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MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS COULD BE RE-ENERGIZED BY SEVERAL POSITIVE FACTORS,

INCLUDING PALESTINIAN UNITY GOVERNMENT, TOP ENVOY TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL

Council Hears from Some 40 Speakers in Day-Long Debate: Israeli Construction near Al-Aqsa Mosque, Lebanon Bombing Among Issues

A newly active Quartet, a Palestinian national unity Government, a more closely involved Arab world and the beginning of political dialogue between the parties had, when taken together, the potential to help restore calm and re-energize efforts to achieve a two-State solution in the Middle East, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process told the Security Council.

Briefing the Council and opening a day-long debate, Alvaro de Soto said that the Quartet, during its meeting in Washington, D.C., had underscored the critical need to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Last week, a very important step forward had been taken in the cause of stability and unity among Palestinians, with the agreement reached in Mecca to form a national unity Government. Next week, President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert were scheduled to hold a trilateral meeting with United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for the first Israel-Palestinian discussions in six years, which would be followed by a Quartet meeting in Berlin. The Mecca agreement incorporated texts calling on Ismail Haniyeh "to respect ... the agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization" and also to "respect international legitimacy resolutions".

However, many immediate and longer-term dangers and challenges to stability and peace would have to be overcome, including the challenges of violence, of developing the Palestinian economy and of the continued lack of any positive Israeli action to remove settlement outposts and stop barrier construction. This year alone, 137 Palestinians had been killed by fellow Palestinians in internal clashes. In Eilat, a Palestinian suicide bomber had killed three Israelis. Israel had shown commendable restraint in Gaza, but this year, 19 Palestinians, including 5 children, had been killed by the Israel Defense Forces.

He was also deeply concerned at continuing tensions over Israeli construction work on a new walkway to restore a broken bridge leading to the Mughrabi Gate of the Al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and accompanying archaeological digging. Israel had stated that its work was purely for safety and access reasons, but there had been a strong reaction in the Arab and Muslim world. Clashes had broken out between Palestinians and Israeli security forces at the site and in other places in Jerusalem.

Turning to Lebanon, he noted that at least three people had been killed and many others wounded today in a double bus bombing near the mainly Christian town of Bikfaya, north-east of Beirut. The bombings had occurred at a time of acute political tension in Lebanon, with domestic political parties at an impasse. Describing the 7 February incident along the Blue Line, where shots had been fired, he said that such incidents illustrated the continued volatility of the situation in southern Lebanon and the need for all sides to fully respect resolution 1701 (2006) and continue to act with restraint at all times. On 6 February, the United Nations had signed the Agreement with Lebanon on the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

In the ensuing debate, during which the Council heard from some 40 speakers, Israel's representative said the international community had clearly determined that any Palestinian Government must recognize the State of Israel, halt and disavow terrorist activities and accept and implement agreements previously signed with Israel, including the [Road Map](#). The published agreement on a so-called unity Government did not condemn violence and terrorism. Hamas had yet to release abducted soldier Gilad Shalit. A suicide bomber had killed three Israelis in Eilat. Further, the situation regarding activities in Jerusalem had been completely distorted. During the winter of 2004, part of the ramp leading up to the Mughrabi Gate had collapsed. The salvage works under way were for the sole purpose of erecting support pillars for a permanent access ramp.

He added that, last week, Israeli soldiers had been shot at by the Lebanese Army while looking for explosive devices near the Blue Line. The real violations, however, had been seen when the Lebanese Army had confiscated a truckload of arms on its way to Hizbollah, which was rearming through the trafficking of arms and munitions across the Syrian-Lebanese border. Meanwhile, Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, kidnapped seven months ago, still had not been

released. In order to lay the groundwork for peace, Israel was willing to work with moderates, strengthening their ability to fight terror, assisting them in meeting economic and humanitarian needs and helping with the development of their political agenda. For those endeavours to be successful, moderation must prevail over extremism. If Israel's neighbours made the right choices, they would be surprised to learn how far Israel was willing to go to secure the reality of a peaceful Middle East.

The Permanent Observer of Palestine said that a dialogue on Palestine National Conciliation held last week had culminated in an agreement between the leaders of the Palestinian people. President Abbas would commission Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh to form a Palestinian Government in the next couple of days. The formation of such a Government should provide for the lifting of the financial blockade. Now the question was whether Israel was ready for real and genuine talks to commence, which would forever terminate its occupation of the territories occupied since 1967.

However, the decision by Israel to continue with the politically motivated and extremely explosive construction and so-called excavation under the Al Buraq Wall in the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, as well as continued settlement activity and construction of its wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, could prove to be a catalyst for the historic moment to slip away. "The time has now come to offer real and genuine proposals that promise a just and lasting peace – one in which a Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital, will be established."

The representative of Lebanon said that, today, her country had been subjected to "a heinous terrorist attack that took the lives of innocent civilians and is emblematic of the instability our region is experiencing". The act aimed to intimidate the people of Lebanon, to cause panic and to destabilize the country. As for the events along the Blue Line on 7 February, it was clear that the Israeli armed forces had provoked the incidents.

Her Government strongly protested the ongoing Israeli violations of the Blue Line, in breach of resolution 1701, she said and asked the Council to press Israel to provide maps of where it had laid those 1.2 million bomblets. The Lebanese Government had undertaken all necessary measures within its capacity to ensure security along its borders and the Lebanese Army was doing its utmost to combat arms smuggling across the border.

The representatives of Qatar, South Africa, Ghana, Russian Federation, Indonesia, Italy, Congo, Peru, Panama, United States, China, France, United Kingdom, Belgium, Slovakia, Syria, Kuwait (on behalf of the Arab Group), Germany (on behalf of the European Union), Cuba (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), Azerbaijan (on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference), Turkey, Japan, Malaysia, Iran, Norway, Venezuela, Argentina, Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Senegal and Jordan also spoke.

Paul Badji, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, addressed the Council, as well.

The meeting began at 10:10 a.m. and was suspended at 1:45 p.m. Resumed at 3:05 p.m., it was adjourned at 4:45 p.m.

Background

The Security Council met today for an open debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. The Council was last briefed on the situation on 25 January by Ibrahim Gambari, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs (see Press Release [SC/8943](#)). For an overview of last year's debates on the issue, see the Security Council Round-up 2006 (Press Release [SC/8940](#) of 12 January 2007).

Briefing by Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace Process

ALVARO DE SOTO, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said that, when the Quartet had met in Washington, D.C., it had underscored the critical need to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Last week, a very important step forward had been taken in the cause of stability and unity among Palestinians, with the agreement reached in Mecca to form a national unity Government. Next week, President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert are scheduled to hold a trilateral meeting with United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for the first Israel-Palestinian discussions in six years.

He said a newly active Quartet, a more closely involved Arab world, a Palestinian national unity Government, and the beginning of political dialogue between the parties had, when taken together, the potential to help restore calm and re-energize efforts to achieve a two-State solution. However, as violence and tension during the last few weeks had attested, many immediate and longer-term dangers and challenges to stability and peace would have to be overcome.

On the Mecca agreement, he said the process of forming a new Palestinian Government, as such, had yet to begin, although some names of ministers had been agreed upon, including for foreign affairs and finance. The agreement incorporates the text of the commissioning letter President Abbas would send to Ismail Haniyeh to initiate the process of Government formation, which would call upon him "to respect ... the agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization" and also to "respect international legitimacy resolutions". The letter also includes a Government commitment to work to achieve Palestinian national goals "as ratified by the resolutions of the Palestine National Council and the Basic Law articles and the National Conciliation Document and the Arab Summits resolutions". Those references showed the potential of the agreement.

He said the Quartet will meet in Berlin on 21 February to give full consideration to developments, two days after the trilateral meeting convened by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The goal of the meeting, as stated by Secretary Rice, was "to have discussions about the broad issues on the horizon so that we can work on the Road Map and try to accelerate the Road Map and move toward the establishment of a Palestinian State." Quartet partners were determined to follow up on that and any subsequent trilateral meetings, as well as on the continued efforts being pursued bilaterally between Israel and the Palestinians.

Warning about challenges, Mr. de Soto said the first challenge was to curb violence. This year alone, 137 Palestinians had been killed by fellow Palestinians in internal clashes. Rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns and other heavy weapons had been used by both sides. That violence had taken a terrible toll in civilian lives, living standards, social fabric and psychological well-being. It was equally important to calm Israeli-Palestinian violence. In Eilat, a Palestinian suicide bomber had killed three Israelis and at least 36 rockets had been fired from Gaza since 25 January. Israel had shown commendable restraint in Gaza, but the number of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) search and detention campaigns in the West Bank had jumped by 58 per cent since the start of 2007. This year, 19 Palestinians, including 5 children, had been killed by the IDF.

He was also deeply concerned at continuing tensions over Israeli construction work on a new walkway to restore a broken bridge leading to the Mughrabi Gate of the Al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and accompanying archaeological digging. Israel had stated that its work was purely for safety and access reasons, but there had been a strong reaction in the Arab and Muslim world. Clashes had broken out between Palestinians and Israeli security forces at the site and in other places in Jerusalem.

A second set of challenges, he continued, was to preserve and build the capacity of the institutions of Palestinian governance, as well as the development of the Palestinian economy. The economy could not be developed without major steps from both parties to implement all aspects of the Agreement on Movement and Access. Implementation, however, had remained very patchy. Exports through the Karni crossing had seen a fourfold increase since 1 January, as compared to November 2006, but was still only 11 per cent of the target. Ninety per cent of Gaza residents relied to some extent on food aid. Closures in the West Bank now stood at 529 – an increase of 25 per cent over last year. Without greater movement and access, trade would continue to drop and reliance on aid would continue to increase.

He said Palestinian institutions, including schools, hospitals and ministries, had been badly harmed over the last 12 months. An extended strike over non-payment of salaries had taken its toll. The Authority's financial management system had been degraded and the security sector remained oversized, factionalized, unevenly trained and under split command. Any new Government would face a budget deficit of about 30 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Israel would need to consistently hand over the clearance revenues that it collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. During the past year, the programme of the Government had hampered the ability of donors to help to address the issues. Interventions had largely been through parallel mechanisms, which had gradually undermined the very institutions intended to serve as the foundation of a Palestinian State. To facilitate recovery, a resumption of direct support and a more holistic approach were needed.

A third set of challenges, he said, related to the continued lack of any positive Israeli action to remove settlement outposts, and the continued settlement activity and barrier construction on occupied Palestinian territory in the West Bank. It was vital that action be taken to ensure that final status issues were not further prejudiced by the creation of facts on the ground.

He noted that at least three people had been killed and many others wounded today in a double bus bombing near the mainly Christian town of Bikfaya, north-east of Beirut. The bombings occurred at a time of acute political tension in Lebanon, with domestic political parties at an impasse.

He said that the general calm that had been prevailing in southern Lebanon since the cessation of hostilities last August was disrupted temporarily on 7 February. The Israel Defense Forces had signalled to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) that it intended to cross the Israeli technical fence to clear a number of mines that it claimed to have identified north of the fence on Israeli territory. UNIFIL urged the IDF to suspend its action and to resolve the matter through UNIFIL's liaison channels and through an urgent tripartite meeting, so as to avoid an increase in tension along the Blue Line.

Despite those appeals, the Israel Defense Forces proceeded with the operation later that night. The Lebanese Army fired on the IDF after it made an opening in the technical fence, but while it was still on the Israeli side of the Blue Line. The IDF responded with at least one missile. No casualties were reported. Subsequently, an IDF bulldozer and excavator carried out earthworks to clear the area of mines and violated the Blue Line in the process. Two days earlier, and at the same location, the IDF had shot at and destroyed four improvised explosive devices on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line. The firing by the Lebanese Army constituted a violation of resolution 1701 (2006) and a breach of the cessation of hostilities agreement. The IDF also violated resolution 1701 by crossing the Blue Line, and the exchange of fire posed a threat to the lives of UNIFIL troops patrolling in the area.

He said that such incidents illustrated the continued volatility of the situation in southern Lebanon and the need for all sides to fully respect the resolution and continue to act with restraint at all times. In that regard, addressing concerns through the tripartite mechanism chaired by UNIFIL was of paramount importance.

He said that, on 6 February, the United Nations had signed the Agreement with the Lebanese Republic on the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The United Nations remained hopeful that the Lebanese institutions would be able to perform their tasks and responsibilities on the way towards the establishment of the Tribunal.

He said that the goal must now be to foster a dynamic in which positive developments were mutually reinforcing. The Mecca agreement signalled a rejection by Palestinians of internal violence and marked a renewed commitment by the Arab world to supporting Palestinian unity and moderation. Hopefully, that would lead to a Government that donors could support. Only if the security forces worked cohesively, rather than facing off in the streets, could the terrible violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory be tackled and security reform be durable. Further delay in supporting Palestinian institutions and reviving economic life could have devastating consequences. While negotiations with Israel remained the province of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and in the hands of President Abbas, the institutions of the Palestinian Authority also had responsibilities to ensure that Palestinian obligations were met under existing agreements.

He said that action by Israel to address the long-standing issue of prisoners, and by the Palestinian side to secure release of the Israeli soldier held hostage in Gaza, would be crucial to achieving lasting progress. Excessive expectations should not be placed on next week's trilateral meeting, but hopefully it would be the beginning of a genuine dialogue. The goal was clear – to end the occupation that began in 1967 and achieve an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State, living side by side in peace with Israel. The overall goal of a comprehensive peace between Israel and all its Arab neighbours must also not be neglected. It was important to act with the right mixture of firmness and flexibility with all parties to ensure that they moved decisively down that path.

Statements

NASSIR ABDULAZIZ AL-NASSER (Qatar), associating himself with the statement of the Arab Group, said the Palestinian territories had seen a different kind of escalation when Israeli authorities had violated the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa compound, allowing for demolitions and excavations. Those excavations were part of a pattern of actions by Israel to change the legal status of occupied Jerusalem and its historic and religious landmarks. Those actions were illegal and invalid.

He said the dialogue between Hamas and Fatah in Mecca had positive results. The step towards a Government of national unity was basic for the resumption of the peace process. He hoped that the establishment of the Government would be positively used by Palestinians and the Israeli Government. The ability of the Palestinian Authority to provide security and basic services would serve the interests of all stakeholders, and all stakeholders should, therefore, support the agreement. He called on the Israeli Government to lift the siege imposed on the Palestinian people.

Ever since adoption of resolution 1701 (2006), the borderline between Lebanon and Israel had been calm, if not for the recent events when an Israeli bulldozer violated the border line claiming it was clearing explosives. In a volatile situation such as that, the two parties should hold themselves to the provisions of the cessation of hostilities. He, therefore, called on the Council to seriously deal with the Israeli violations of Lebanese borders and airspace. He hoped that the upcoming Quartet meeting in Berlin would provide an incentive to revive the peace process in the Middle East. The Council must undertake an active and robust role to arrive at a just and permanent settlement of the Palestinian question.

DUMISANI S. KUMALO (South Africa), like previous speakers, welcomed the decision by Fatah and Hamas to form a Government of national unity in Palestine. The significance of the Mecca accord lay in its provision of clear evidence that the Palestinians were both capable and willing to settle their internal differences. The Palestinian leaders had also demonstrated their aim to forge a united and peaceful front to address the urgent task of ending the illegal occupation of their country, which remained the key to peace and development throughout the region. Furthermore, both Fatah and Hamas had made significant concessions that he hoped were sufficient to break the international siege on the Palestinian people. The opportunity presented by the accord, therefore, should not be squandered, and direct talks on final status issues should commence without delay. Hopefully, a new dialogue would be followed up by the establishment of confidence-building measures, such as the extension of the ceasefire to the West Bank and the release of prisoners on both sides.

He urged the international community to ease its financial blockade against the Palestinian Authority. He particularly urged Israel to release all Palestinian tax revenues, which belonged to the Palestinian people and were neither development assistance nor generosity. Those funds were urgently required to alleviate socio-economic hardships, including the deteriorating Palestinian institutions. The vision of a two-State solution and the principle of land for peace must underpin any permanent settlement of the Middle East conflict. Hopefully, the upcoming trilateral meeting, followed by the Quartet's meeting, would reinvigorate the peace process. Regarding the situation on the ground, he reiterated that Israel should refrain from taking unilateral action, which would predetermine final status negotiations, such as the building of settlements and the separation wall. The building of new settlements in the West Bank was contrary to international law. He was particularly concerned about the excavation work being carried out by Israel beneath the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and the demolition of the historic road connecting Al-Maghhariba with the compound. The compound was revered by millions of Muslims throughout the world and any damage to it would likely have serious repercussions.

The Middle East situation, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, had been on the Council's agenda since the United Nations' creation, he said. However, there had been a consistent failure by the parties and the international community to seriously address the challenges facing the region. A regional solution must address the plight of the millions of Palestinians. Also, the international community, particularly Israel, could no longer "pretend" that those living in appalling conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon and elsewhere did not exist. Peace in the region also hinged on ending the occupation of the Shebaa Farms and the Syrian Golan Heights. As President Thabo Mbeki recently wrote, "... the question can no longer be avoided – is it not time that the United Nations, genuinely representing all nations, assumes its rightful position and lead a global process to address all the interconnected challenges facing the peoples of the Middle East and West Asia?"

LESLIE KOJO CHRISTIAN ([Ghana](#)) said that, before the unfortunate confrontation between the Israel Defense Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces on 7 February, it had been expected that the cessation of hostilities would hold, ensuring the stabilization of the security and military situation along the Blue Line. He commended UNIFIL for its quick response to the crisis and hoped the two armies would continue to exercise maximum restraint. Israel and Lebanon did not need to be reminded of the need to commit themselves further to implementing a permanent ceasefire on the full acceptance of the Taif Accords and resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006) and intensifying efforts to revive the stalled Middle East peace process. Hopefully, the Quartet's efforts to launch meaningful negotiations would lead initially to the consolidation of the ceasefire within an international framework, with a definition of its parameters and rules and its extension to the West Bank.

He welcomed the Mecca accord with cautious optimism and hoped there would be an immediate end to factional violence and the stabilization of the political and security situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. It was expedient for the Palestinian Government of national unity to commit itself to the Quartet principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations. Because the stifling of international aid and the financial boycott imposed by Israel had led to severe disruptions to Palestinian basic services and impacted negatively an already fragile economy, he again appealed to all concerned to release such withheld funds. He also condemned Israel's demolition of the historic road connecting Al-Maghariba with the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, in addition to two rooms adjacent to the Al Buraq Wall. He further expressed concern over construction work initiated by Israel in the old city of Jerusalem.

He said that there could be no military solution to the Palestinian question and the vision of an independent, viable and sovereign Palestinian State living side by side with Israel in peace and security would be achieved only through compromises and negotiations in good faith.

VITALY I. CHURKIN ([Russian Federation](#)) said, over recent weeks, significant events had taken place, such as the talks in Mecca that had led to agreements on the creation of a Palestinian national unity Government. He hoped the future Government, set up in line with the demands of the Quartet, would become an important factor in relaunching peace talks. Implementation of the agreement should be accompanied by the removing of roadblocks in the Palestinian territories. There had been a pained response in the Arab world to the construction work near the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Defining the status of Jerusalem was an issue that must be resolved in direct Palestinian Israeli negotiations on final status issues. Parties should not, through unilateral steps, try to predetermine the final status. Stopping the work on the Temple Mount had been a step in the right direction.

He said the Quartet had recently met in Washington, D.C., and would meet in Berlin. During that meeting, the need to define a framework for the settlement of Palestine, without losing sight of the Lebanon and Syria track, would be discussed. Such a comprehensive approach might best be accomplished through an international conference. Unrest continued in Lebanon. He called on the Lebanese parties to seek political compromises and to refrain from violence. He was concerned at today's explosions in the country.

REZLAN ISHAR JENIE ([Indonesia](#)), associating himself with the upcoming statements on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, said that the intractability of the conflict in the Middle East was a matter of deep concern. He reaffirmed Indonesia's support for a peaceful solution that would fulfil the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination and Statehood, to independently conduct its foreign relations, to live in peace, and for every Palestinian refugee to return home.

He welcomed the Mecca declaration. There was an urgent need for the Palestinians to establish a unity Government. That would require not only moral support, but material assistance from the international community. Peace could not be obtained by diplomacy alone, but required the parties concerned to cease the use of force and develop collaboration. He deeply deplored the excavation in the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque and urged Israel to stop such activities, which threatened to increase tensions and complicate efforts to revive the peace process.

Regarding the situation in Lebanon, he noted with great concern the continuing Israeli air violations and recent crossing by the Israeli military of the Blue Line, which were a blatant violation of resolution 1701 (2006). As for the security situation, sustainable peace depended not only on deployment of an international peace mission, but on the presence of political unity and national cohesion. All parties in Lebanon must have a strong commitment to national reconciliation and the creation of a united and stable Lebanon.

He said that peace would only come to the region when the Israeli Government was willing to comply with Security Council resolutions, the Road Map, the Madrid terms of reference and the principle of land for peace, and when all Arab neighbours accepted Israel's right to live in peace.

MARCELLO SPATAFORA ([Italy](#)) said he was deeply concerned about the news coming from Lebanon. He condemned in the strongest possible terms today's attacks in Bikfaya, as well as any resort to violence, and he expressed his heartfelt condolences to the relatives of the victims. He, meanwhile, welcomed the agreement reached in Mecca by the Palestinians as an important step towards the start of reconciliation between the various Palestinian political forces. He particularly appreciated the role played by the Saudi King, who, with patience and cleverness, created the necessary conditions. It was necessary now to carefully assess the new Government's programme, which should reflect the Quartet principles as an essential condition for normalizing relations with the international community. He now awaited the terms of the agreement to set a Palestinian national unity Government, and he stood ready, together with other European Union member States, to work with a legitimate Palestinian Government.

While keeping to the results-based sequential approach of the Road Map, he underlined the urgent need to elaborate new strategies, which offered the parties a clear negotiating prospect. It was crucial that Israel, at the present delicate moment, refrain from any action that could be misunderstood by the Palestinians, particularly regarding Jerusalem's status. Equally important was a cessation of all forms of provocation by the Palestinians. It was time for negotiations to start on the basis of effective mutual confidence-building measures, including full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access, particularly in Rafah, whose opening should be routine rather than exception, as well as the implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh agreements, the release of prisoners and the complete transfer of customs revenues to the Palestinian Presidency. Above all, the truce currently in force in Gaza should be rapidly extended to the West Bank. Once direct talks had begun, a creative effort should be made to involve all regional actors.

He expressed deep concern over the recent incident between the Israeli and Lebanese armies, and he commended UNIFIL's prompt and effective intervention, which prevented a deterioration of the situation. He was concerned by the discovery of a weapons cache, promptly seized by the Lebanese authorities. Hopefully, any attempts to rearm irregular militias would be stopped. Full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), particularly the freeing of the two Israeli soldiers, was fundamental. He called on the Lebanese forces to renounce violence and to immediately resume the dialogue. He urged all the Lebanese political forces to seek a compromise on the way forward, something that, as the tragic events of the day showed, could no longer be put off.

JUSTIN BIABAROH-IBORO ([Congo](#)) said that he regretted the continued suffering of the Palestinians in the occupied territories, who were deprived of access to basic social services. Sanctions imposed by Israel since April 2006, which resulted in the suspension of direct financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority,

and Israel's retention of its customs duties had worsened an already precarious humanitarian situation and undoubtedly contributed to the escalation of the fratricidal war among the Palestinians.

He expressed concern about the violence following the construction undertaken by Israel at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, but did welcome recent initiatives to relaunch the peace process, as well as the Mecca agreement. That effort should be encouraged, particularly by lifting the financial blockade on the Palestinian Authority.

Regarding Lebanon, he expressed concern about the violence that could lead to a civil war there and he condemned today's bomb attack near Beirut. War between Israel and Hizbollah had accelerated the country's political, financial and economic crisis. He called upon the Lebanese to continue dialogue to find solutions to the various challenges. He deplored the unilateral steps that had caused conflict between Israeli and Lebanese forces on the Blue Line on 7 February. Both parties had the obligation to respect the Blue Line, and must refrain from any act of provocation. To create a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, all players concerned, including regional actors such as Syria, Iran and others, must be included. They could help stabilize situation and ensure a lasting end to hostilities.

JORGE VOTO-BERNALES ([Peru](#)) said the ceasefire in Gaza agreed on between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, as well as the 23 December meeting between the two leaders, had generated hope. He hoped those initial steps might be consolidated and lead to a new phase in the peace process. As the Quartet had pointed out, the parties must fully implement the measures on which they had agreed and abstain from any action counter to the Road Map. He welcomed the Mecca agreement. In order to be effective, the new Palestinian Government must align itself with the three basic requirements of the Quartet. The Trilateral Meeting on 19 February should firm up the political momentum. It was essential to adopt measures that would create a favourable environment for a process designed to create a Palestinian State living side by side in peace next to Israel.

Addressing the situation in Lebanon, he said resolution 1701 (2006) must remain the context for the Lebanese Government gaining sovereign control of its territory. Border activities could heighten tensions. He condemned the terrorist attack in Lebanon this morning. He urged the countries in the region to maintain a constructive attitude that promoted dialogue in Lebanon. The conflict in the Middle East could only be resolved through political negotiations, and the Quartet remained the most relevant mechanism in that regard. The Road Map was the inescapable reference point on which peace must be based.

RICARDO ALBERTO ARIAS ([Panama](#)) said that he wished to pay tribute to the leadership of Saudi Arabia, which had led to the Mecca Agreement. Implementation of that agreement would create the conditions for a better future for the Palestinian people. Hopefully, the new Government would be accompanied by decision-making in the political realm that would lead to the lifting of financial restrictions that affected the Palestinian people.

He said that the formation of a Palestinian Government of national unity was meaningful, but for progress to be achieved, all political forces in Palestine must commit to dialogue, reject violence and accept earlier agreements. He expressed concern about Israel's work on the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Even if such work was fully within the scope of law, it was not necessarily wise. The present moment should be taken advantage of to promote peace; for that reason, he urged suspension of the construction work.

He further deplored terror attacks by non-State actors on civil targets within Israel. The Palestinian Authority would not be credible until it could prevent such acts. Actions by Israeli forces in violation of international law were not acceptable. He appealed to leaders not to lose sight of the opportunity to move towards a lasting peace. The basic principles of the peace agreement were known to all – two democratic States living side by side in security. The international community must waste no opportunity to favourably influence that process.

Regarding Lebanon, he deplored recent acts of violence, as well as events along the border with Israel. He appealed to all political and social actors to resolve such conflicts through dialogue.

ALEJANDRO D. WOLFF ([United States](#)) said there had been a number of significant developments. Secretary of State Rice had held meetings with President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert during her January trip to the region. Washington had hosted a Quartet meeting on 2 February, after which the United States, European Union, Russian Federation and the United Nations had issued a statement that reaffirmed the Quartet principles and support for efforts aimed at realizing the two-State vision. The Quartet would meet again in Berlin on 21 February to assess the situation. Prior to that meeting, Secretary Rice would travel to Jerusalem, the Palestinian territories and Amman, where she would meet with Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and King Abdullah.

He said the United States strongly supported the bilateral dialogue between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas. The upcoming discussions would focus on advancing the shared goal of a two-State solution to the conflict, in accordance with the sequence of the Road Map. His country would continue to assess the outcome of the meetings in Mecca. While those developments were encouraging, the situation in the region remained delicate, as seen in the strong reaction to the construction of the ramp at the Temple Mount, or Al-Haram al-Sharif. He urged all parties to exercise great care when deciding whether and how to engage in any activity near sensitive religious sites. It was a delicate issue that required moderation and a clear understanding of the facts. There was no justification for the use of violence by protestors.

He said the 7 February incident along the Blue Line had underscored the need for the parties to exercise restraint, to cooperate with UNIFIL and to avoid actions that could further exacerbate tensions, in particular by the initiation of the use of force. It remained critically important that all those involved in the terrorist attacks in Lebanon since October 2004, including the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri and most recently Minister Pierre Gemayel, were held accountable. He supported the efforts of the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission and looked forward to the timely establishment of a tribunal of international character. Concerned about reports of continued shipments of arms to Hizbollah and other armed groups, he said the Council must be united in insisting that Syria and Iran abide by their obligations under Council resolutions to respect Lebanese sovereignty and end their support for the armed militias.

LIU ZHENMIN ([China](#)) said that there had been positive signs of late in Middle East peace efforts, including the Mecca agreement. He sincerely hoped all Palestinians, regardless of factions, could join together to effectively implement that agreement, to establish a unity Government and resume peace talks with Israel. Nonetheless, there were some worrisome trends in the region. Israel's construction at the Al-Aqsa Mosque had given rise to strong reaction among Arab countries. What happened there six years ago triggered large-scale violence and conflict, leading to a serious setback to the peace process. He hoped that all sides could learn the relevant lessons and respect religious and holy sites of both sides.

Regarding Lebanon, he called for calm on both sides, as well as a commitment to implementing resolution 1701. He hoped that those responsible for the killing of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri could be found and brought to justice. He strongly condemned today's bombing in Beirut and expressed the hope that Lebanese people could unite and seek peaceful means to resolve internal differences.

He said that the Middle East situation had affected the peace and development of the entire world. Relevant resolutions, the principle of land for peace, the Road Map and the peace initiatives of various Arab countries remained the basis for settlement. An independent Palestine living side by side with Israel was the only approach to settling the Palestinian question. He hoped that the Quartet could find a way to implement the Road Map as soon as possible.

JEAN-MARC DE LA SABLIERE ([France](#)), aligning himself with the statement on behalf of the European Union, said the Conference of Support for Lebanon held in Paris had been a major success, with pledges of \$7.5 billion. However, tragedy had once again hit Lebanon. The two bomb attacks on buses in Beirut was a reminder of the cost the Lebanese people were paying in affirming their sovereignty. France had condemned the cowardly attack on the eve of the commemoration of the attack on Hariri two years ago. It was more than ever essential that the Lebanese people come together in dialogue, he said, and called on all parties to preserve unity in the country. Regarding the south of Lebanon, he recalled the importance of full respect of the Blue Line and the need to reach a ceasefire soon.

As for Israel and Palestine, a number of events had generated hope, he said, and hoped that the peace process could once again be on track. Welcoming the Mecca agreement, he said the formation of a national unity Government would provide an opportunity for Palestine to overcome internal disagreements. The agreement represented a step in the right direction. The rapid creation of such a Government should be encouraged by the international community. He also welcomed the relaunch of dialogue between the parties. The 23 December meeting, and the visit made to the region by Ms. Rice and Javier Solana, had created political momentum. He hoped that the upcoming Summit meeting on 19 February and the Berlin meeting of the Quartet on 21 February would enhance the momentum. An international conference would be helpful in the peace process. There were many obstacles to overcome, but he counted upon the political will of the parties to meet the challenges.

KAREN PIERCE (United Kingdom), aligning herself with the statement to be given later by Germany, on behalf of the European Union, welcomed the Mecca agreement and expressed hope that the formation of a Palestinian unity Government would end factional violence. She condemned the 29 January suicide attack. Such attacks only further escalated tension in the region. Rocket attacks into Israel and Israel's construction work at the Al-Aqsa Mosque were also matters of concern. The international community must continue providing assistance to help the Palestinian economy develop. Economic reform went hand in hand with political reform. She expressed the hope for a lasting solution of two States living side by side in peace and security.

Regarding Lebanon, she condemned today's bus bombings, for which there was no justification. The United Kingdom continued to support the democratically elected Government of Lebanon and urged all parties to participate in dialogue. The United Nations had a central role to play in peace and stability in the region. Resolution 1701 was the best framework for solving Lebanon's problems. She urged regional States to avoid destabilizing the situation there. It was critical to make progress on the Shebaa Farms issue, on securing the release of captured Israeli prisoners and the implementation of an arms embargo. In the wake of the 7 February incident on the Blue Line, it was important for both sides to act with restraint. The United Nations had an essential role to play in investigating the assassination of Rafik Hariri. She hoped that Lebanese officials could find an agreed way forward and that the tribunal could proceed.

JOHAN VERBEKE (Belgium), aligning himself with the statement on behalf of the European Union, said that, on the question of the Middle East, one could not afford another lost year. The role of the international community was to create the necessary conditions for the resumption of direct negotiations between the parties. He welcomed the recent meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas and the initiative for a trilateral meeting. The resumption of dialogue should not be at the mercy of events. The responsibility of the parties was to demonstrate their commitments through negotiations. The Quartet was the guarantor and catalyst for different initiatives.

He welcomed the active part of the Arab countries and welcomed the Mecca agreement. If 2007 was to be different from previous years, one must rely on the actions of the parties. Belgium would be prepared to cooperate with a legitimate Palestinian Government. He condemned the firing of rockets into Israel, as well as the blind terrorist attack on the population in Eilat, and welcomed Israel restraint in that regard. He called upon Palestinian leaders to end the violations, and upon the Israeli Government to end activities involving settlements and the building of the Wall within Palestinian occupied territories. As a participant in UNIFIL, his country hoped that the political parts of resolution 1701, particular in regard to the Shebaa Farms, would be implemented. He condemned this morning's "serious, odious and tragic" events in Lebanon.

Council President PETER BURIAN (Slovakia), in his national capacity, said that, despite the many challenges, there was a window of opportunity to reinvigorate the peace process. The meeting at the end of last year between the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian Authority President had created a positive momentum, which should be further developed by concrete and immediate actions. The views expressed by the parties and regional leaders during the latest visit of the United States Secretary of State to the region had also been positive. He welcomed the upcoming trilateral high-level meeting; the Quartet meeting of 2 February had also been welcome. He also supported the idea of regular Quartet meetings at the level of principals and envoys. Like previous speakers, he said that the resumption of transfers by Israel of tax and customs revenues was desperately needed. He also hoped the recent agreement among the Palestinians would end the deadly internal strife and allow for early engagement and a continuation of dialogue towards a solution to the Middle East conflict.

Turning to developments on the ground, he expressed deep concern over the recent deterioration and condemned the suicide bombing in Eilat on 29 January. He also reiterated his country's call for an immediate end to violence by Palestinian factions, as well as attacks on Israel, notably the launching of rockets against Israeli population centres, and for the release of the abducted Israeli soldier. He supported the efforts of President Abbas in that regard. He expected Israel and the Palestinians to exercise the utmost restraint and to sustain and further consolidate the mutually agreed ceasefire in Gaza. At the present critical time, it was paramount not to jeopardize further possible progress and promising prospects for peace in the region. He called for a sensitive approach in dealing with religious sites in Jerusalem. The Israeli Government should continue its commitment to peace based on the Road Map, and he repeated his call for the immediate release of Palestinian Ministers and legislators in Israeli custody.

Noting that tomorrow was the second anniversary of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, he said it was high time to put an end to politically motivated violence in Lebanon. Proper investigation of that case and bringing the perpetrators to justice would contribute to reconciliation. The signing of the agreement between the United Nations and the Lebanese Government to set up a special tribunal to prosecute the suspected killers was a welcome development, and hopefully that Government would take the necessary measures to complete the ratification process without delay. He had been following with great concern the recent developments in Lebanon, including the clashes in the streets. Only through the united efforts of all Lebanese could a solution for many outstanding issues be found. Resolution 1701 (2006) provided a good basis for the stabilization of the situation. It was crucial that the resolution and other relevant Council texts were fully respected and implemented by all relevant actors in all aspects. The constructive role of Lebanon's neighbours, as well as others in the region, was crucial, he said.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer for Palestine, said that, based on the initiative of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud of Saudi Arabia, a dialogue on Palestine National Conciliation had been held last week, which had culminated in an agreement between the leaders of the Palestinian people. That agreement endorsed the cessation of any and all strife among the Palestinian people and the approval of the speedy formation of a national unity Government. Peaceful dialogue would now serve as the sole basis for solving political differences among the Palestinian people. Key issues, such as Occupied East Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees, the prisoners and the continuation of the illegal construction and building of the Wall and settlements would be given top priority.

He said that President Abbas would commission Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh to form the next Palestinian Government in the next couple of days. The President would call on the Premier of the next Government, among other things, to abide by the interests of the Palestinian people, to work towards achieving their national goals as ratified by the resolutions of the Palestine National Council, the Basic Law, the National Conciliation Document and the resolutions of Arab Summits, as well as to respect Arab and international agreements signed by the PLO. The formation of such a Government should provide for the lifting of the financial blockade.

The agreement produced a constructive environment for the upcoming meeting on 19 February between President Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, he said. That meeting would address practical issues, such as the release of prisoners, the release of taxes, implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access and lifting of restrictions on the movement of persons and goods in the West Bank. It would also address the overall political process. President Abbas would reiterate the readiness of the Palestinian side for talks on final status issues to commence at once. If that meeting proved to be a success, it would greatly influence the success of future meetings, including the Quartet meeting in Berlin. In order to arrive at two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and with secure borders, a specific timeline had to be established, with a mechanism of monitoring. An international conference could provide a way for accomplishing those objectives.

He said the Palestinian side had spoken. Now the question was whether Israel was ready for real and genuine talks to commence, which would forever terminate its occupation of the territories occupied since 1967. However, recent developments had dashed hopes for peace among the Palestinian people. Those included the decision by Israel to continue with the politically motivated and extremely explosive construction and so-called excavation under the Al Buraq

Wall in the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. That illegal action had sparked serious alarms that the intentions of the Israeli Government were not to promote peace, but rather to agitate the Muslims and Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

In a scene reminiscent of the September 2000 intifada, Israeli occupying forces had stormed the compound on 9 February, using excessive force against Palestinian worshippers and wounding dozens of them. The Old City of Jerusalem and its walls were protected by the United Nations Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972). Moreover, the Israeli action had been in violation of the 1994 Fourth Geneva Convention, The Hague Regulations of 1907, and in blatant defiance of relevant Council resolutions. The Council had repeatedly reaffirmed that actions taken by Israel aimed at changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of the city were null and void and without any legal validity whatsoever.

He said that if the Council were to succeed in halting and reversing Israeli actions, it would have played an extremely crucial role, not only in upholding international law, but also in creating the necessary environment favourable for enabling the peace process to move forward. He sincerely hoped that that would be achieved. The rest of the international community also had an obligation to ensure that no unilateral measures were taken that endangered the fragile prospect of peace. Illegal actions taken by Israel, including continued settlement activity and construction of its wall in Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, could prove to be a catalyst for the historic moment to slip away. "The time has now come to offer real and genuine proposals that promise a just and lasting peace – one in which a Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital, will be established."

DAN GILLERMAN ([Israel](#)) said that the international community had clearly determined that any Palestinian Government must recognize the State of Israel, halt and disavow terrorist activities, and accept and implement agreements previously signed with Israel, including the Road Map. Those were non-negotiable principles, prerequisites for peace that could not be circumvented. As such, the published agreement on a so-called "unity Government" did not address the reality on the ground. Palestinian terror, including the firing of Qassam rockets and the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip, continued. Israel was respecting the November ceasefire agreement, while the Palestinians were consistently violating it. Meanwhile, Hamas had yet to release abducted soldier Gilad Shalit.

Two weeks ago, a 21-year-old Palestinian from the Gaza Strip blew himself up inside a bakery in the southern city of Eilat, killing three Israelis. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for and praised the attack. Such action was the continuation of the Palestinian leadership's policy to wage a war of terror against Israel, rather than put its people on the road to Statehood. The only reason Hamas had sought a so-called unity Government was because of international pressure. Hamas must be made to understand that it could not bypass the world's demands by creating a façade of unity. There could not be a peace process so long as one side refused to acknowledge the existence of the other. Further, the Mecca agreement did not condemn violence and terrorism. Previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinians must be fulfilled before the unity Government could be addressed. "The previous agreements are not part of a menu from which Hamas can pick or choose only those elements it wants to fulfil."

He said that the reality of the situation in Jerusalem had been completely distorted and blown out of proportion. Since 1967, the Mugrabi Gate had been the access bridge to the Temple Mount for all non-Muslims. Only Muslims could enter through the other gates. Israel had consistently respected the sanctity of the area, and showed the utmost sensitivity when dealing with the various religious authorities. During the winter of 2004, part of the ramp leading up to the Mugrabi Gate collapsed, due to erosion caused by a snowstorm and an earthquake. A temporary wooden bridge was constructed, but by law the debris must be removed or the collapsed part rebuilt.

He said that the salvage works under way in the Jerusalem Archaeological Park were for the sole purpose of erecting support pillars for a permanent access ramp, to replace a pre-existing ramp. The bridge was for the benefit and safety of visitors to the area. He asked the Council to imagine the outcry, from Muslims and others, if the bridge were allowed to collapse. The works were taking place in sovereign Israeli territory and outside the very sensitive area of the Temple Mount. The digging was being conducted with full transparency, in accordance with antiquities laws and under the auspices of leading experts and professionals, in coordination with the various religious authorities. Israel had no intention of affecting the Temple Mount during the repair works or causing any damage to it.

He said that the situation in Lebanon, by contrast, was one of pressing concern. Last week, Israeli soldiers discovered explosive devices in a situation that reminded many of the incident that provoked last summer's war with Hizbollah. Later in the week, Israeli soldiers were shot at by the Lebanese Army while looking for similar devices in the same area, north of the technical fence and south of the Blue Line, all in sovereign Israeli territory.

The real violations, however, were seen on Friday, when the Lebanese Army confiscated a truckload of arms on its way to Hizbollah, which was rearming through the trafficking of arms and munitions across the Syria-Lebanese border. The Council should have addressed that incident, which shed light on the violation of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006). Meanwhile, Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, kidnapped seven months ago, still had not been released and there had not even been signs they were alive. He urged the Council to follow through with the commitment in resolution 1701 for their unconditional release.

Hizbollah's rearming and the killing of innocent people in public bus bombings were the real situation in the Middle East. A disturbing trend was emerging where some within the international community wished to advocate concessions, coddle the extremists and prematurely declare success. Those pronouncements only emboldened the extremists. The international community must send an unequivocal message to the forces of extremism – to Hamas and Hizbollah and to their puppet masters Iran and Syria, whose tentacles exerted a destabilizing influence – that it would no longer permit their villainous meddling in the region.

He said that, in order to lay the groundwork for peace, Israel was willing to work with moderates, strengthening their ability to fight terror, assisting them in meeting economic and humanitarian needs, and helping with the development of their political agenda. For those endeavours to be successful, Israel's neighbours needed to make the right choices. Moderation must prevail over extremism. If they did make the right choices, they would be surprised to learn how far Israel was willing to go to secure the reality of a peaceful Middle East.

CAROLINE ZIADE ([Lebanon](#)) said that today, her country had been subjected to "a heinous terrorist attack that took the lives of innocent civilians and is emblematic of the instability our region is experiencing". The bombs had killed three people and injured 22. The act aimed to intimidate the people of Lebanon, to cause panic and to destabilize the country. The Prime Minister had requested technical assistance from the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission in investigating the act of terror. Recently, Israel had begun construction and excavation work beneath the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. It had dealt heavy-handedly with civilians attending Friday prayers and peaceful protesters. Those actions not only seriously threatened the foundations of the Mosque, it also threatened the foundations for any other possible peace or goodwill in the region.

As for the events along the Blue Line on 7 February, Israel had claimed it was conducting demining activities, by night in an area where the Blue Line was not clearly demarcated. The Lebanese Armed Forces had conveyed a message to Israel through UNIFIL that Israel postpone its activities until the morning and that the matter be resolved through regular liaison channels. The Israeli Armed Forces persisted and their bulldozer crossed the technical fence despite warning shots, crossing into the Lebanese side by a width of 50 metres and a depth of 30 metres. It was clear that the Israeli Armed Forces had provoked the incidents. Her Government strongly protested the ongoing Israeli violations of the Blue Line, in breach of resolution 1701 (2006). It also looked forward to a prompt settlement of the Shebaa Farms issue.

She said Israel's July war on Lebanon continued today with over 1.2 million cluster bombs that continued to kill and maim innocent civilians. Israel dropped those bombs in blatant defiance of international humanitarian law. She thanked all countries that were helping in the demining efforts and asked the Council to press Israel to provide maps of where it had laid those bomblets, as well as all the maps of mines planted during the occupation of South Lebanon. On 25 January in Paris, the international community had demonstrated its support for Lebanon, with total pledges of \$7.6 billion after the Lebanese Government had presented a reform plan. The political message was clear: Lebanon's sovereignty and stability were vital and the Lebanese deserved and required international

assistance to achieve those goals. The Lebanese Government had undertaken all necessary measures within its capacity to ensure security along its borders. The Lebanese army was doing its utmost to combat arms smuggling across the border.

BASHAR JA'AFARI (Syria) thanked Mr. De Soto, even though he had failed to refer to the occupied Syrian Golan while describing the "situation in the Middle East". Israeli occupation authorities continued to detain scores of Syrian nationals in detention camps and continued to build settlements in the Syrian Golan, in violation of Security Council resolution 497 (1981). Associating himself with the statements to be delivered by Kuwait, on behalf of the Arab Group; Azerbaijan, on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference; and Cuba, on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, he said that one of surprising ironies in the annals of the United Nations, without which Israel would not have seen the light of day, was the fact that Israel had continued its racist settler occupation of Arab lands, as well as its suppression and acts of aggression against the Palestinians. It had become one of staunchest adversaries of peace, stubbornly spoiling the will of the international community. Meanwhile, those with influence, stood in the way of holding Israel accountable.

Given that Israel had violated all conditions of United Nations membership and reneged on its Charter commitments, it was legally legitimate to question the burden that resolution 273 (1949), by which Israel was admitted as a United Nations Member State, placed on the international community. Israel continued to desecrate all international laws and ethical norms. Its latest series of terror began on 6 February, with its excavations that threatened the foundations of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In 1969, Israel had tried to burn the Mosque. In 1996, it had built a tunnel close to the Mosque, and in 2000, Ariel Sharon, then the head of the right-wing opposition, had visited the Mosque compound, leading to the second intifada and obstructing the peace process.

Since 1967, Israel had also taken deliberate steps to change the demographic map of Jerusalem, confiscating territory and building illegal settlements, all in violation of United Nations and international instruments against building in international territories. A just and comprehensive peace required a genuine commitment by both parties. It was not about buying time, and providing Israel with everything in exchange for nothing in return. It required the effective withdrawal from the occupied Golan to the line of 4 June 1967 and withdrawal from other territories, including Jerusalem. Peace was not elusive, if the will was available on the Israeli side. More than 30 initiatives had been presented so far, all of them rejected by Israel, which was supported by the use of the veto of a super-Power. Until the Israeli Government took responsibility and stopped hiding behind military might, the region would lack peace and stability.

ABDULLAH AL MURAD (Kuwait), speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, said the attacks in Lebanon were a criminal act of terror that must be condemned. The question of Palestine was the quintessence and core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The resolution of the question represented the essence of the comprehensive and just solution to the conflict. He commended the agreement reached in Mecca between the Palestinian factions and hoped that a national unified Palestinian Government would soon be formed. Recently, the Occupied Palestinian Territory had witnessed a serious escalation in the acts of demolition and excavation in the perimeters of the Noble Sanctuary. It was a flagrant violation of the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as a threat to its infrastructure. Condemning those hostile Israeli actions, he called on the Council to intervene immediately. The Council had emphasized in numerous resolutions that such measures aiming at altering the legal status of Al-Quds were null and void.

He said Israel's continued work in the perimeters of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, its military incursions in the areas of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as the imposition of an economic siege and the illegal construction of the separation wall and new settlements, were all unlawful and illegal practices. Not only had those practices had a dire effect on the security and stability of the region and the world, they also undermined the international efforts that were being exerted to revive the peace process led by the Quartet. The just, durable and comprehensive solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict would never materialize if Israel continued its unilateral measures, aiming at imposing a fait accompli and influence the outcome of the final settlement negotiations.

An everlasting peace must end the occupation of Arab lands based on Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), the Madrid Peace Agreement, the principle of land for peace and the requirements of the Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative. That would lead the Palestinian people to regain all their legitimate political rights and their establishment of their own independent State with Al-Quds as its capital, as well as a total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Syrian Golan, back to the borders of 4 June 1967. In case Israel continued its unlawful and illegal demolitions and excavations in the perimeters of the Al-Quds Mosque, the Arab Group reserved the right to raise the issue once again to make Israel comply with relevant United Nations resolutions, especially resolution 242, 338 and 465 (1980).

THOMAS MATUSSEK (Germany), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said the continuous standstill in the Middle East peace process could ultimately prove to be the most serious threat to stability and security in the region, if not on a global scale. The Quartet intended to give active follow-up to meetings between Israeli and Palestinian leaders and to remain closely engaged at the moment of increased activity and dialogue. It was also committed to meet according to an agreed calendar and to monitor developments and actions taken by the parties. At the core of the issue was the need for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to launch a process with the goal of ending the occupation that began in 1967, and creating an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel.

Calling for continued international assistance to the Palestinian people, he welcomed the recent extension of the Temporary International Mechanism. He called on Israel for the immediate transfer of all withheld Palestinian tax and custom revenues through the Temporary International Mechanism and urged for full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access. The Union continued to be committed to the European Union Border Assistance Mission in Rafah. The Union welcomed the Mecca agreement and stood ready to work with a legitimate Palestinian Government that adopted a platform reflecting the Quartet principles. It reiterated its call for an immediate and unconditional end to all acts of violence and terror and called on the parties to consolidate the ceasefire in Gaza and to extend it to the West Bank.

He said the Union condemned in the strongest terms the suicide attack in Eilat and urged the Palestinian leadership to do everything in its power to put an end to terror and bring to justice those who supported it. The Union was deeply concerned at the recent authorization of settlement activities and the ongoing construction of the barrier on Palestinian land, as those developments were contrary to international law and the Road Map. He called on Israel to desist from any action that would threaten the viability of an agreed two-State solution. It would not recognize any changes to the pre-1967 borders other than those agreed by both parties.

The European Union welcomed the success of the international conference in support of Lebanon held in Paris on 25 February, he said. The Union and its member States had contributed more than 40 per cent of the total aid pledged. The Union condemned in the strongest of terms the targeted attacks on two buses in Lebanon. It also expressed great concern at the renewed violent clashes of the past weeks in Lebanon and urged all parties to refrain from violence. A solution to the current political deadlock should be sought only through dialogue and with full respect for the democratic institutions of the country. The Union reaffirmed its commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Lebanon. It reiterated its call on Syria and other countries in the region to refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of the country.

ILEANA NUÑEZ MORDOCHE (Cuba), on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said that she was deeply concerned at the impasse in the peace process and the increasing deterioration of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly as a result of the disproportionate, indiscriminate and excessive use of force by Israel. A just and lasting solution to the Palestinian question must be based on the principle of territory for peace, which included the establishment of an independent Palestinian State in all the Occupied Palestinian Territory since 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israel must stop its aggression against the civilian population of Palestine and withdraw its troops from the Gaza Strip to the positions it occupied before June 2006. It must put an end to occupation and illegal practices, including the construction of the separation wall.

She reaffirmed her support for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in his rejection of a so-called Palestinian State with provisional borders, which would in essence be an entity under the control of Israel, rather than a sovereign and independent State, as well as any attempt to alter the terms of reference of the peace process and impose an unlawful unilateral solution by Israel.

She expressed strong condemnation of Israel's heinous aggression against the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy city of Al-Quds al-Sharif, including the excavation work beneath the Mosque, which threatened its foundation. Those acts by Israel, the occupying Power, were considered a provocation to more than 1 billion Muslims in the world. The Non-Aligned Movement denounced Israel's continued denial of Palestinian worshippers' access to their religious sites.

She said that it was no secret that Israel's unpunished acts were, to a large extent, due to the protection provided by the United States, in the Security Council and other international fora. Acts such as the brutal military aggression against Lebanon or Israel's presence in the Syrian Golan were, likewise, unacceptable. Ongoing Israeli air and land violations of the Blue Line, in breach of resolution 1701, remained deeply concerning. The Shebaa Farms issue needed to be resolved. While condemning Israel's use of cluster bombs and deploring the death toll resulting from them, she called on Israel to provide the exact locations of those deadly weapons, as well as the maps of mines planted by Israel during its occupation of south Lebanon.

She said that all measures and action taken by Israel, such as its illegal decision of 14 December 1981 to modify the legal, physical and demographic condition of the occupied Syrian Golan, were null and void. Actions such as the illegal construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in the Syrian Golan since 1967 were a clear violation of international law. She demanded that Israel withdraw completely from the occupied Syrian Golan to the borders of 4 June 1967.

AGSHIN MEHDIYEV ([Azerbaijan](#)), speaking in his capacity as Chairman of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, read out a statement authorized by that group on 8 February. According to the statement, the Organization expressed its strong condemnation of Israel's heinous aggression against the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy City of Al-Quds al-Sharif by demolishing a historic road connecting Al-Maghariba with the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, in addition to two rooms adjacent to Al Buraq wall. It also condemned the excavation works under the compound that undermined the foundations. Those acts were a provocation to the feelings and sentiments of more than 1 billion Muslims in the world.

He said that, since 1968, the Council had adopted 16 resolutions that declared that measures and arrangements taken by Israel, the occupying Power, which aimed at changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of Al-Quds al-Sharif were null and void and without any legal validity whatsoever. By escalating aggression and creating new facts on the ground, Israel, the occupying Power, raised doubts about its seriousness in resuming the peace process. The Organization reaffirmed the centrality of the cause of Al-Quds al-Sharif for the whole Islamic *Ummah*, and emphasized the need to prevent further escalation in the region. It called on the Council to take immediate and urgent action in order to bring an end to Israeli violations against the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Al-Quds al-Sharif, and to guarantee Israel's respect for the Council's resolutions and international law.

BAKILKIN ([Turkey](#)) said that the complex web of issues in the region was more entangled than ever. The peace process was stalled and the recent internal strife in Palestine and Lebanon had further complicated the situation. With respect to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there was an absolute need for the realization of the two-State vision without further delay. He welcomed the recent agreement to form a Palestinian national unity Government and hoped it would be established on a political platform that embraced the Quartet principles. The Government should meet the expectations not only of the Palestinians, but also of the international community. As for the Middle East peace process, a constructive approach with a view to initiating the final status talks "can be within our reach". However, as the two parties considered the necessary steps to build mutual confidence, they should refrain from actions that might lead to new tensions and crises. He reiterated his rejection of terrorism.

He also urged all parties to implement constructive rather than divisive policies. It would be the "right thing" for Israel to halt its construction work around Al-Haram al-Sharif, yet he understood that the excavation was continuing. He urged Israel to act with utmost caution and consideration, and to assume policies that reflected a high regard for the religious sensitivities of Muslims. The Quartet statement of 2 February had been a step in the right direction. Regional efforts in support of the Quartet's work would be of great value, as well. The Syrian and Lebanese tracks should not be overlooked. A comprehensive settlement must take into account consideration of the relevant United Nations resolutions, the land-for-peace principles, as well as the Arab Peace Initiative. Lebanon's destiny was particularly significant for the future of the entire region. Unfortunately, last summer's war had set back that country's efforts to heal and rebuild itself. On the other hand, Lebanon could make a strong leap towards stability, if resolution 1701 was fully implemented.

KENZO OSHIMA ([Japan](#)) said the international community harboured deep concerns over the unremitting deterioration in the political, security, economic and humanitarian spheres in Palestine, particularly the internal political conflict, which had resulted in many deaths and casualties. While the international community could and should help, the Palestinians bore the primary responsibility to bring unity to their effort to address those problems. He, therefore, commended the recent talks in Saudi Arabia to form a unity Government aimed at ending the political difficulties in the Palestinian Territory. That positive step should contribute to resumption of the peace process. Japan strongly expected that, based on that agreement, the violence would cease and the new Government would make serious efforts to advance the peace process with Israel. He encouraged both sides in their common effort to find normalcy and peace, and would closely follow the developments.

He welcomed as positive the step taken by the Israeli Government to partially transfer tax and customs revenues to the Palestinian Authority. He also expected Israel to take measures to reduce the number of checkpoints and to transfer further tax and customs revenues. Further, he expected that both sides would continue their peace efforts with a strong determination, which included an extension of the ceasefire agreement to the West Bank and the safe return of the abducted Israeli soldier. At the same time, the international community, particularly the countries in the region and the major donors, must strengthen proactive engagement to support the Palestinians' efforts to advance the peace process. Of particular importance was the need to give strong, tangible and visible support to President Abbas, who had been exerting a most serious effort to ensure the interests of all of the Palestinian people. Japan would continue to assist the Palestinians, as a major and long time participant in that regard.

Touching on the situation in Lebanon, he hoped that the concerned parties and factions in the country would engage proactively in efforts towards stability and reconstruction. There remained many challenges to be addressed, foremost among them the issue between Lebanon and Israel for full implementation of resolution 1701 and stabilization of the situation in the country. The disarming and disbanding of all remaining militias, as well as the delineation of the border, were among the key issues that must be tackled with vigour. A comprehensive peace that included both the Lebanese and Syrian tracks was the only way to achieve permanent peace in the region. Japan expected Syria to play a proactive role for the realization of regional peace and stability. The region was fraught with risks and dangers, but there were encouraging initiatives that required strong international support, in order that further escalation of tension and conflict might be averted. Not least among the issues to be tackled were the situation in Iraq, the Iranian nuclear issue and the situation in Lebanon. Those issues were all affected by, and interrelated with, one another. That was why it was so important to ensure a positive outcome to the core issue -- the Middle East peace process, including the Palestinian problem.

ZAINOL RAHIMZAINUDDIN ([Malaysia](#)) said that he hoped that the Council would follow up today's debate with timely and concrete action. The Palestinian question remained the single most important catalyst feeding conflict, strife and terrorism, not only in the Middle East, but throughout the world. The lack of political commitment and will, particularly by the major players, was well-manifested through the incapability of the Council to come up with relevant resolutions. Meanwhile, Israel continued to disregard international law, United Nations resolutions and calls by the international community to stop their atrocities towards the Palestinians.

In addition to violence against the civilian population, destruction of civilian infrastructure, strangulation of the Palestinian economy, construction of an illegal separation wall and illegal settlement activities, Israel's latest belligerent action was excavation works around and beneath the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque and willfully destroying religious, cultural and heritage sites in Al-Quds. He condemned Israel for such actions, which were a direct violation of international law, and demanded an immediate stop to excavation works that had a direct impact on the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He also urged the Security Council to demand Israel to immediately stop those illegal activities and called upon the international community to intervene.

He said that Israel must be held responsible for all breaches of international law. Continued inaction and paralysis by the Security Council on Israeli actions would be interpreted as promoting a double standard. The Quartet process must be brought back on track, and Israel must agree to return to the peace process and implementation of the Road Map.

MEHDI DANESH YAZDI ([Iran](#)) strongly condemned today's terrorist acts in Lebanon and expressed condolences to victims and the Lebanese people. He said that the Israeli regime's recent atrocious acts and insolent expansionist policy had once again exacerbated the already dire situation in the volatile region. Its recent heinous action against the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy City of Al-Quds al-Sharif had yet again displayed the aggressive and racist nature of the regime. He strongly condemned Israel's continued excavation work beneath the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. It was a provocative and insulting measure that undermined the sanctity and foundations of the Mosque compound and threatened it with collapse. Equally condemnable was Israel's continued policy of denying Palestinian worshippers access to their religious sites, and its intention to construct a tourist site below the compound.

He said that Israel's latest illegal act was a nefarious attempt to colonize and Judaize Al-Quds al-Sharif through changing the status, demographic composition and character of the Holy City. Such deplorable policies and practices were in line with other Israeli war crimes and atrocities. The international community must prevent Israel from carrying out its dangerous designs against Palestinians, which would jeopardize peace and security in the whole region. Unfortunately, one delegation, exploiting its permanent presence at the Security Council and its veto privilege, kept preventing the Council from taking any meaningful action. Those who impeded justice and accountability for Israeli war crimes by repeatedly abusing the veto power bore responsibility for the bloodshed in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

He said that, throughout the period under review, the Israeli regime had persisted in its aggressive policy towards Lebanon, in violation of resolution 1701. Durable peace in the region would only be possible through an end to occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories, the return of all Palestinian refugees and a democratic mechanism that enabled the inhabitants of Palestine and the Palestinians driven out of their homeland to determine their future in a democratic fashion. It could not be achieved through State terrorism, occupation, intimidation and aggression. Lastly, he rejected the baseless allegations by Israel and the United States made in the Council today. They were yet another attempt to divert the international community's attention from Israel's crimes in Palestine and elsewhere by raising unfounded allegations against others.

MONAJUUL ([Norway](#)) said that the Mecca agreement was an important step forward. The formation of a unity Government would give President Abbas a broad basis for negotiating with Israel. It was essential that the international community continue to build on what had been achieved and offer its encouragement. She welcomed the recent statements by the Quartet and expressed full support for the upcoming tripartite meeting, which would, hopefully, encourage the resumption of a peace process leading to a two-State solution.

She urged the parties to implement fully what had been agreed at the 23 December meeting between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and to meet their obligations under the Agreement on Movement and Access, the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings of 2005 and the Road Map. The Mecca agreement should be an important step towards ending internal violence and creating stability in the Palestinian Territory. The new Government should reinstate the rule of law in Gaza and act decisively against terrorism and rocket attacks on Israel. She urged the immediate release of the captured Israeli soldier and the detained members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. Supporting Palestinian institution-building was crucial in building a viable, democratic and independent Palestinian State that could live side by side in peace with Israel.

Finally, she condemned today's bombing in Lebanon and extended her condolences to the victims and people of Lebanon.

FRANCISCO JAMIER ARIAS CÁRDENAS ([Venezuela](#)), aligning himself with the statement made on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said that Israel had continued establishing civilian settlements in places that had previously been vacated, in clear violation of the Road Map, leading to an increase in the number of settlers on the West Bank. Peace in the region could only be achieved by fully implementing the pertinent Security Council resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative, the principle of land for peace and the Road Map. It was necessary to establish an independent Palestinian State responding to the aspirations of liberty, independence and security.

He reaffirmed his firm support for the legitimate, democratically elected Government in Beirut, and for the territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Lebanon. Venezuela fully supported the reconstruction of Lebanon and reiterated its condemnation of actions committed against that country. Resolution 1701 must be firmly applied. The abuse of the veto by the United States with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict had been used as a veil to cover up important human rights violations. The situation of violence in Iraq was clear evidence of the consequences of unilateral actions in violation of international law, as was the case of the United States invasion of that country.

CESAR MAYORAL ([Argentina](#)) noted that, in spite of the efforts since 2002, the objective of two States living side by side in peace and security continued to be as elusive as ever. If the Quartet did not play a more proactive role in the peace process, it would be transformed into a negligible mechanism. The parties directly involved, however, had the principal responsibility for halting the peace process. It was the Palestinian Authority's responsibility to maintain peace and order in Gaza, to avoid mortar attacks against Israel, free Israeli soldier Shalit, reform institutions and combat extremism. He supported the recent agreement to create a unity Government between President Abbas and Hamas. The authorities must recognize Israel's right to exist, accept the previous agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority and renounce violence.

For Israel's part, settlement expansion practices, construction of the separation wall, closures and restriction of movements, illegal assassinations, excessive use of force and the arbitrary arrest of Palestinian officers had not generated hope in the Palestinian population. As a result, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza had deepened, worsening the precarious living condition of the Palestinian population. Peace negotiations were the only way. The international community, especially the Quartet and the Council, needed to assume a more active role in helping the parties reinstate the negotiations and end the vicious circle of death, vengeance and retaliation.

Regarding Lebanon, he expressed deep concern for the recent violence along the Blue Line. The arms embargo stipulated by resolution 1701 must be respected, not only by the parties, but also by all States. The two Israeli soldiers captured by Hizbollah in 2006 must be freed. The Lebanese themselves bore the responsibility for advancing on the basis of national consensus on key issues stipulated by resolution 1701. He denounced today's explosions in northern Beirut and expressed condolences to the victims' families.

He said another fundamental ingredient in the search for peace was the end of the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights and the devolution of the territory to Syria in accordance with resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), as well as through the adoption of policies by Syria that demonstrated its commitment to regional peace and stability. While the debate had historically focused on the peace process between the Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrians on one side, and the Israelis on the other, the situation in Iraq and Iran added an additional dimension. The Council needed to play a more active role, and the parties needed the courage to sit down at the negotiating table.

HAMID CHABAR ([Morocco](#)), associating himself with the statements on behalf of the Arab Group, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, said the situation in the Middle East raised both hopes and concerns. Hope had been renewed in the wake of the Mecca agreement, international engagement and direct negotiations between the parties. Concern remained because of the explosions in Lebanon, as well as the continued tense situation in al-Quds due to the provocation by Israel. The King of Morocco, as President of the Al-Quds Committee, had stated that the renovations near the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound had led to the collapse of a gate and two rooms adjacent to Al Buraq Wall, which were important religious and historic sites. The actions were new violations of the sanctity of the Mosque and provoked the feelings of all Muslims.

He said the King of Morocco had condemned all activities aimed at changing the demographic character of the city and had reaffirmed the necessity of Israel to abide by resolutions on Jerusalem, as well as on the necessity to preserve the demographic and cultural character of Al-Quds. He had called on Israel to immediately cease the actions and concentrate on peace negotiations and mutual respect. The Council should urge the Israeli Government to immediately end the violations. A just and balanced peace as a result of negotiations was the only basis for international legitimacy. Such a just and balanced peace should lead to withdrawal by Israel from all occupied territories, as well as to an independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital.

FARUKH AMIL (Pakistan) said the hope that had emerged from the respite in violence brought about by the ceasefire in Gaza had been short-lived when, yet again, the region had been plunged into despair by Israeli actions in and around the Al-Haram al-Sharif compound. Although media reports claimed that the controversial construction work near the Al-Aqsa Mosque would be put off to allow public consultations, preparatory excavations continued, much to the anguish of Muslims the world over. Those actions were illegal and "play with the emotions of the Muslim world". They also threatened peace and security in the region. Since 1968, the Security Council had adopted 16 resolutions repeatedly declaring that measures and arrangements taken by Israel aimed at changing the legal status, demographic composition and character of Jerusalem – Al-Quds al-Sharif – were null and void and without any legal validity whatsoever. Those acts undermined international efforts to resume the peace process and they prejudiced the final status talks by creating new realities on the ground.

He called on the Council to take urgent action to end the Israeli violations against the Al-Aqsa Mosque and on Israel to respect the Council's resolutions and international law, particularly international humanitarian law. He also strongly urged the Israeli side to halt all work at the site and to take all necessary precautions to preserve the holy places. While Israeli actions posed new obstacles to peace, the Muslim world had been sincerely engaged in promoting peace in Palestine and the Middle East, with the active intercession of the Saudi King. The Council and the Quartet should welcome the latest development – a Palestinian unity Government that was willing to negotiate peace with Israel. That should lead to an end of the economic boycott and to concerted efforts to ensure the stability of the Palestinian Authority. That should also enhance its capacity to preserve peace and promote development. The Israeli-Palestine issue was at the heart of the multiple challenges confronting the region. A comprehensive, just and lasting solution based on Council resolutions, the land-for-peace principle, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Road Map was urgently needed.

MUHAMMAD ALI SORCAR (Bangladesh), aligning himself with the statement made on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said the occupation must be recognized as central to the issue of Palestine. He reiterated full support to the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to a sovereign and independent State, with East Jerusalem as its capital. For a just and sustainable peace to take root, Israel must meet all its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention, relevant General Assembly and Security Council resolutions and other peace initiatives. Hopefully, the recent agreement reached in Mecca between Hamas and Fatah would create an enabling environment for peace through the formation of a national unity Government that would lead to the lifting of the siege currently imposed on the Palestinian administration.

He said that, due to the extreme political sensitivity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, very little archaeological excavation had been done until now; there did not appear to be any reason why that should suddenly change. With major political issues pending, carrying on that plan was in no way helpful to the peace process. Digging under the holy site gave the feeling that the shrine above it was under threat. Now was not the time and place to look for ancient artefacts. The construction and excavation work should immediately stop. The Security Council had a responsibility to halt the ongoing work, as it could further destabilize an already imperilled peace effort.

PAUL BADJI (Senegal) said recent developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory were of great concern regarding the peace process. Every time there was some hope for peace in the region, various acts undermined what had been achieved during long years of effort and compromise. The relative calm that had recently reigned had suffered a blow, because of the decision by Israeli authorities to begin archaeological work at the foot of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. Those actions were compounded by restrictions not allowing Palestinian men younger than 45 to have access to the Mosque. All that would raise resentment, not only among Palestinians, but also among the Muslims in the *Ummah*. He called on Israel to halt the systematic destruction of Islamic symbols in the city.

He welcomed the Mecca agreement towards the formation of a national unity Government. That agreement should help to reconcile Palestinian leaders with a view to resume negotiations with Israel. He called on the international community and the Quartet to render assistance. The Council should continue to urge the parties to strictly implement its resolutions and international law.

BASHEER ZOUBI (Jordan) said that Palestine remained the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which affected peace in the entire Middle East region. The Mecca agreement was an important step forward. While the Palestinian parties were reaching an agreement in Mecca, however, Israel had begun demolition and excavations in Al-Quds Al-Sharif, a grave escalation that jeopardized many Islamic holy sites and was unacceptable under any pretext.

He said that Jordan had strongly condemned Israel's violations at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, beginning with the excavation and including the use of force against worshippers. The continuation of the desecration of any holy sites or symbols would only lead to an escalation of violence. Islamic sites could not be desecrated: they were the responsibility of the religious authorities, not the Israeli Government. The sites were inside Jerusalem, where Israel had no sovereignty, so Israel's actions were clearly in violation of Security Council resolutions. He called on Israel to cease such illegal violations immediately and for the Council to make all efforts to end illegal practices, such as excavations and attempts to eradicate Islamic sites in Al-Quds.

Speaking in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Mr. BADJI said the Committee was extremely concerned at the events in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, as a result of the Israeli occupation. The restrictions on movements and the closing of the border hindered humanitarian assistance, economic recovery and development. Frustration was fomenting extremism. In that light, it was extraordinary that the Israeli Government would authorize excavations near the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Council had reaffirmed the fact that the Fourth Geneva Convention applied to all occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, and had declared that all steps taken to modify the demographics or character of East Jerusalem were null and void.

He welcomed the Mecca agreement, as well as the assistance given by regional parties. The new Government of national unity should put an end to rocket-firing on Israel and other attacks targeting civilians. He hoped that financial restrictions could now be lifted. The Committee welcomed the December ceasefire in the Gaza strip, saying that such a ceasefire must now be expanded to the West Bank, and that the international community should create an effective monitoring mechanism. He appealed to Israel to end its military operations and the use of excessive force, and appealed to both parties to end immediately all acts of violence. The Council must live up to its responsibilities by helping to put an end to violence and poverty in the Occupied Territory.

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