
Middle East 'Quartet' agrees to work towards two-State solution, Annan reports

16 July – Following more than two hours of talks on the situation in the Middle East, the members of the diplomatic "Quartet" - the United Nations, United States, Russian Federation and European Union - today said they were committed to backing reform efforts by the Palestinian Authority and called on Israel to take concrete steps to support the emergence of a viable Palestinian State.

In a communiqué read to the press held after this morning's meeting in New York, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that the Quartet strongly supported the goal of a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement, as expressed in a statement last month by US President George W. Bush, and agreed that with an intensive effort on security and reform by all, this could be reached within three years.

"We remain committed to implementing the vision of two States, Israel and an independent, viable and democratic Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," Mr. Annan said.

The Secretary-General said the Quartet pledged all its efforts to realize the goals of reform, security and peace, reaffirming "that these efforts in the political, security, economic, humanitarian, and institution-building fields must proceed together, hand-in-hand."

The Quartet also welcomed "the strong Palestinian interest in reform, including the Palestinian 100-Day Reform Programme, as well as the willingness of regional States and the international community to assist the Palestinians to build institutions of good government and democracy, in preparation for statehood," Mr. Annan said.

As for Israel, the Secretary-General said that the Quartet noted that country's "vital stake" in the success of Palestinian reform and called on it to take concrete steps to support the emergence of a viable Palestinian State, including easing internal closures, releasing frozen tax revenues, withdrawing forces and stopping all settlement activity.

Mr. Annan said that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had informed him that he wanted to see a worldwide humanitarian operation to alleviate the plight of the Palestinian people, adding that the Quartet agreed that full humanitarian access would be the fastest way to begin improving their plight. The United Nations - with the full support of the group - agreed to lead that effort, he said.

"We all share the end objective of two States, living in peace, side by side," the Secretary-General said in response to a question. "What we have to do is work out how we get there."

Later this afternoon, the Secretary-General and the other members of the Quartet met at his residence with the Foreign Ministers of Egypt and Jordan, as well as the Permanent Representative of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations.

Speaking to the press afterwards, the Secretary-General stressed that more work needed to be done to iron out the details of what it would take to reach the objective of a Palestinian state in three years' time.

"We discussed the reform plans, the security issues and the progress that is being made on that front," Mr. Annan said, adding that the meeting also addressed the "desperate" humanitarian situation on the ground as well as Prime Minister Sharon's offer to work on the international humanitarian effort to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians.