
New York, 6 February 2004 - Secretary-General's press encounter following Liberia Reconstruction Conference

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Q: Mr. Secretary-General, you have welcomed the Israeli proposal to dismantle settlements in the Gaza Strip, but now the Israelis are considering relocating some of those people in the West Bank. Is that also a move that you would welcome?

SG: I think we need to get all the details on that. In fact, I have just spoken to Prime Minister [Ariel] Sharon this morning on this issue and on developments in the Middle East. We had a very frank and long conversation and I will await details of how they intend to implement [inaudible]. You know, I have indicated that if the Quartet can help with the implementation we will be happy to do that. He will be coming to the [United] States early next month, and I have suggested to him that it would be good if we met here in New York to continue our discussions.

Q: Do you consider what Israel is doing in Gaza a unilateral effort? The U.S. is pleased with anything along these lines, but of course wants a negotiated settlement. Do you think there is something awry here?

SG: I think the issue really is land for peace and eventually Israel will have to give up land to make that peace possible. We need to ensure that there is no terrorism or violence. We need to ensure the parties honour their commitments under the Roadmap which they have both embraced. And if Israel were to decide to withdraw from Gaza, as a necessary first step, as I indicated in my earlier statement, one will also have to consider when the next steps on the West Bank are going to be taken, because the land for peace is not just Gaza, it also embraces the West Bank. We need to get more details from the Israelis as to how they are going to proceed. I have indicated that we will be prepared to have, but that does not exclude negotiations because the parties have to sit and negotiate and come to an agreed settlement, and this is why the Quartet has put forward a Road Map. And we are prepared to support their effort.

Q: Did you seek or get, please, assurances from the Prime Minister that this is not unilateralism, that he still has the Roadmap in mind, that he still has negotiations in mind?

SG: He did tell me that he fully respects the Road Map, and that they expect the Quartet members also to play their role in working with the parties and in taking steps to ensure that there is an end to terror. But he assured me that he stood by the Roadmap. And let's also be clear here, the question of the withdrawal is under discussions and it has not been approved by the Knesset. There is even talk of a referendum. So let's see how it evolves. But I think we should take it seriously. As someone who worked with the Israeli government and with the Lebanese government on the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Lebanese border - people did not believe it at the time – but it happened. We have to have positive expectations and work with them and refine these things as we go forward. So I am encouraged.

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