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IN SOMBRE CONTEXT OF GAZA CRISIS, LEBANON PROVIDES FRAGILE 'RAY OF HOPE'

FOR PEACEFUL MIDDLE EAST, SAYS SECRETARY-GENERAL TO LEBANESE PARLIAMENT

Following is UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's address to the Lebanese Parliament in Beirut, 17 January.

I am deeply honoured to address the Lebanese National Assembly.

I wish to thank Speaker Berri for according me this privilege.

This building and its magnificently restored surroundings are a fitting symbol of the indomitable spirit and resilience of the Lebanese people.

I thank you for this honour to speak to you here today.

I come here at a most difficult time for the region and the world. I have visited several countries to help find solutions to the tragic crisis in Gaza.

The goal of my mission is to step up the pace of our joint diplomatic efforts to achieve an immediate ceasefire, to urge implementation of Security Council resolution 1860, and to ensure that urgent humanitarian assistance be provided, without restriction, to those in desperate need.

The level of violence in Gaza is unprecedented in recent decades.

The Israeli aerial and land offensives against Hamas targets are inflicting heavy civilian casualties, widespread destruction and tremendous suffering for the entire population.

More than a thousand Gazans have died in less than three weeks. More than 5,000 have been wounded. At the same time, rockets fired from Gaza threaten a million Israelis.

There are reports of very high numbers of women and children amongst the dead.

Hospitals are struggling to cope with the staggering number of seriously injured people.

Public infrastructure has been destroyed. There is no place left to bury the dead. There are no safe places.

And to my great dismay, even UN shelters have not been able to provide sanctuary to civilians trying to flee the fighting.

I have conveyed my strong protest and outrage against this attack, as well as the attack on our UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] compound, and I have demanded a full explanation and apology. Although Israeli leaders have apologized for the latest attack, I have demanded an assurance that this will not happen again.

Here I must stress my support and deepest appreciation for the vital role being played by UNRWA in providing humanitarian and economic assistance.

UN staff in Gaza are doing valiant, lifesaving work under appalling circumstances. I was unable to go to Gaza myself at the present time, although I had wanted to.

I had wanted to go to Gaza so as to be a witness to the suffering of Gaza civilians, and to show my solidarity with them and my UN staff there.

Instead, I spoke to them the day before yesterday via video link, and was very touched and moved by their personal stories and experiences.

Gaza's pain is felt by all of us. I know that it is felt throughout Lebanon, above all among the Palestinian community living in this country.

As we continue striving for the peace that has eluded us for too long, caring for Palestinian refugees remains a central concern for both the United Nations and your Government.

I commend Prime Minister Siniora and the Government for their efforts to improve the living conditions of Palestinians in Lebanon.

It is imperative that the international community continue supporting these efforts.

In particular, I call on donors to support the reconstruction of the Nahr el Bared camp.

It is my duty and moral obligation as Secretary-General of the United Nations to uphold the UN Charter and its principles.

Security Council resolution 1860 provides a clear framework for ending the current violence.

Our top priority must be to save lives now by immediately ending the violence through a ceasefire.

We must safeguard lives in the future by making sure that the ceasefire is durable and fully respected by all the parties.

And we must remember that there is no military solution to the challenges facing this region. Political solutions are needed as a matter of urgency – and as the most promising way forward.

Hamas must stop firing rockets into Israel.

Israel must end its offensive in Gaza and withdraw its troops.

There should be no more illicit trafficking of arms and ammunition into Gaza.

The crossings from Gaza into Israel and Egypt must be opened and functioning in accordance with international agreements.

The Palestinians must be reconciled under the legitimate authority of President Abbas.

And the international community must provide practical support on the ground to help achieve these goals.

It is clear that we can no longer delay addressing the root causes of this crisis.

Israel must end its occupation of Palestinian and Arab territory which began in 1967.

All of the core issues of the peace process, without exception, must be resolved.

We tried hard to do that in 2008, and failed. We must not allow the same thing to happen in the year ahead.

This is the breadth of the task that we face in promoting a solution to this long conflict. But let me repeat my simple, core and immediate message.

Both sides must first stop the fighting now. We cannot wait for all the details, the mechanisms, to be conclusively negotiated and agreed, while civilians continue to be traumatized, injured and killed.

We have no time to lose. I demand, again, an immediate ceasefire.

Excellencies, Distinguished Members of Parliament,

In this sombre context, Lebanon provides a ray of hope – albeit fragile – for a peaceful Middle East.

Few nations have suffered more from the tragic consequences of war than Lebanon.

Lebanon knows only too well the enormous human devastation that comes when brothers stare each other down through the barrel of a gun.

I honour the memory of the many thousands of innocent men, women and children who lost their lives in your country's wars.

The Parliament where we are gathered today was a front line in yesterday's war.

You have rebuilt it as a symbol of Lebanon's will to forge a very peaceful future.

This building embodies the belief of all Lebanese that such a future should be decided by the people through democratic and constitutionally mandated institutions.

You have brought this Parliament back to life after the agreement reached in Doha last year.

By revitalizing your institutions, you have pulled back from the brink of armed conflict, proving once again Lebanon's unwavering desire for progress through dialogue.

I congratulate you and all Lebanese on your collective achievement in implementing that historic agreement.

Although much has been achieved since Doha, much remains to be done by you.

I encourage you to continue working together, across political and community lines, to implement the bold national agenda you have set for yourselves.

The United Nations and the international community stand ready to help you along the way.

I am particularly encouraged that you have adopted a new electoral law, and that you have set the date of 7 June for your next elections. These elections are your shared responsibility.

I call upon all of you to ensure that they take place in a peaceful and calm atmosphere.

I commend the ambitious reforms that this Parliament has adopted.

And I continue to follow the process of national dialogue that you have embarked upon under the firm leadership of President Suleiman.

His election last May signalled a new era for Lebanon. I commend the national consensus he has forged since then. This consensus is also a product of all political leaders present here today. Especially I pay tribute to Speaker Berri and Prime Minister Siniora.

As proven by long United Nations experience, dialogue is the best way to address the root causes of armed conflict and other differences of opinion.

I am encouraged that the dialogue is now ready to tackle some of the most difficult issues.

But this process is as fragile as it is vital.

I urge you to nurture it, and not allow short-term factors to deter you from shaping solutions that will stand the test of time.

Resilient as Lebanon's democracy has become, your country has suffered from a long history of political violence.

Assassinations have taken the lives of many of this country's most promising leaders, including several members of this National Assembly.

Prime Minister Hariri was in this very room only a few minutes before he was killed on that tragic day almost four years ago.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon will open its doors as of 1 March this year.

Its objective is to identify the perpetrators of this crime and to strike a blow against the impunity that has persisted for too long.

There are great expectations of this new body. The UN will provide all the support necessary for it to meet those expectations, as well as the highest judicial standards.

As the Middle East suffers through the terrible conflict in Gaza, we are reminded of the tragic war of 2006 in Lebanon in which so many innocent lives were lost.

I am very concerned about the situation in Southern Lebanon.

Further attacks across the Blue Line would put at risk the stability brought about by resolution 1701.

I urge all parties in Lebanon and in Israel to continue to show restraint during this tense time in the region.

I am satisfied that the lengthy negotiations – mediated by the United Nations – on the exchange of prisoners between Hizbullah and Israel was concluded successfully.

But while Security Council resolution 1701 enjoys the support of all parties, it has yet to be implemented in full.

I have just come from Israel, where I renewed my demand that the Government of Israel comply with resolution 1701.

Lebanon should fulfil every one of its obligations, too. The UN will continue to work with all the parties to ensure resolution 1701 is fully implemented.

I commend the role that UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) has played in this regard under the command of General Graziano.

The United Nations will also continue to engage the Syrian Arab Republic to ensure its full cooperation in this important process.

I am encouraged that Lebanon and Syria have started on a new path in their relationship.

The establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of embassies provides for the future development of closer ties between your two countries.

Indeed, cooperation between sovereign nations based on mutual respect almost always proves to be a wise investment.

Tangible progress should be possible in areas such as border management, border delineation and control, and on the important question of missing people.

Lebanon and the United Nations have long-standing ties.

Charles Malek, your country's first ambassador to the United Nations, was present at the birth of the Organization in San Francisco in 1945.

He went on to play a leading role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – we celebrated its sixtieth anniversary last year.

This bond has deepened with the years.

Today, members of the United Nations family are working in partnership with you in most regions of Lebanon, in fields ranging from health and development to security.

The United Nations will continue to stand by all Lebanese as you write the next chapter in your country's history.

That is my pledge to you and to the people of Lebanon.

The terrible events in Gaza over the past three weeks have given us a terrible reminder that we will not be able to forge a more secure and stable world for this and future generations without addressing the challenges of the Middle East.

Above all, this must mean the establishment of a Palestinian state taking its rightful place in this region.

That goal -- a just, comprehensive and lasting peace -- will remain a top priority of the United Nations.

As I continue my journey through your region, it is clear to me that Lebanon bears special significance as a symbol of hope for a Middle East where communities can live side by side, turning their back on conflict to forge a common path in peace and prosperity.

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