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'IF DOOR TO PEACE CLOSES, IT WILL BE VERY HARD TO REOPEN,' SECRETARY-GENERAL WARNS, URGING ARAB LEADERS TO SIGNAL STRONG SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIAN PEACE EFFORTS

Following is UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's message to the extraordinary session of the Summit Conference of the League of Arab States, delivered by Robert Serry, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, in Sirte, Libya, 9 October:

I send my greetings to the Arab leaders gathered in Sirte, and I thank Colonel Muammar Al-Qadhafi for hosting this important Summit. I wish you well in your discussion of the many challenges facing the Arab world today.

The question of Palestine is foremost in all our minds.

When President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu met on 2 September in Washington, they resolved to seek an historic Israeli-Palestinian agreement on all permanent status issues within a year. President Obama signalled his strong personal engagement, as did leaders in the region. The Quartet gave full support to this effort and is committed to convening an international conference in Moscow at the appropriate time, concurrent with direct negotiations.

The continuation and expansion of settlement building in the West Bank is contrary to international law and the Road Map. Moreover, the expiry of Israel's

10-month partial settlement moratorium, without anything in place to preserve an atmosphere for successful negotiations, has created a major obstacle to

progress. I have publicly expressed my disappointment at this development.

My Quartet colleagues have authorized me to confirm that we adhere to our statement of 21 September. In that statement, we noted that mutual trust and confidence are critical to successful negotiations, and reiterated our call on Israel and the Palestinians to promote an environment conducive to progress, including by refraining from provocative actions and inflammatory rhetoric. We noted that the commendable Israeli settlement moratorium instituted last November had a positive impact and urged its continuation, and we adhere to that position. We also recalled that unilateral actions by either party, including settlement activity, cannot prejudice the outcome of negotiations and will not be recognized by the international community. We called upon both sides to fulfil their obligations under the Road Map, encouraged the parties to work together to find a way to ensure that negotiations continue in a constructive manner and urged the international community to support their efforts.

In that spirit, I urge you to signal your strong support for President Abbas at this difficult time. He is demonstrating his commitment to legitimate Palestinian rights and to meeting the challenges of negotiating a just and lasting peace. I also encourage you to support his efforts and those of Prime Minister Fayyad to build the institutions of a future State. This work is making unprecedented progress and needs your political and financial support.

For my part, I will continue to support Palestinian reconciliation within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority, and I ask you all to do the same. We must also reaffirm our readiness to work together, not just for Israeli-Palestinian peace, but for Israeli-Syrian peace, Israeli-Lebanese peace and the comprehensive regional peace envisaged in Security Council resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

The situation in Gaza remains among my top priorities. The United Nations is at the forefront of efforts to assist the people and to press Israel to enable reconstruction and economic revival. At long last, we are making some progress. But the needs are huge and much more needs to be done — including exports, freer movement of people and broader reconstruction. As we work on this agenda, support from the Arab world is highly appreciated.

Above all, this is a time for statesmanship and wisdom. If the door to peace closes, it will be very hard to reopen. There is no alternative to a negotiated settlement resulting in the creation of an independent and viable State of Palestine living side by side with the State of Israel in peace and security. Let us reaffirm our common commitment to this goal and work together to achieve it in the year ahead.

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