



Press Release

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STRIFE IN IRAQ, MIDDLE EAST MUST NOT HAMPER ARAB LEAGUE'S PROGRESS.

SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS TUNIS SUMMIT

Following is Secretary-General Kofi Annan's message to the Summit Meeting of the League of Arab States, delivered in Tunis on 22 May by Mohamed Sahnoun, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Africa:

It gives me great pleasure to send my greetings to all the leaders who have gathered in Tunis for this important summit meeting.

This is a period of profound turbulence and pain in the Arab world. There is enormous suffering and bloodshed in Palestine. There is upheaval in Iraq. There is the frustration of disappointed aspirations, and a palpable yearning for progress, especially among young people. These currents and wounds, powerful and inter-related, create formidable challenges for you, the region's leaders.

In Palestine, Israel has continued extrajudicial killings, the use of disproportionate force in densely populated areas, wide-scale house demolitions, construction of a West Bank barrier and other activities. In the last couple of weeks, we have witnessed a terrible escalation of killing and injury that has reached absolutely unacceptable levels. Apart from the manifest contraventions of international law, such actions hinder the search for peace and deepen the bitterness that prevails among Palestinians and the indignation felt in the international community. We condemn those acts, and call on Israel to refrain from further violations of international law and to meet its obligations under the Road Map, especially halting settlement activities and ending the use of violence.

For their part, some Palestinian groups continue to carry out suicide bombings and other attacks that fuel hatred and fear, and set back their national aspirations. We should all strongly condemn terrorism, wherever and whenever it occurs; no cause can justify it. We call on the Palestinian Authority to meet its obligations under the Road Map, and take effective measures on the ground to curb violence and combat terror.

In this dark landscape, Israel's proclaimed intention to withdraw from the Gaza Strip could offer a possibility of putting an end to violence. Withdrawal from Gaza might even be used as a bridge back towards resuming a meaningful peace process — if it is complete, if it is done in consultation with the Palestinian Authority, and if it is carried out as part of the Quartet's Road Map. It must also lead clearly to an end of the occupation.

Despite the brutal events of the last two weeks, I urge all governments to remain focused on the need for a comprehensive negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. Over the last three years, ordinary people on both sides have lost faith in the other party's desire for peace. I appeal to all concerned, especially the leadership, to make a real effort to think what actions can convince ordinary people on the other side of its genuine desire for peace. If instead each side sees evidence only of the other's ill will, the future will hold only more of the same destructive carnage and stalemate. The current killing and suffering are simply too great to be endured. There has to be a better way. Enough is enough.

The dire humanitarian plight of the Palestinians, particularly those made homeless in Rafah in the past weeks, compels me to make a special plea on behalf of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. UNRWA is a veritable lifeline for millions of Palestinians. At a time when emergency needs in the occupied Palestinian territory are rising, and when the Palestinians' coping mechanisms are stretched to the limit, it would be tragic, and destabilizing, if UNRWA were unable to rebuild destroyed homes in Gaza or were forced to reduce food aid, discharge thousands of workers, or discontinue psychological and trauma counselling for children. I appeal to you to give, and give generously, to meet emergency needs identified by UNRWA, and I call on Israel to facilitate UNRWA's humanitarian mission, including by ensuring access to people in need.

The United Nations will also work with you to help Iraq through its difficult period of transition. Traumatized by three wars, dictatorship and more than a decade of sanctions, Iraq's people are beset by violence, uncertainty and abuses, and caught between an occupying power and an insurgency that does not spare its fellow citizens. Whatever our view of the war and its wider implications, we must be united now in helping Iraq through this latest ordeal.

Towards that end, my Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, has been talking with Iraqis of all political persuasions on a path and a framework that would enable Iraq to regain its full sovereignty, unity and independence. Iraqis must resume control of their destiny as soon as possible: with a political system of their choosing, with control over their natural resources, and with mechanisms to build a State based on the rule of law and human rights for all the country's people. Your active support will be crucial during this transition: today, as efforts continue to put a caretaker government in place, and tomorrow, as Iraq moves towards elections and long-term constitutional and political arrangements. The region has a role to play, and must play it. Each of us shares an interest in a free, stable, united and democratic Iraq at peace with itself and with its neighbours, an Iraq that can once again take its proper place in the region and in the international community. That, and nothing else, must be our agenda, and the United Nations is striving to do its part, as circumstances permit.

The atmosphere in Iraq and Palestine creates a ruinous climate for the entire region. I am happy that such a climate has not hindered you from addressing the wider agenda of change in the region.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the members of the Arab League on your important progress in revising the Arab Charter of Human Rights. I

am encouraged by your plans to adopt the revised Charter, and hope that the final version will be fully in accordance with international human rights standards, as recommended by the Expert Group. The United Nations will continue to follow the efforts of the League in developing a regional human rights mechanism with great interest, and we remain committed to supporting and assisting you in that crucial endeavour.

Any process of reform, anywhere in the world, must be homegrown, coming from within. The Arab world is no exception. There is nothing that the outside world can tell you about freedom, women's emancipation or the knowledge gap that your own people are not already telling you. It is not remote outsiders who have been working on the landmark series of Arab Human Development Reports, published by the UN Development Programme. It is Arabs themselves -- leading intellectuals, sociologists and others. Thinking only of their own people's well-being, and seeking only to assess, honestly, their societies' development, they are offering a prescription for progress. With those recommendations striking a chord throughout the region, it is a source of real encouragement that many of you are strongly supporting them. The United Nations remains strongly committed to working with you as you continue your quest for development, justice and peace. Above all else, leadership can make a difference between hope and despair, and between renewal and the status quo.

Please accept my best wishes for a successful summit.

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