
Moscow, Russian Federation, 9 May 2005 - Secretary-General's press conference with other members of the Middle East "Quartet"

SG: As you know, we have just completed a meeting of the Middle East Quartet, in which we covered a lot of important ground, as you will see later from the statement, or the communiqué, we will be issuing.

We emphasized that this is a hopeful and promising moment for both Palestinians and Israelis. They both deserve the full support of the international community. And we reaffirm our support for the Israeli initiative to withdraw from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank.

We strongly reiterate our commitment to the two-state solution and to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank as a way of re-energizing the Roadmap. We stress the importance of full and complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as an important step paving the way towards realizing the vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. A new Palestinian state must be truly viable, with contiguity in the West Bank. No party should take unilateral actions that would prejudice the final status issues. The Quartet urges both parties to fulfill their obligations under the Roadmap.

We express our full support for our Special Envoy for Gaza Disengagement, Mr. James Wolfensohn. There is also an urgent need for the Israelis and Palestinians to coordinate directly and fully on withdrawal preparations. This will require close coordination with both Israel and the Palestinians to identify and implement those actions and policies that will ensure smooth and successful withdrawal. Creating the environment conducive for a long-term sustainable and viable economic development of all the Palestinian territories would constitute a suitable basis for additional assistance efforts by the international community.

The Quartet recognizes that economic development and progress on security go hand in hand. Security reforms and the re-establishment of rule of law are necessary to create an enabling environment for economic growth and political progress.

We also recognize the need for additional efforts by the international community to assist the Palestinian Authority in accomplishing these tasks, including by re-building the capabilities of the Palestinian security services.

In that regard, we welcome the recent concrete steps that President Abbas has taken towards reform of the Palestinian security services, and stress the need to continue implementation of these reforms. We commend the Palestinian Authority's commitment to democracy and look forward to the holding of free, fair and transparent multi-party legislative elections in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem under the scrutiny of international observers.

We also took advantage of today's meeting to introduce Mr. Alvaro de Soto, my new Envoy to the Quartet, and also welcome Mr. David Welsh, the new US Envoy to the Quartet.

Finally, the Quartet reaffirms its commitment to a just, comprehensive and lasting settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict based on resolutions 242 and 338 and will remain engaged with all the parties to that end.

We now take your questions.

Q: Have you discussed the Russian proposal about the international meeting which [President] Putin made in Cairo and what is the result of your discussion?

Sergei Lavrov: On the whole, we agreed that the Quartet should remain in permanent contact with the parties and with each other. We all agreed, and it was reflected in our communiqué, that our final goal lies in a comprehensive and just settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And the proposal of President Putin about thinking of the future means the need not only to concentrate on the immediate tasks of the Palestinian-Israeli settlement, but to regard this process as a whole and to think about the future. This also includes our thinking about the multilateral aspects of the international settlement. We agreed to pursue our exchange of opinions in this regard. All the members of the Quartet believe that this is a very important aspect.

Q: (for Condoleezza Rice): There had been a few basic steps that needed to take place in order for the Roadmap to get underway: the release of prisoners by the Israelis, the disarming of militants by Palestinians. What is going to happen to the Roadmap when you cannot even get these basic steps underway?

Condoleezza Rice: First of all, we are all in agreement that this is a time when we must seize the opportunity before us, an opportunity presented by the Palestinian elections and the new Palestinian authorities and the coming Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza and four northern territories of the West Bank. We also believe that the parties should intensify their efforts to fulfill the Sharm- el-Sheikh agreements. But I would just caution that this process will have its ups and downs over the next several months. The obligation of the international community represented here by the Quartet is to help the parties to move through these difficult issues to make achievements so that we can complete the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza and four settlements in a way that accelerates our ability to make progress on the Roadmap. And so since we had a report today of General Ward's efforts with the Palestinians and, on behalf of the international community, on security reform with the Palestinians, which I think this will contribute to this effort. So we will intensify our efforts, and we expect the parties to intensify their efforts as well.

Q: (for the Secretary-General and Condoleezza Rice): How can you assess the Arab initiative under the Roadmap, because this initiative proposes peace not only to Palestinians and Israelis, but rather to Arabs and Israelis?

SG: I think what you see from the communiqué is that we are not limiting our efforts, we are focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but we do indicate that the ultimate objective is to see settlement in the region based on UN resolutions 242 and 338. And of course, we are also very conscious of the Arab initiative which was put forward in Beirut, and I think that is what you are referring to, which is part of the basis on which we are going forward. In fact, when you look at the UN situation and the Arab initiative, in effect exchanging land for peace and ensuring that the whole region is not only at peace and security, but that they move on to have a normal neighbourly relationship. In this broader context, the

initiative put forward by the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in the Beirut summit was an important contribution, and we bear that in mind as we move forward.

Condoleezza Rice: Let me just underscore that I think that the Roadmap does incorporate many of these ideas, and we are devoted to moving forward on the Roadmap. And obviously, the true goal here is to have two states – Israel and the Palestinian state – living side by side in peace and democracy, but in a region that is also at peace. But let me just emphasize that many opportunities have been missed in the Middle East, and we have a real opportunity before us in the next several months to have a successful disengagement of Israel from the Gaza and four West Bank territories. We then have a very strong possibility of the establishment of democratic transparent institutions that can be the basis of a Palestinian state, of economic development in this region that can improve the lives and the hopes of the Palestinian peoples. And what you hear here is the commitment not to miss the opportunity that is just in front of our very eyes. So when we talk about this next four or five months, it is not because we do not have a bigger vision, it is because we recognize the opportunities that are right before us, if we are to build confidence and trust to move forward.

Sergei Lavrov: In conclusion, I would like to thank all my colleagues for holding this meeting in Moscow. It is very symbolic that this meeting takes place on the Victory Day, on the day when we mark the 60th anniversary of our victory in the World War II. At that time, we united our efforts to combat our common enemy, and today we need also to unite our efforts to fight a new enemy, which is international terrorism. The Arab-Israeli conflict is the holdover of the past, which we have now, and this conflict nurtures extremism and, in some part, terrorist acts which occur in the region. It is only together, only through our combined efforts that we can achieve the settlement in the region, and through the Quartet as well. I hope, as my colleague Condoleezza Rice mentioned, this chance that we have this year, will not be missed. Thank you very much.