

Cairo, Egypt, 14 January 2009 - Secretary-General's joint press conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit [unofficial transcript]

Thank you very much Mister Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Media,

Assalamou Alaykoun

I am pleased once again to be here in historic Egypt.

I regret, however, that the circumstances are so painful.

I was honoured to meet this morning with H.E. President Mubarak. I have just concluded an urgent meeting with Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit and I am going to continue our discussions with the Foreign Minister over lunch right after this meeting. I am also going to meet with the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Mr. Amre Moussa. We shared our feelings of frustration and pain over the ongoing violence in Gaza. We also discussed in depth how to attain an immediate ceasefire and to further secure humanitarian relief. Again, this morning, after my meeting with the President, the First Lady briefed me on the efforts by the Egyptian Government and the Red Crescent Society on humanitarian efforts, and I was very touched and grateful for her personal initiative and intervention on these issues.

Over the course of the next few days I will also be visiting Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Turkey, Lebanon and Syria, before I attend the Arab economic summit meeting in Kuwait.

At each stop, I will repeat my call for an immediate and durable ceasefire and insist that Security Council Resolution 1860 be fully respected by all the Parties.

Second, I will demand that urgent humanitarian assistance be provided, without restriction, to those in need. The United Nations' mandate is to help those who are suffering.

Third, I will encourage diplomatic efforts underway among concerned parties, and in that regard I highly recommend the initiative of President Mubarak and the Egyptian government officials.

My goal is an immediate end to the violence in Gaza – an end to Israel's military offensive and a halt to the rocket attacks by Hamas. It is intolerable that civilians bear the brunt of this conflict.

Negotiations need to be intensified to provide arrangements and guarantees in order to sustain a durable ceasefire and calm. Egyptian efforts in this regard are crucial, and I highly appreciate the personal involvement of President Mubarak.

President Mubarak briefed me about the status of his initiative and I sincerely hope that his initiative will bear good fruits as soon as possible. The United Nations stands ready to support and assist this process, as well as the humanitarian and reconstruction efforts to follow. I ask that all those who have influence with any party to this conflict use all means to end the violence and to find a durable solution.

I thank you very much.

Q: Right now, what is the biggest obstacle in case of ceasing the fire and ending the ongoing battle in Gaza, and what do you expect to do about this obstacle?

And one more question, what is the UN going to do to halt Israel from using white phosphorous in the battle, knowing that white phosphorous causes severe and inhuman physical damage to people.

SG: For the first question I have already answered. I think the focus of my mission today, which is fully supported by the members of the Security Council, is to bring an immediate ceasefire, an immediate halt to violence. I again urge both parties to stop now, to stop this fighting now. We have seen so many people die. More than 900 people have been killed more than 4,000 people have been injured. Many thousands of people have lost their homes and there is no time to lose for us and for those people in Gaza, therefore again urge that we first stop this fighting and then make this ceasefire durable and sustainable one. This is the issue that President Mubarak is now doing and trying to build upon and then we have to provide humanitarian assistance and with that the reconstruction of the Gazan society. This is the first mission and this mandate which I have in accordance with the Security Council resolution and mandate that is supported by Security Council.

For the second question, we have no confirmation of the use of white phosphorous but I would appeal to all the parties very strongly to stop any such kind, if they do, because of the terrible discriminate effect it has especially on such a intensely populated area such as Gaza.

Q: What the United Nations going to do after a cease-fire in Gaza?

SG: As soon as a ceasefire is ensured, I intend to dispatch a United Nations assessment team (to Gaza) to determine the extent of damage and also the extent of humanitarian needs, then the United Nations will try to issue a fresh appeal for humanitarian assistance. Of course the United Nations, all humanitarian agencies, with the contribution of the international community will continue to provide such humanitarian assistance, food, fuel and medicines to all the people, population in Gaza, then we will discuss with the international community how we can proceed with the more sustainable humanitarian assistance as well as the long term reconstruction of the Gazan society. This is what I have discussed this morning with President Mubarak and Minister Aboul Gheit and I will continue to discuss this matter with the leaders of the world.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, you have just mentioned that over 900 people have been killed, children have been killed, houses have been destroyed, elder handicapped people have been killed, crimes against humanity have been committed, innocent civilians have lost their lives and houses, Is there going to be a trial? Who is going to pay the price for what has been committed?

SG: Palestinians have been killed, wounded and traumatized in the aerial and ground operations, and there has been extensive destruction of civilian property and infrastructure. That is a very sad and unacceptable situation. Israelis also have also been killed, wounded and traumatized by the continued rocket launches by Hamas into Israel. I had been urging and I had been condemning that these Hamas rocket attacks must stop. And at the same time I have been condemning the excessive military operations by Israelis. These two things must stop immediately. Both parties need to be reminded of their obligations under international humanitarian law, as I had done repeatedly to refrain from targeting civilians or civilian objects and from indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. I urge again that greater precautions need to be taken by both sides to spare civilian populations from the effects of these hostilities.

Q: What is your sense following your discussions with the Egyptian President and Foreign Minister? Do you think a ceasefire deal is within reach?

SG: Now, on your question, as I said repeatedly that the ceasefire must be ensured immediately. The Security Council's resolution has made it quite clear, each and every Member State and party has an obligation to fully comply with the Security Council Resolution, as a Secretary-General of the United Nations I have a duty and responsibility to ensure the implementation of this Security Council resolution. The core of my mission is to ensure this ceasefire is attained, however, I have strongly urged President Mubarak to continue his initiative so that this initiative will bear good fruit as soon as possible and I was encouraged by his commitment and I think I hope that we will be able to see a ceasefire soon.

Q: [from Arabic] Secretary-General, you spoke about mutual ceasefire and about two sides in this war regardless of the extent of the destruction in Gaza. Don't you see that you are equating between the two sides, a side who is continuing bombing and a side that is defending himself – Is there anything further than good intentions?

SG: As everyone agrees, if any one of the parties does not stop fighting, we cannot ensure ceasefire therefore I have been urging, in the strongest possible terms, that both sides must stop fighting now, we don't have any time to lose, then we can discuss the conditions as Egyptian government will lead that initiative, how to make this truce last, sustainable and durable, and which can be fully respected by all the parties. The international community must encourage and fully rally behind this initiative now. And all the way I am encouraged that discussions will continue and I certainly hope that this ceasefire will be attained as soon as possible. First and foremost is a ceasefire, then we can discuss all humanitarian assistance and the crossings option, and we can also discuss how we can protect the population in Gaza, by establishing certain international mechanisms or monitoring whatever it may be, that depends upon how we will have discussions on these matters, and for that humanitarian possible gain, we must open all these crossings, fully operate in accordance with the 2005 agreement on movement and access, those will be the elements which we will continue to discuss and build upon, in close cooperation with the parties concerned and

mechanisms will continue to provide necessary assistance and full commitment on this.

Q. When do you think you will get to see for yourself firsthand what the situation is like in Gaza? When do you think that will happen? Are you going to go to Gaza? Are you going to go to the Egyptian borders?

SG: I would have personally liked to visit Gaza at this time - that was in mind and in my heart - but in view of the current situation in Gaza I am not quite sure at this time whether I will be able to visit Gaza, but I will have an opportunity to speak directly with our staff working in Gaza when I visit Israel tomorrow, and I will try to encourage them and command their tireless efforts under such very dangerous circumstances who have been tirelessly working to provide humanitarian assistance and work for the wellbeing of the Palestinian people there. As I said, once a ceasefire is attained, I will try to visit, again, but before that, I intend, as I said to dispatch the assessment teams to Gaza.

Q: [from Arabic] welcome in the region after nineteen days of killing Palestinians. -your visit to Gaza is in your heart but it is very important because Israel is killing human beings. It is important that you meet the other side. Israel ignores the UN and does not implement Security Council Resolutions – Israel wages war when it wants and ends it also when it wants. The UN does never use chapter 7 when it comes to “the blue eyed boy” Israel while it uses it with any other Arab country. This affects the credibility of the United Nations and the Security Council. You equate those who killed one thousand and the Palestinian rockets. How many Israelis have been killed?

SG: Today I feel very sad when I think of all these civilian killings and many thousand wounded people who have suffered from this fighting. That is why I told you that I really wanted to visit Gaza at this time, to share their sufferings, to share their plights together with the United Nations. I will continue to try to have an opportunity of visiting myself in person, but at this time, considering this very tense, and even dangerous circumstances, I am not sure at this time when I will be able to visit. As soon as a ceasefire is obtained I will first send an assessment team to determine the extent of damages, the extent of the humanitarian needs. This, I think, is what is necessary to be done first hand, foremost.

About the implementation of Security Council Resolutions, all the Member States of the United Nations have obligation to abide by the Security Council Resolutions, Security Council resolutions are binding in nature. And I will urge, when I meet the Israeli leaders, as I have been doing until now, to abide by this, by immediately halting military operations, and ensuring a cease-fire and by ensuring humanitarian assistance.

Q. But Mr. Secretary-General, is Israel prohibiting you from going to Gaza, what is your role as the so called “international community” if you cannot implement the Security Council resolution, and if you cannot visit, what role is there left for you?

SG: I have tried to visit myself Gaza at this time, but all the circumstances has not allowed me to visit at this time. I will not tell you any detail of what I have been discussing with the Israeli government but you have my full commitment that I will do my best as Secretary-General of the United Nations first and foremost to bring a ceasefire immediately and whatever I can do in my power to bring humanitarian assistance and also encourage the negotiations now under discussions.

Thank you very much Shukran Jazilan.