lighting, the setting is all changed. And the question is this: How deep is the crisis now in the Middle East and what will you try to achieve one year later during your next trip to Israel and Gaza?

Secretary-General: We have been frustrated enough. We have seen all these ups and downs in political negotiation and security and safety and the humanitarian situations in Gaza and the West Bank and elsewhere. There have been encouraging developments of the situations in the Middle East in general, as we have witnessed last year and recently. However, overall the situation has not made much progress. That is exactly why the Quartet has decided to meet in Moscow this week, and we will discuss, on all the matters, how the Quartet and the international community as a whole can contribute, first of all, to the resumption of negotiations. The proximity talks, which have been facilitated by the United States, should eventually be led to a direct negotiation between Israelis and Palestinian authorities. The recent announcement by the Israeli Government, the 1,600 settlements, has cast very negative atmosphere. This is not desirable. I condemned, in my capacity as Secretary-General of the United Nations, and the Quartet, as a group, also condemned this. And you have seen all these condemnations from the international community. These issues will be the top priority issues which I will discuss with Israeli leadership when I visit. And I'd like to see for myself what kind of impact we can bring, I can bring, to improve the humanitarian conditions in Gaza.

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Question: Mr. Secretary-General, on the subject of the Middle East and your upcoming trip, the most recent Quartet statement on Friday spoke of the possibility of consideration of "additional steps that might be required to address the situation". However, other than repeating over and over again the condemnation and the message, which I am certain you are going to do, realistically, what tools do you as Secretary-General have, or the international community have, to really get some movement here?

Secretary-General: The tools the Member States have, or the United Nations as a collective entity of all Member States -- we will have to discuss in the Quartet what additional steps the Quartet or the international community can take to facilitate the resumption of peace talks, as well as the implementation of the Road Map, in accordance with international law. That we will have to discuss again.

Question: What are your recommendations or ideas of what can realistically be accomplished?

Secretary-General: Any recommendation should be made there.

Question: Do you mean that the United Nations doesn't have any concrete suggestions to present to the Quartet at the meeting in Moscow?

Secretary-General: I am discussing with my senior advisers, including Mr. [Robert] Serry, our strategy towards this Quartet meeting in Moscow, what the United Nations, as Secretary-General, can propose [as] good recommendations or ideas for the Middle East peace process.

Question: I am following up on the Middle East, Mr. Secretary-General. Despite all the international condemnation, Israel continues to push ahead with its expansion of settlements, and declare contentious heritage sites as its own. As you go into the meeting with the Quartet, what gives you reason to think that Israel may be serious about resuming peace negotiations? Do you have any reason to think that they will stop their recent actions? And secondly, there have been reports that there was a conversation between yourself and an Israeli official who asked you to take a more balanced stance. Can you confirm that conversation took place, and your response?

Secretary-General: On the holy site issues, I have made it quite clear, and the international community has made it quite clear, that this is very sensitive and important to all religious groups, [including] Christians and Muslims, including these holy sites in Bethlehem and Hebron, at this time by Israelis is not possible. It is not acceptable. That is what I have made quite clear. I have taken note that the Prime Minister of Israel has made it clear that they will be sensitive to these holy site issues.

Question: She asked about whether you could confirm and your conversation with the Israeli, I believe it was Foreign Minister, and what your response was? He said to the press that he had had a conversation with you in which he asked the UN to be more balanced.

Secretary-General: That announcement by the Israeli Government was a unilateral announcement. Often, I am troubled by just unilateral announcements. I have been engaging with world leaders on many, many occasions, by telephone or through bilateral meetings. Normally, I have not released unilaterally the contents of the dialogue, particularly when it comes to telephone conversations. Therefore, often in [this] case, you have heard from the other side of my interlocutors with whom I had dialogue -- sometimes balanced, sometimes unilateral. This is one of those cases. I have made it quite clear my position: that we have -- as Secretary-General and as the Quartet -- we have made the condemnation of these 1,600 settlements, and I explained why I am going to Gaza, and what I expect. But there was no mention of what I have told to the Israeli Foreign Minister. That is regrettable that that should have been discussed and agreed. Normally, diplomatic practice is that you agree in advance up to where we will be releasing to the press. You should not expect that I should release all that I have discussed or I will discuss. That is normal and agreed and established diplomatic practice to preserve confidentiality and diplomatic and political sensitivities. That is what I have been doing very faithfully, reflecting and respecting the sovereignty of Member States. But often, I have received that kind of statement through the media. One came again from Sri Lanka, most recently.

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Thank you.

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