



Press Release

PAL/2118
PI/1900

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

UNITED NATIONS MEDIA SEMINAR ON MIDDLE EAST PEACE IS OPPORTUNITY FOR JOURNALISTS

TO CONVEY POSITIVE MESSAGE TO PEOPLES ON BOTH SIDES OF REGION'S BROADEST DIVIDE

Under-Secretary-General Akasaka Cites 'New Challenges and Developments'; Panels Discuss Gaza Reconstruction; Role of UN, New Actors in Peace Process

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

RIO DE JANEIRO, 27 July — The head of the United Department of Public Information today opened the seventeenth International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East, urging Israelis, Palestinians and the wider international community, particularly journalists, to support the world body's ongoing efforts to help the parties arrive at a just and lasting solution.

"This seminar is taking place amid new challenges and developments," said Kiyo Akasaka, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, as he highlighted, among other events, the Gaza crisis at the beginning of the year. He also noted the visit by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to Gaza to address the humanitarian dimensions of that crisis, as well as the recent speech in Cairo by United States President Barack Obama and another speech in June by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The two-day event, entitled "Promoting Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue — a view from South America", is organized by the United Nations Department of Public Information in cooperation with the Ministry of External Affairs of Brazil. Today's proceedings included two panel discussions, respectively on "The Challenge of the Post Gaza Conflict Reconstruction" and "The Peace Process, the United Nations and New Actors". They featured contributions from senior United Nations and Brazilian officials, as well as journalists representing news outlets from the Middle East and elsewhere around the world.

Stressing the commitment of the United Nations and the wider international community to the goal of guaranteeing both Israel's security and the creation of a viable and independent Palestinian State, Mr. Akasaka said the main challenge was restarting direct negotiations based on recognition of the two-State solution, and the acceptance of previous agreements and obligations entered into by both parties, including the Quartet-backed Road Map. "Such a solution, if it is to be sustained, must be supported by both Israelis and Palestinians, as well as by the neighbouring countries in the region and the international community," he said.

Since the focus of the seminar was to analyse the new challenges facing the Middle East peace process, he hoped discussing the matter with colleagues in the media would help them to convey positive messages to the peoples on both sides of the region's broadest divide. "Ultimately, it is civil society, including your readers, your listeners and your viewers, who have the power to demand peace and in some way, to contribute to its achievement," he said.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in a message delivered to the seminar by Mr. Akasaka, cited "new energy and possibilities" surrounding the issue, telling international actors to step up their engagement and take heart from recent public opinion polls that pointed to consistently strong grass-roots support in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory for peaceful coexistence within the framework of a two-State solution.

However, he said, the international community must also pay close attention to needs on the ground. "I remain deeply concerned about conditions of the civilian population in Gaza and the potential for renewed instability. I am doing my utmost to ensure that reconstruction starts as soon as possible," he said.

Further, members of the media and civil society had central roles to play in informing and influencing people and in promoting dialogue and mutual understanding, he said, encouraging them to explore what more they could do to spread the message of coexistence and peace. "While fully respecting your professional independence, we also need your creativity and engagement," the Secretary-General said.

In a keynote address that provided a vivid snapshot of life in the Gaza Strip six months after the relief efforts had begun in the wake of the latest crisis there, Karen

AbuZayd, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), said it was apparent that the effectiveness and impact of the emergency response and other humanitarian activities were, and would continue to be, curtailed by Israel's blockade of Gaza. The closures had decimated the Palestinian economy and "ensures that the decline in living standards will take years to erase", she said.

"That crossings have now been closed for 26 months reflects the difficulty of making headway on issues where neither side feels able to afford the concession, which would provide the other with the assurance upon which compromise could be based," she said. The blockade, along with "the systematic, policy-driven expansion of Israeli settlements on expropriated Palestinian lands" and the separation barrier in the West Bank all served to "whittle away Palestinian lands [...] curtail the space available for social, economic and cultural interaction [and] dissipate Palestinian confidence in the prospects for the emergence of an economically and politically viable Palestinian State".

"So, for now, the revolving wheels of claims and counterclaims, demands and refusals, continue to spin," Ms. AbuZayd said, noting that, amid the stalemate, rockets continued to fly, albeit fitfully, into Sderot and Ashkelon, some 11,000 Palestinians remained in Israeli prisons and 1.1 million Gazans were almost completely dependant on food aid. Against that bleak landscape, UNRWA remained committed to its human development objectives, through education, health, relief and social service programmes, which offered an alternative to extremism – a future, grounded in universal values of dignity and self-reliance for the next generation.

Turning to the role of the media, she said that in the Middle East, the reason for the media's sway included the region's relatively high literacy rates, widespread access to the Internet and the highly emotive nature of the Palestinian-Israeli question. The global media "played" to the security implications of the conflict, including its association – both actual and perceived – with international terrorism. The influence of the media brought with it heavy responsibilities. In a conflict underpinned by competing, existential worldviews that drew inspiration from religious convictions, balanced objectivity in the portrayal of events was as rare as it was crucial.

Finally she urged the seminar to eschew lofty pronouncements, which would not assure the security of Israel or conjure up a just and durable solution to the Palestinian plight. "Unravelling the realities and complexities of the conflict demands a meticulous, painstaking, inclusive process of dialogue, mediation and negotiation, conducted in accordance with established principles of international law and sponsored by the international community acting in concert," she said, hoping the seminar would contribute to illuminating a path to those goals.

The seminar began its work in the afternoon hearing a wide-ranging message from Celso Amorim, Minister of External Relations of Brazil, who said his country was keenly interested in the Middle East peace process because it had an extremely important community of both Arab and Jewish citizens that contributed immensely to the fabric of Brazilian society. Brazil had a large population of nationals living in Lebanon. Issues involving the Middle East were critical to everyone in the world, not just to the people in the region. Indeed, global issues were at stake in the Middle East, he declared.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's Government had undertaken many initiatives regarding the Middle East, he said. The President had visited the region early in his tenure and, among other things, had called for a summit between Arab and South American countries. The object of such a meeting would be to discuss economic and social cooperation, as well as to inject a new voice into the dialogue, which always seemed to be dominated by larger Powers.

Brazil and other developing nations had a key role to play in "breathing new life into the debate", he said, adding that his country could share its experience of peace – it had not been involved in any conflict for more than 130 years – and the historically peaceful coexistence of its diverse members of society. He had been deeply shocked when he had visited the Occupied Palestinian Territory for the first time. He had felt as if he had landed "on another planet".

After that visit, he had attended the Annapolis conference convened by the United States in 2007, hoping that it would achieve some progress, especially as that meeting had been so broadly representative of the international community. Unfortunately, no such progress had followed. So how could Brazil help? He believed that his country had the confidence of both sides in the debate. Brazil was a reliable partner and did not arouse any animosity.

Finally, he said, part of the job of a diplomat was being an optimist, so he was hopeful about progress in the Middle East peace process. Among other things, he had noted a reduction of the firing of rockets into Israel. At the same time, he hoped for more progress on the issue of settlement expansion and the opening of checkpoints. On those concerns, he was heartened by the pronouncements of the new Administration in Washington and hoped that President Obama would follow up. He urged the international community to heed the voices of all those, especially in the Middle East region, who could also play a role to promote the peace process.

Delivering a keynote address to the afternoon session, Marco Aurelio Garcia, Special Advisor for Foreign Policy in the Office of the President of Brazil, said many had questioned Brazil's involvement in the Middle East issue, but the country's foreign policy was guided by the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Moreover, it was seriously concerned about the promotion and protection of human rights. Brazil also repudiated the idea of a "clash of civilizations", and embraced the notion of peaceful coexistence, dialogue and negotiations.

Turning to geopolitical issues, he noted that many other conflicts in the Middle East region were fuelled by the passions surrounding the question of Palestine. As such, they would no doubt recede if the international community stood by its commitments to the Palestinian people. The peaceful resolution of that conflict would bolster freedom and democracy worldwide, and would build the conditions for a renaissance of creative thought and cultural advancement that had fuelled progress in both Arab countries and Israel for centuries.

At the outset of the meeting, statements were delivered by Vera Machado, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs of the Ministry of External Relations of Brazil, and Antonio Pedro Monteiro Lima, Permanent Representative of Cape Verde to the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the United Nations Committee on Information. Mr. Akasaka also distributed a statement by Paul Badji, Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations and Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Mr. Akasaka moderated the seminar's panel discussion on "The Challenge of the Post Gaza Conflict Reconstruction". It included presentations by Ruy Nogueira, Under-Secretary-General for Cooperation and Trade Promotion of Brazil; Eli Dayan, former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Israel and currently Chairman of the Ashkelon Foundation; Mhammad Shaker Abdallah, columnist and member of the Editorial Board of *Al-Quds*, Jerusalem; and Andrew Whitley, Director of the Representative Office of UNRWA in New York.

The second panel, "The Peace Process, the United Nations and New Actors", was moderated by Affonso Celso De Ouro-Preto, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary for the Middle East of Brazil, and featured Nahum Bamea, a columnist for *Yediot Aheronot*; Ahmad Issa Adwiat, journalist and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council; Elena Suponina, Head of the International Desk of the Russian newspaper *Vremya Novostei*; Semih Idiz, political columnist for the Turkish newspaper, *Milliyet*; and Thomas Seifert, Chief Foreign Reporter of the Austrian daily *Die Presse*.

Opening of the Seminar

In opening remarks, KIYO AKASAKA, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, thanked the Government of Brazil for its generous support in hosting the seminar. He said that participants had gathered, not only to highlight issues relating to the question of Palestine, but also to foster dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, to help them sustain their hopes and visions for a peaceful future and to contribute to the realization of those hopes.

He said that the international community remained fundamentally committed to the goal of guaranteeing both the security of Israel and the creation of a viable and independent Palestinian State. The seventeenth seminar was taking place amid new challenges and developments, including, most recently, the Gaza crisis at the beginning of the year. Among other events, he also drew attention to the visit to Gaza by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to address the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis, the recent speech in Cairo by United States President Barack Obama and another speech in June by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The main challenge, he said, remained restarting direct negotiations, based on recognition of the two-State solution and the acceptance of all previous agreements and obligations entered into by both parties, including the Road Map, which called for the freeze of all settlement expansion by Israel and for the Palestinian Authority to end violence and incitement. The successful resolution of the Palestinian reconciliation talks, which Egypt was facilitating between Fatah and Hamas, and the restoration of Palestinian unity, based on the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) commitments, were important to the success of the peace process and would help to facilitate the reconstruction of Gaza after the recent conflict.

He went on to say that, in Gaza, but also in the West Bank, the decline in social services and living conditions of the Palestinians was cause for serious concern. While major donors continued to provide humanitarian assistance, particularly through UNRWA and other United Nations funds and programmes, along with non-governmental organizations, almost six months after the conclusion of Operation Cast Lead, early reconstruction and recovery in Gaza had stalled, owing to the prohibitions on imports.

The United Nations remained involved in a search for a just and comprehensive solution to the Middle East question on the basis of the principle of land for peace and a just and comprehensive regional peace consistent with Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). "Such a solution, if it is to be sustained, must be supported by both Israelis and Palestinians, as well as by the neighbouring countries in the region and the international community," he said.

The wider regional dimension was also impacting the Middle East peace process in various ways, for example, as a result of the issues surrounding Iran's nuclear programme. But Mr. Akasaka said the recent elections in Lebanon, as well as the greater engagement between Syria and the international community, could present new opportunities for the search for peace in the Middle East.

He said the focus of the seminar was to analyse the new challenges facing the Middle East peace process. As it was a "media seminar", he hoped discussions with colleagues in the media would help them to convey positive messages to the peoples on both sides of the region's broadest divide. He also stressed that, for journalists to work effectively, the freedom of the press and expression, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, must be fully ensured.

"Ultimately, it is civil society, including your readers, your listeners and your viewers, who have the power to demand peace and, in some way, to contribute to its achievement," he said, noting that one of the concrete results of the seminar was the Civil Society Initiative of Palestinian and Israeli Mayors. Coordinated by its Chairman, Professor Ilan Juran, that small group of officials from water authorities in Gaza and Israel had together developed a water treatment proposal for Gaza, which the United Nations hoped would come to fruition in the near future.

In a message delivered by Mr. AKASAKA, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the seminar was taking place at a time of new energy and possibility in the Middle East peace process, and he hoped the momentum for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace would be used by both Palestinians and Israelis.

"The international community, for its part, must focus all its energies on this goal. As we do so, we can take heart from public opinion polls in recent years that point to consistently strong grass-roots support in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory for peaceful coexistence within the framework of a two-State solution," the Secretary-General continued. However, the international community must also pay close attention to needs on the ground.

"I remain deeply concerned about conditions of the civilian population in Gaza and the potential for renewed instability. I am doing my utmost to ensure that reconstruction starts as soon as possible," he said. Further, members of the media and civil society had central roles to play in informing and influencing people, and in promoting dialogue and mutual understanding. "I encourage you to explore what more you can do to spread the message of coexistence and peace. While fully respecting your professional independence, we also need your creativity and engagement."

VERA MACHADO, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs of the Ministry of External Relations of [Brazil](#), said on behalf of Brazil's Minister of State, who would join the seminar later in the day, that there was renewed energy in the Latin American and Caribbean region, which could highlight the efforts of new actors to generate peace in the Middle East. Brazil's interest in the issue was not new, especially as both Jewish and Arab immigrants had found safe haven in the country. She hoped the seminar would expand the dialogue and increase understanding between Israelis and Palestinians towards forging peace.

ANTONIO PEDRO MONTEIRO LIMA, Permanent Representative of [Cape Verde](#) to the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the United Nations Committee on Information, said that Committee was responsible for overseeing the Department of Public Information and related activities in which the Organization was involved. It also drafted resolutions on the information activities under way at all levels of the United Nations. This year, the Committee, among other things, had urged the Information Department to do its utmost to support the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and to foster media discussion on the issue. Overall, the question of Palestine was a matter of priority for the Organization.

Palestine today was experiencing peace with its neighbours, including Israel, and it was up to the international community to support such peaceful relations in the hopes of renewed dialogue. Indeed, that was the responsibility of all men and women of goodwill in the world, especially those living in the Middle East, a land of great historical, religious and cultural significance. The only feasible objective was peace. That objective could only be met, however, if all stakeholders mustered the political will.

Neighbours could not live in a state of perpetual war, which had a particularly detrimental affect on young people, he said, calling on the international community to work together to improve the situation for those youngsters. Journalists must do their part, as citizens of the world, to contribute to peace. Everyone must live up to his or her individual responsibilities. Indeed, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi had surmounted obstacles that people had said then would be impossible to overcome.

Finally, he said the seminar reinforced the efforts of the United Nations and its Information Department to work towards a just and lasting solution to the situation in the Middle East. "We all know the road will be difficult, but the United Nations and the international community will stick to that road [...] for the good of all the peoples of the region."

KAREN ABUZAYD, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, in a keynote address, said that, although South America was physically distant from the Middle East, and unique in many respects, its history was replete with the experience of many issues underlying the situation in the Middle East. The principle of asylum from persecution was embedded in the consciousness of that continent. During the years prior to the Second World War and through the post-War decade, South America had given safe haven to Europe's refugees, many of whom had since become integrated into the societies in which they had settled.

Continuing, she said that in the post-War period, the South American region had been caught up in revolutionary upheavals and proxy conflicts, which had characterized the cold war. From the 1970s, armed conflict and political violence in Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua had generated turbulence and refugee flows, making the region the focus of international concern. The historical themes of socio-political discourse in South America — claims to land ownership based on ancestral ties, the equitable distribution of wealth, resistance to oppression and the demand of ordinary people for fundamental rights and

freedoms — found more than a passing resonance in the Middle East.

“Similarities begin to fade, however, when we consider some of the elements of complexity affecting the Middle East today,” she said, adding that underpinning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the Palestinian claim to self-determination. Further, that conflict was one in which one protagonist was a fully-fledged State — a regional economic and military Power — while the other consisted of a largely exiled people grappling with human rights violations, economic deprivation and grave issues of internal disunity, while searching for a State of their own. The asymmetry in the profiles of Israel and Palestine had been reinforced over time, influencing the contours of the conflict and the prospects for resolving it.

“As a result, and in tandem with persisting hostilities, several of the fundamental matters in dispute have been materially altered,” she said, highlighting the dimensions, demarcation lines and possession of land; access to and rights over water, natural gas and other natural resources; and the legal and demographic constitution of Jerusalem. Instead of being addressed or awaiting a just dispensation at the time the conflict ended, those issues had been — and were — in a state of ferment. One example receiving prominent attention was the systematic, policy-driven expansion of Israeli settlements on expropriated Palestinian lands, cementing entrenched scenarios, which would not be easily or rapidly overturned.

Another example was the West Bank separation barrier and its associated regime of exclusion and security zones, she said. Those further whittled away Palestinian lands and curtailed the space available for social, economic and cultural interaction. There was also the experience of Gaza, where, since 2000, a series of conflict situations had decimated the economy, from commerce to the production and export of industrial and agricultural goods. “The blockade of Gaza [...] ensures that the decline in living standards will take years to erase,” she said.

All of that had dissipated Palestinian confidence in the prospects for the emergence of an economically and politically viable Palestinian State, she said, adding that, as the adversaries confronted each other with increasing intensity, the sponsors of armed struggle and confrontation were bolstered, while the forces of compromise and mutual accommodation found themselves more often at bay. In accordance with the United Nations Charter, it was through good faith dialogue that parties to conflict could understand each other’s interests and proceed to carve out a space where compromise, accommodation and healing could thrive.

She said that the participants must consider the situation with an unbiased appreciation of the context she had just described. Further, recovery and reconstruction in Gaza was a useful lens through which to examine a cross-section of relevant issues. Six months after UNRWA had stepped up its efforts in Gaza, it was apparent that the effectiveness of the response was, and would continue to be, curtailed by the blockade. That crossings had been closed for 26 months now reflected the difficulty of making headway on issues where neither side felt able to afford the concessions that would provide the other with the assurance upon which compromise could be based.

So, for now, the revolving wheels of claims and counterclaims, demands and refusals, continued to spin. Amid the stalemate, rockets continued to fly, albeit fitfully, into Sderot and Ashkelon, some 11,000 Palestinians remained in Israeli prisons and 1.1 million Gazans had been rendered almost completely dependant on food aid. Further, she said the isolation of Gazans was antithetical to the possibility of negotiation and peacebuilding. It exacted a heavy price, fuelling frustrations and a sense of injustice among Palestinians.

Amid that bleak political landscape, she said, UNRWA remained committed to its human development objectives through education, health, micro-finance, relief and social service programmes, which offered an alternative to extremism, namely a future, grounded in universal values of dignity and self-reliance for the next generation. The seminar’s panel discussion on “The Peace Process, The United Nations and New Actors” was an opportunity to consider the approaches that international community had thus far employed in its search for a negotiated solution and to assess whether those approaches had been effective in advancing a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

She said she expected the discussion would touch on the extent to which the processes of negotiation had been inclusive of the major constituencies within the Palestinian body politic and what were the reasons for excluding one group over another, or the impact of excluding any stakeholders. For her, there was an obvious need for negotiations to seriously reflect the interests of Palestine refugees. Given the complexities of return and settlement issues in the Palestinian context, informed choice must be the basis for clarifying refugee expectations and the rights attached to the choices made by the refugees themselves. Such considerations appeared to be absent from recent approaches.

Turning to the role of the media, she said that, in the Middle East, the reason for the media’s sway included the region’s relatively high literacy rates, widespread access to the Internet and the highly emotive nature of the Palestinian-Israeli question. The international media played to the global security implications of the conflict, including its association — both actual and perceived — with international terrorism. The influence of the media brought with it heavy responsibilities. In a conflict underpinned by competing, existential worldviews that drew inspiration from religious convictions, balanced objectivity in the portrayal of events was as rare as it was crucial.

The organizers could not have chosen a more opportune moment to debate and explore questions relating to the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, she said. This was a time of possibilities, a time when the new President of the United States had struck a refreshingly frank and balanced tone for addressing this 60-year-old conflict, deploring the suffering endured by both Israelis and Palestinians, and affirming his determination to bring the conflict to a peaceful end. His words had fired the imagination of all who were war-weary and thirsted for peace, inspiring new hope and a belief in the future, where less than six months ago, only despair had reigned.

She said that, while UNRWA’s role was not a political one, it was axiomatic that its exertions would come to fruition only when the work of political actors hastened the realization of a just and lasting solution to the plight of refugees and the establishment of a viable Palestinian State, coexisting in peace and security with Israel and its neighbours. She urged the seminar’s participants to eschew lofty pronouncements, which would not assure the security of Israel or conjure up a just and durable solution to the plight of Palestinians.

“Unravelling the realities and complexities of the conflict demanded a meticulous, painstaking, inclusive process of dialogue, mediation and negotiation, conducted in accordance with established principles of international law and sponsored by the international community acting in concert,” she said, adding that she hoped the seminar would contribute to illuminating a path to those goals.

Panel I

The first panel of the day, entitled “The Challenge of the Post Gaza Conflict Reconstruction”, was moderated by Mr. AKASAKA, who said that, nearly five months after the International Conference on the Palestinian Economy and Gaza Reconstruction, in Sharm el-Shiekh, Egypt, rebuilding efforts continued to face significant challenges. He said the foundations for pressing ahead with the reconstruction of Gaza could not be laid without discussing the diverse political and security realities that shaped the challenges surrounding the issue.

He said reconstruction efforts had been slow, making the United Nations humanitarian mandate in Gaza that much harder to execute. “The hardship felt by the civilian population of Gaza has grown, contributing to the ongoing instability in the region,” he said. The diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East peace process had also last month expressed concern about the humanitarian situation.

The first panellist, RUY NOGUEIRA, Under-Secretary-General for Cooperation and Trade Promotion of Brazil, said his Government aimed to encourage the participation of a more diverse group of voices to help promote Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. In Gaza, the war had only worsened a crisis that remained

unresolved. In that tiny strip of land, with a population of some 1.5 million, unemployment had spiralled, per capita incomes had dropped and the lack of infrastructure and market access made the prospects of working in the area almost nonexistent. The bottom line was that the population of Gaza was becoming ever more dependent on international assistance for food and other basic necessities.

In light of that situation, the Brazilian Government could not remain on the sidelines, he said. It had participated, since 2006, in the various donor and reconstruction conferences on Gaza, and last March, Brazil had launched a host of projects in the areas of health and education, among others. In 2008, a mission from the Brazilian Cooperation Agency had been dispatched to the Occupied Palestinian Territory to discuss several projects, specifically targeting refugees in the region. Further, Brazil had partnered with India and South Africa for key programmes in teacher training and the provision of education tools and equipment.

He stressed that economic development and reconstruction could not be separated from the key political issue: Israeli occupation. Indeed, that occupation had led to the ongoing blockade of Gaza, and until that situation was changed, the international community had to do all it could to help strengthen the Palestinian economy and institutions. It must also strengthen relations between the two sides. Brazil would not shy away from the issue, including through supporting the political process and providing aid to the Palestinians.

Next, ELI DAYAN, former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Israel and current Chairman of the Ashkelon Foundation, said the seminar had heard routine speeches thus far that did not represent the changed situation. "I think that today we are witnessing a revolution in Israel [regarding] two States for two peoples," he said, stressing that the national consensus on that issue was a basis for renewed dialogue and an historic opportunity for progress. The international community could not continue attacking Israel; neither could it ignore re-engagement from the Gaza Strip.

He believed that Israel's leadership was today prepared to pay a big price to achieve peace with the Palestinians. At the same time, that leadership hoped the Palestinians would change their attitudes towards Israel. Israel recognized that Palestinian refugees were suffering, but Israel was expecting Arab countries to help it address the issue. Israel also hoped the international community would understand its security concerns.

He recalled a very different time, when in Ashkelon there were reciprocal visits between Israeli and Palestinian officials and professionals. While that time had long passed, it was clear that one of the main problems today was the leadership of the Palestinians; Hamas did not want to declare its commitment to international agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority with Israel. The international community had to understand both sides of the issue. The political dialogue must be completed so that the Palestinian economy could flourish. Indeed, the economic situation in the West Bank was starting to turn around and security was better there. That was a far cry from the situation in Gaza. He stressed that Israel was not above criticizing itself, and he hoped those that supported the Palestinian side could also engage in a little self-criticism.

"It is time for new initiatives if we want new results," he said. Especially during periods of quiet, it was necessary to support the Egyptian-backed efforts to craft a long-term ceasefire with Hamas. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was playing a very important role. If such an agreement was reached, he foresaw the opening of a few more checkpoints in Gaza, under Israeli inspection. Such inspection was unfortunate, but Israel's security concerns were very real, as the bombing of Israeli territories, including Sderot, had shown.

If such an agreement was reached with Hamas, that might add even more impetus to the United States and European desires to improve the economic situation in the Occupied Territory, including through generating international interest and investment. He hoped that the seminar would eschew "old and stale" ideas and look for new and constructive ways to promote peace.

For his part, MOHAMMAD SHAKER ABDALLAH, columnist and member of the Editorial Board of *Al-Quds*, Jerusalem, said that the effort to promote negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians had literally "hit a wall", which included not only the actual separation barrier that had been built by Israel, but also the Israeli blockade of Gaza. Those and other actions had wrecked the Palestinian economy and dashed the hopes of people in the Occupied Territory, especially the children. Indeed, it was the children and the elderly who were paying the price of Israel's destruction of Gaza. Why should they bear the brunt? What was worse was that there was no relief, because Gaza was being blockaded, not only by Israel, but Egypt as well. It was time to end the blockade, he declared.

He went on to say that there was no excuse for any deaths, on either side. He refused to accept violence on either side. The Palestinian people wanted peace and President Mahmoud Abbas had sacrificed much to that end. The Israeli side had claimed that there was "no partner" on the Palestinian side when, in reality, there was no denying that Mr. Abbas was ready to talk. The Israeli side must prove its case. What was the impediment for Gaza's reconstruction? The blockade. Until the closures ended, there could be no forward movement. He urged journalists, from the Middle East and beyond, to promote the idea of peace. He particularly urged journalists in Israel to help sway public opinion in that country.

The final panellist for the morning, ANDREW WHITLEY, Director of the Representative Office of UNRWA in New York, said the physical challenge of reconstructing Gaza concealed a set of interlocking political issues -- from security to the right to life and education -- that affected two peoples that had been locked in conflict for decades.

The reconstruction of Gaza had to be seen in a deeper context, before Israel had imposed its "medieval" blockade. Indeed, tracing the history of that effort back to 2000, or the beginning of the second intifada, he said, repeated military incursions had wrecked the infrastructure in the territories again and again. Over \$300 million worth of construction projects were suspended because materials could not be brought in. The Palestinian economy had been in free fall for nine years. Many of the pledges that had been made remained unfulfilled. All goods except very basic necessities and some medicines had been prevented from entering Gaza. He said the list of banned items was hard to justify and just as hard to explain.

Among the challenges to reconstruction in Gaza, he noted intra-Palestinian tension and unrest, which had been regrettably fomented by outsiders until recently. On that point, he stressed that it was not in the vested interest of Hamas to see the blockade ended, especially when it controlled the economy that had sprung up around the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. Another challenge was the fact that Israel was still holding some 11,000 Palestinians in prison. That was a serious issue that must be addressed. Finally, he said the victims of "this macabre dance that has brought death and destruction to so many" were the ordinary upstanding citizens of Gaza, who were being hindered from making a living. Those ordinary citizens could not live out their dreams, but had been brought to destitution and dependence on international aid, he said, adding that the peace process had also fallen victim to such challenges.

On the role of the media, he said that while there were indeed some courageous and fair-minded journalists reporting on the Middle East, there was no denying the tendency to portray "the other" stereotypically. For example, it was easy to brand every member of Hamas as a terrorist, and to portray the Palestinian Authority as "weak" or a collaborator with the United States. It was also common to hear Israel portrayed only as "cruel" or "expansionist".

Not only were such portrayals inaccurate, they served no one's interest, he said. The press must not succumb to "lazy journalism", which contributed inexorably every day to the erosion of the peace process, dashing hopes that it would eventually bear fruit. The media owed it to the public to depict the perspectives of "the other" in a clear and fair manner.

When the floor was opened for comments and questions, one journalist said that she was trying to come up with something new to add to the debate, and one speaker stressed that it was hard to overcome the perception that had emerged over so many years that the situation was nearly intractable. Another speaker said it was impossible to ignore the role Hamas was playing in undermining the peace process, and once its leaders were removed, talks would begin in earnest.

Responding, Mr. DYAN said looking at the past was detrimental. Both sides had made mistakes. Both sides would point to the actions of the other as an obstacle to peace. The Palestinians would say Prime Minister Netanyahu was the problem and Israelis would say that it was the intifada that had led to the current situation in Gaza and stalemate in the peace talks. It was time to look forward. It was also time for Arab countries to "make small gestures" to Israel to create a better atmosphere. He said it was time to reach agreement with Abu Mazen. Finally, he called for equal criticism of the missteps that both sides had made.

He stressed that he had never suggested that Palestinians and their supporters forget the past, but rather to give the future a chance by looking at the changes that were under way. Heretofore nettlesome issues, such as settlements and the return of refugees, would be addressed in the renewed negotiations and should not be considered obstacles to peace.

Mr. ABDALLAH said that the Palestinian side had indeed condemned the rockets that had been fired on Sderot and the effect such actions had on the Israeli children living there. But there was no denying that the population of Gaza had been subjected to collective punishment. Moreover, it was clear that Hamas was not suffering from the blockade and, as some had suggested, that group might even be benefiting. When the homes, businesses, hospitals and schools were rebuilt, "sooner or later Hamas will fall, but the people of Gaza will prevail".

Mr. WHITLEY said UNRWA had condemned suicide bombings and rocket attacks against Israel. UNRWA also educated some 200,000 children in its programmes and taught the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He reminded the seminar that Hamas had been elected in a poll that had been called one of the freest and fairest in the Middle East. So while one might disagree with some of Hamas' tactics, that was no cause for them to be "removed" by some outside force.

The seminar began its work in the afternoon by hearing a wide-ranging message from CELSO AMORIM, Minister of External Relations of Brazil. He said Brazil was actively interested in the Middle East process because it had an extremely important community of both Arab and Jewish citizens that contributed immensely to the fabric of Brazilian society. Brazil also had a large population of nationals living in Lebanon. Moreover, issues involving the Middle East were critical to everyone in the world, not just people in the region. Indeed, global issues were at stake in the Middle East, he declared.

President Lula's Government had undertaken many initiatives regarding the Middle East. The President had visited the region early on in his tenure and had, among other things called for a summit between Arab and South American countries. The object of such a meeting would be to discuss economic and social cooperation, but also to inject a new voice into the dialogue that had always seemed to be dominated by super-Powers. He added that the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) had also struck a free trade agreement with Israel. For his part, the Minister had visited the region following the Gaza crisis at the beginning of the year, as well as two years ago, after the Annapolis meeting on the Middle East peace process.

Brazil and other developing countries had a key role to play in "breathing new life" into the debate, he said, adding that his country could bring its experience with peace — it had not been involved in any conflict for more than 130 years — and with the historically peaceful coexistence among diverse members of its society. He went to say that he had been deeply shocked by his first visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territory. He had felt as if he had landed "on another planet". After that visit, he had attended the Annapolis conference convened by the United States with the hope that it would be possible to achieve some progress, especially as that meeting had been so broadly representative of the international community. Unfortunately, no such progress had followed.

How could Brazil help? He said he believed that his country had the confidence of both sides in the debate. Brazil was a reliable partner and did not arouse any animosity. Part of the job of a diplomat was being an optimist, so he was hopeful of progress. Among other things, he had noted a reduction of the firing of rockets into Israel. At the same time, he hoped for more progress on the issue of settlement expansion and the opening of checkpoints. On those issues, he was heartened by the pronouncements of the new Administration in Washington, and hoped that President Obama would follow up. He urged the international community to heed the voices of all those in the region, such as Iran, that could play a role to promote the peace process. The more voices calling for peace, the better.

Calling for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East, he also said international efforts must do more to improve the prospects of the Palestinian people, especially through economic cooperation with the countries of the region. Bolstering the Palestinian economy would be vital in ensuring they were invested in the peace process. Brazil would continue to work with all other nations towards the goal of ensuring peace and stability in the Middle East.

Panel II

The second panel was entitled: "The Peace Process, the United Nations and New Actors". It was moderated by AFFONSO CELSO DE OURO-PRETO, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary for the Middle East of Brazil, who said it was clear that, over and above organizations like the United Nations and the major Powers that made up the Quartet, small countries, such as Norway, played an important role in the Middle East peace process. He hoped the participants would discuss ways to enhance the voice of new players, including Brazil, in the debate.

In a keynote address, MARCO AURELIO GARCIA, Special Adviser for Foreign Policy in the Office of the President of Brazil, said that, perhaps when negotiations stalled, it was necessary to change the interlocutors at the table. That had been Brazil's feeling following the Annapolis conference, when it had taken an even greater interest in the matter. Indeed, the world was much changed since the cold war, and decisions must not be taken by a small group of countries.

He said that many people had questioned Brazil's involvement in the issue, but the country's foreign policy was guided by the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Moreover, it was seriously concerned about the promotion and protection of human rights. Brazil also repudiated the idea of a "clash of civilizations", and embraced the notion of peaceful coexistence, dialogue and negotiations. Turning to geopolitical issues, he noted that many other conflicts in that region were fuelled by the passions surrounding the question of Palestine. As such, they would no doubt recede if the international community stood by its commitments to the Palestinian people.

The peaceful resolution of that conflict would also bolster the idea of freedom and democracy around the world, and would build the conditions for a renaissance of creative thought and cultural advancement that had fuelled progress in both Arab countries and Israel for centuries, he continued. Brazil was willing to heed any call to help promote the Middle East peace process and provide the open space for a lasting resolution to the conflict, whether such a call came from Gaza, Tel Aviv, or elsewhere.

The first panellist, NAHUMBARNEA, a columnist for *Yedioth Aheronot*, thanked the Brazilian Government for hosting the conference, especially for providing translation in Hebrew, which was not often the case. He said that perhaps the most important actor in the peace process had been the United Nations. The Organization had played a strategic diplomacy role in many ways, including the adoption by the Security Council in 2006 of resolution 1701, which had ended the war in Lebanon.

In some ways, however, the Organization's efforts had not been very successful, he said. Outside the United Nations, it was important to consider the potential of a new coalition of interlocutors, including Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Jordan and others who could not only promote Arab-Israeli peace, but help "break the Iranian nuclear threat". It was not possible, however, to reach an agreement without United States involvement, he added.

AHMAD ISSA ADWIAT, journalist and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, said that, while it had often been said that Israel did not have a "real partner"

on the other side of the negotiating table, there was indeed an elected leadership that in the Occupied Territory that could speak effectively on behalf of the people. On the role of the press, he stressed that the Palestinian Authority promoted a free press, which was allowed to operate without restrictions throughout the Territory.

He was hopeful that the press would shine a light on the situation in the region, especially towards promoting the Egyptian-led negotiations. He called for unity among Palestinian factions, and towards that goal, appealed to Syria to end its support for those elements that were meddling in the affairs of ordinary people in Gaza. Indeed, some of those persons lived in mansions and five-star hotels in Syria, while the people of Gaza were suffering.

He said the citizens of the Occupied Territory did not support suicide bombings. Neither did citizens on the Israeli side support the Gaza blockade. What was clear was that there were small groups of persons on both sides of the conflict trying to undermine peace, and as such, the international community must stay the course and work together towards a lasting solution. He hoped participants could leave Brazil with renewed hope to ensure the dignity of two people: Palestinians and Israelis.

ELENA SUPONINA, Head of the International Desk of the Russian newspaper *Vremya Novosti*, said she was pessimistic about the lack of unity among Palestinians, that the current Israeli Government would not be more flexible in seeking a negotiated settlement and that, with the economic crisis garnering so much attention, people were not concerned with the Middle East. While the Russian Federation had offered to host an international conference on the Middle East peace process this year in Moscow, she had the impression that neither of the parties in the conflict were prepared to meet and that overall conditions were not ripe for a global meeting. The press in the Russian Federation believed that the objective should be to achieve peace, and that was why the United Nations should play a much more active role than it was playing today.

SEMIH IDIZ, political columnist for the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet*, said the discussion of the possibility of new players in the Middle East invariably turned to Turkey, which had a unique position in that it had been the first predominately Islamic country to recognize Israel when it was first established. Turkey did not have the "baggage" regarding the Jewish State and also had a very forward-looking view of nation-building. That stand had soured many in the Arab world to Turkey and had sparked the feeling the Turkey was not an objective partner on Arab-Israeli issues. He believed, however, that Turkey was becoming more pro-Palestinian, but its relations with Israel were a matter of State policy.

He said that, even while situations like the crisis in Gaza at the beginning of the year were creating anti-Israel sentiment in Turkey, the Turkish Government was still standing by its political and military relationship with Israel. So Turkey's increased profile in the Middle East meant that people were looking for Turkey "to do something". He was unsure just what that "something" might be, especially since most regional players seemed to agree that the United States was perhaps the key arbiter. Still, perhaps Turkey could play a facilitating role between Israel and the Palestinians, rather than lead role, in the future.

Finally, he did not think new players could change the game very much, especially because Hamas was "bad news" and Israel was becoming more right-wing by the day. Moreover, both sides seemed to be stuck in a "zero-sum game" mode. Indeed, he was concerned with the "somebody has to lose for somebody to win" attitude, and believed that no change could occur unless basic questions were answered, including on the issue of Hamas' acceptance of the existence of Israel and Israel's acceptance of Hamas as an elected political authority in Gaza. Other vital issues were Israel's settlement expansion, and the "million-dollar question": What to do with Jerusalem? If both sides continue to play the "zero-sum game", there would be no negotiated settlement, no matter who the "new" players might be.

The final panellist of the day was THOMAS SEIFERT, Chief Foreign Reporter of the Austrian newspaper *Die Presse*, who said the European Union was one of Israel's biggest trading partners and largest contributors to Palestinian relief and assistance. At the same time, because of Europe's troubling history regarding Israel, it should be cautious when dealing with the Middle East. Nevertheless, European Union members were concerned about ensuring a stable environment in the Mediterranean.

Mr. Seifert also called for a dose of realism. He said that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was not the most dangerous situation on the planet. Indeed, he urged the participants to look at what was going on in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Southern Sudan and, perhaps more than all those, the situation in Kashmir, which involved two nuclear Powers that had not resolved outstanding issues. He also expressed scepticism about what appeared to be gamesmanship to win the world's top diplomatic "prize", which was peace in the Middle East.

He said a closer look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict revealed that all the issues raised today were easily surmountable if the parties sat down to talk, with the assistance of the United Nations, which, for all its faults, was perhaps the organization best placed to manage the change to a two-State solution. New players were not the key, but perhaps it was more important to enhance contacts among the parties, including civil society in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, to boost "people-to-people" contacts. Jerusalem probably had more foreign correspondents than anyplace in the world, and those reporters should consider "peace reporting" to give a voice to citizens in the region.

When the floor was opened for comments, a speaker from the Brazilian press stressed that when Israel had been created, the international community had failed to establish a homeland for the Palestinians, as had been called for in the initial Security Council resolution 181. Another speaker expressed concern that United Nations efforts had been referred to as weak and unreliable. While not all of the Organization's initiatives had succeeded, it was nevertheless a key player in alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people, especially through UNRWA.

Another speaker said she believed the participants were missing the point: if the international community wanted peace, all stakeholders must do more to strengthen Abu Mazen's authority. Forward movement to that end would be helped by confidence-building measures taken by Egypt to stop the flow of weapons into Gaza, and by Israel to ensure the release of Palestinian prisoners.

In response, Mr. BARNEA said that there was nothing romantic about the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Indeed, those tensions were over security, self-determination and real estate. It was also time to accept the fact that it was in the best interest of some of the parties to keep the status quo. That said, politicians could not be counted on to advance the process.

Ms. SUPONINA said the Palestinian Authority was not presently strong enough to negotiate a settlement, especially since President Abbas could not go to Gaza. That meant that the international community must talk to all sides, including Hamas. "I'm sure it's impossible to solve the Palestinian question without talking to Hamas," she said.

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