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IN BRIEFING TO SECURITY COUNCIL, UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS OPPORTUNITY NOW EXISTS TO REVITALIZE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

Poll States That Majority of Palestinians Now Oppose Violence Against Israelis; Peace Index Shows 70 Per Cent of Israelis Favour Resuming Talks

Confirming to the Security Council today that there existed, once again, a window of opportunity to revitalize the Middle East peace process, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Kieran Prendergast, urged the international community to encourage the parties to persevere as they moved along the narrow and difficult road to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.

Mr. Prendergast said in his regular monthly briefing on that situation that both parties seemed to have realized the potential for change inherent in the present situation. Support among the Palestinian public for violent acts and terror directed against Israelis had declined dramatically, and the optimism and hope prevailing among Palestinians was mirrored on the Israeli side. Now it must be made clear that both Israel and the Palestinians were expected to seize the moment to act constructively and to work within the framework of the [Road Map](#).

A poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center had found that, for the first time since September 2000, a majority of Palestinians opposed all acts of violence against Israelis, he said. In contrast to many previous polls, the survey also found that Palestinians once again looked into the future with hope. All Palestinian factions appeared to have taken note of the shift in public opinion. Senior Hamas leaders recently spoke about the possibility of a long-term ceasefire with Israel and of accepting the creation of a Palestinian State alongside Israel, within the 1967 borders and with Jerusalem as its capital.

On the Israeli side, he said that the latest Peace Index showed that 70 per cent of the Jewish Israeli public was now more optimistic about the chances of peace with the Palestinians. A clear majority of 75 per cent favoured the resumption of talks. Many Israelis believed that the current Palestinian leadership had been handling the affairs of the Palestinian Authority in a positive way, and a majority thought that the Government of Israel should facilitate living conditions in the occupied territory by ending closures and removing checkpoints – a belief, which he wholeheartedly shared.

Mr. Prendergast suggested that there were two catalysts opening the present “real opportunity” to implement the Road Map and make a huge leap towards a settlement of the conflict. One was the transitional process in the Palestinian Authority; the other was the Israeli initiative to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank. Thus, now was the time to actively engage, help the process along, and determine how best the international community could contribute to a revival of a sustainable peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.

Asserting that the end goal had remained unchanged – the end of occupation and the establishment of an independent, sovereign, viable, democratic and contiguous Palestinian State living alongside Israel in peace and stability, he said that both parties still had important steps to take. Israeli settlement activity, including the natural growth of settlements, had not been frozen, as Israel was obliged to do. And, the Palestinian Authority must take further steps to bring to a complete halt the violence and terror, and to institute full reform of the security services, as was required under the Road Map. Everyone must do their best to ensure that the parties realized the potential of the moment.

The meeting began at 10:13 a.m. and was adjourned at 10:35 a.m.

Briefing Summary

KIERAN PRENDERGAST, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said that, four weeks ago, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority spoke about the critical juncture the Middle East had reached, and outlined the elements that had turned the present period into such a momentous time for the region. This month, he was glad to be able to confirm that there existed, once again, a window of opportunity to revitalize the Middle East peace process.

He drew attention to a marked number of positive developments. The Palestinian leadership had continued to oversee the transitional period in a highly commendable manner, with no significant internal unrest. Significant strides had been made towards ensuring that the presidential elections scheduled for 9 January 2005 would be conducted in a free and fair manner, in accordance with international standards. Elections would be monitored by more than 400 international electoral observers. The United Nations had provided technical assistance to the Central Elections Commission. It would also establish a Liaison and Support Unit, generously made possible by the Japanese Government, to support and facilitate the work of the incoming international observer delegations and assist in their liaison with the electoral commission and Israeli authorities.

Registration for Palestinian voters had re-opened on 24 November and continued until 1 December, he said. Almost 80 per cent of adults had registered. Israel had not lifted the ban imposed in September against voter registration in East Jerusalem, but it had reassured the United Nations that residents in East Jerusalem would be able to vote in accordance with the modalities of the 1996 presidential elections, as set out in the Oslo Accords. He had also taken positive note of the Government of Israel's announced intention to lift movement restrictions and withdraw from Palestinian villages and cities for the election.

He noted that campaigning would officially begin on 26 December and last through 7 January. Some changes were recently introduced to the electoral law, most of which concerned legislative elections scheduled for later in 2005. All of those developments had led him to expect a free and fair, democratic electoral process. The Palestinian leadership had made great strides in moving forward in areas far beyond the electoral process. Earlier this month, PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmad Qurei (Abu Ala) held talks with Syrian and Lebanese leaders in a historic visit to both countries, after an important visit to Egypt. He had taken particular note of the PLO Chairman's pledge to "end the armed struggle" and, henceforth, pursue the "democratic route to liberation".

While significant steps towards reform had been taken, security reform and the establishment of full control by the Authority over the Palestinian areas continued to be among the primary challenges facing the Palestinian leadership, he said. Priority should be given to establishing a society based on the rule of law. In that context, he had also noted positively the PLO Chairman's frank assertion that "the Palestinian (security) apparatus needs discipline. There is security chaos; that's why we ... are seeking to unify the security apparatus".

He said that, with the emergence of a more positive atmosphere, "support among the Palestinian public for violent acts and terror directed against Israelis has declined dramatically", he said. That was a critically important development. A poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center had found that, for the first time since September 2000, a majority of Palestinians opposed all acts of violence against Israel. In contrast to many previous polls in recent years and months, the survey also found that Palestinians once again looked into the future with hope.

All Palestinian factions appeared to have taken note of the shift in public opinion, he said. Recently, senior Hamas leaders had spoken about the possibility of a long-term ceasefire with Israel and of accepting the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel, within the 1967 borders and with Jerusalem as its capital. Such a ceasefire would greatly facilitate the ability of both parties to build on the potential opportunities of the present moment.

He said that the optimism and hope that prevailed among Palestinians was mirrored on the Israeli side. According to the latest Peace Index, 70 per cent of the Jewish Israeli public was now more optimistic about the chances of peace with the Palestinians. A clear majority of 75 per cent favoured the resumption of negotiations. Many Israelis believed that the current Palestinian leadership had been handling the affairs of the Palestinian Authority in a positive way. A majority thought that the Government of Israel should facilitate living conditions of the Palestinian population in the occupied territory by ending closures and removing checkpoints – a belief, which he wholeheartedly shared.

He said that the Israeli Government had contributed meaningfully to enabling a positive transition. Security cooperation between the parties had resumed. Prime Minister Sharon had spoken of contact between the parties that was "nearly daily, mainly to do with coordinating various things". Israel had scaled back military activity in areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority, and Prime Minister Sharon had announced his willingness to cease all military incursions into Palestinian areas if calm prevailed. PLO Chairman Abu Mazen and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had declared themselves willing to meet one another. In recognition of a long-standing Quartet condition, the Israeli Prime Minister had said that Israel would want to coordinate security arrangements with the Palestinian Authority for the planned implementation of his initiative to withdraw Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, and for the transfer of the evacuated areas to the Palestinians.

In addition, he noted the public acknowledgement of Prime Minister Sharon that incitement in the Palestinian media had dropped noticeably, in accordance with Palestinian obligations under the Road Map. Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz had overseen the issuing of increased numbers of entrance permits to workers from the West Bank. And, on 12 December, the Israeli cabinet approved a prisoner release, the details of which were yet to be determined.

He noted with satisfaction and hope for the future that the overall level of violence had dropped in the past month. In that context, the United Nations had decided to reduce the current security rating for the Gaza Strip back to phase 3, after it had been raised to phase 4 earlier in the year. Nevertheless, casualty figures were still too high. Since the last briefing to the Council on 15 November, 52 Palestinians and seven Israelis had been killed, and 172 Palestinians and 29 Israelis had been injured.

While there had been a reduction of incidents, a disturbing level of violence continued, he said. Palestinian militants continued to fire mortar shells and Qassam rockets against Israeli settlements and targets inside Israel, albeit in reduced numbers. He hoped that, in the coming weeks and months, a democratically empowered and strengthened Palestinian Authority would be able to meet fully its obligation under international law and under the Road Map to do its utmost to prevent such attacks.

In the Gaza Strip, in particular, the situation had remained unstable, he said. On 7 December, an Israeli soldier was killed, and four others were wounded when Hamas militants set off a bomb near the Karni crossing in central Gaza. A prolonged gun battle had ensued, in which four Palestinians died, among them a 14-year-old bystander. Hours later, an Israeli helicopter fired a missile at suspected Palestinian militants in the area, killing one. On 10 December, four Israelis were injured in a mortar attack on the settlement of Neve Dekalim. Five Israeli soldiers were killed and six were wounded on 12 December in an explosion beneath an Israeli military outpost close to the Rafah checkpoint on the Gaza-Egypt border. In the ensuing gun battle, at least one Palestinian was killed. The Israeli Air Force also fired six missiles at six targets in Gaza City, though, fortunately, no casualties had been reported. Over the past two days, four Palestinians were killed in various incidents in the Gaza Strip, among them, a taxi driver who was hit by Israeli gunfire near a check point. Five Israelis were wounded in those incidents.

During the reporting period, Israel had also continued to carry out illegal extrajudicial killings, he said. Four Palestinians were wounded on 9 December when an Israeli aircraft fired a missile at a car in the Gaza Strip in an attempt on the life of the leader of the Popular Resistance Committee, a militant faction based in Gaza. There had been reports that a wanted Islamic Jihad militant was killed by Israeli troops while he was lying on the ground, wounded and unarmed, during an arrest raid near Jenin in the West Bank on 3 December. He welcomed the Israeli Defence Force (IDF)'s announcement of an investigation of that incident.

As he had said repeatedly, the Government of Israel must respect its legal obligations to ensure the safety of Palestinian civilians and refrain from the disproportionate use of force. On 20 November, two 15-year-old Palestinians stone-throwers were shot dead in Nablus. On 29 November, a 38-year-old Palestinian physician was killed when Israeli forces fired tank shells and automatic gunfire towards the Rafah refugee camp. Five Palestinians were shot dead on 9 December along the Egyptian border in the Gaza Strip, though it remained unclear whether they were militants, smugglers or civilians. On 10 December, a seven-year-old girl was killed by Israeli forces in Khan Younis. Five Palestinian schoolchildren were wounded on 12 December, as an IDF tank fired three shells in the Khan Younis refugee camp, one of which had exploded in a school yard.

He said that Israel continued to demolish houses and maintain movement restrictions for the Palestinian population, albeit in an eased form. Israel's construction of the barrier in the West Bank also continued, with worrisome consequences for the Palestinian population, despite the Government of Israel's ongoing revision of the barrier's route, which was moving closer to the Green Line. Barrier construction and movement restrictions were the chief reasons for the continuing economic crisis in the Palestinian areas. They reduced employment and limited Palestinian access to basic services. The adjusted unemployment rate continued to stand at 32.6 per cent and just over 40 per cent of Palestinians between the ages of 15 and 24 years were unemployed. Approximately half the Palestinian population were living below the official poverty line of \$2.10 per day, while 16 per cent lived in extreme poverty. Poverty bred despair and extremism.

To address the economic crisis, the main donor coordination body, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, had met last week in Oslo, he said. The donors would continue to coordinate their efforts, and looked forward to an improvement of conditions on the ground. The new spirit of cooperation had been underscored by the fact that, at the Liaison Committee, Palestinians, Israelis and key representatives of the international community had met for the first time in a year, in a meeting characterized as harmonious, constructive and creative. Israel's economy had also not been exempt from the consequences of the conflict. Only a peace process and a full and final settlement of the conflict would enable a move from crisis management and recovery to sustained and sustainable development and prosperity.

Meanwhile, he continued, the Quartet Principles had met on 23 November in Sharm el-Sheikh in the margins of the Iraq conference. They had discussed the current transition in the Palestinian Authority and had agreed that the immediate priorities were to provide technical support for the presidential elections and to help ensure the fiscal stability of the Palestinian governing body. All Quartet members were united in their view that the situation at present was conducive to long overdue change. The Quartet envoys remained in close contact with one another, with a view to coordinating and planning ahead beyond the crucial first step of the Palestinian elections.

Both parties seemed to have realized the potential for change inherent in the present situation, he said. There existed at present a real opportunity to implement the Road Map's provisions and to make a huge leap towards a settlement of the conflict. There were two catalysts for that. One was the transitional process in the Palestinian Authority; the other was the Israeli initiative to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank. When the Israeli Disengagement Plan had been presented as a unilateral initiative, the Quartet had specified that if the Israeli withdrawal initiative was implemented in full coordination with the Palestinians and the Quartet, then it could prove to be a key contribution towards a genuine revival of the peace process. The withdrawal should also lead to the end of the occupation of the Gaza Strip and be accompanied by similar steps in the West Bank.

He said the redeployment of Israeli troops, military installations and settlements, including settlers, could represent a step forward, with highly symbolic, precedent-setting significance on the road towards ending the occupation that began in 1967 and towards achieving a lasting peace in the Middle East. In that sense, Prime Minister Sharon was indeed planning to go further than any other Israeli prime minister before him, evacuating Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory for the first time since 1967. The United Nations, together with Quartet partners, stood ready to assist the parties to maintain momentum.

Now was the time to actively engage, help the process along, and determine how best the international community could contribute to a revival of a sustainable peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, he said. The end goal remained unchanged, namely, the end of the occupation and the establishment of an independent, sovereign, viable, democratic and contiguous Palestinian State living alongside Israel in peace and stability. Both parties still had important steps to take. Israeli settlement activity, including the natural growth of settlements, had not been frozen, as Israel was obliged to do under the Road Map. The Palestinian Authority must take further steps to bring to a complete halt the violence and terror, and to institute full reform of the security services, as was required under the Road Map.

Potential opportunities had also emerged more clearly on the wider regional track, he said. When Terje Rød-Larsen had visited Damascus in late November, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad had reiterated his unequivocal willingness to resume negotiations with Israel, without any conditions, within the framework of the relevant Security Council resolutions and the fundamental principle of land for peace. Both President Mubarak and King Abdullah had offered to mediate between Syria and Israel. The Organization believed the outstretched Syrian hand should be grasped.

In that regard, he welcomed Foreign Minister Shalom's statement at the Herzliya Conference yesterday that Israel should not deny a hand reaching out for peace. Such statements by the two sides were particularly welcome because movement on the regional track would help to reinforce the momentum that was being created for progress with the peace process. The end goal was, and must remain, a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, tension had recently increased somewhat along the Blue Line, he said. A hitherto unknown group had claimed responsibility for the Katyusha attack against Israel of 15 November. In the aftermath of the attack, the United Nations had called on Lebanon to double its efforts to ensure an immediate halt to serious violations of the Blue Line. While he was pleased to note that the Lebanese authorities had spoken out against the incident and had launched an investigation, he called on Lebanon's Government to extend its authority over all its territory, as demanded in relevant Council resolutions.

Israel had, meanwhile, continued its intermittent air violations of the Blue Line, he said. On 5 December, 14 air violations had been recorded. The United Nations had continued to call on Israel to cease the over-flights violating the Blue Line, while emphasizing to all parties that one violation did not justify another.

He concluded that everyone must do their best to ensure that the parties realized the potential of the moment. Some momentum had been already created. But much work remained to be done if potential was to become achievement. It must be made clear that both Israel and the Palestinians were expected to seize the moment to act constructively, and to work within the framework of the Road Map. The international community should do everything within its power to encourage the parties to persevere as they moved along the narrow and difficult road that lead to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

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