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ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER'S PLAN FOR GAZA WITHDRAWAL 'BOLD STEP' THAT SHOULD BE WELCOMED BY ALL, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

Middle East Envoy Terje Rød-Larsen Says Continued Construction Of Barrier on Palestinian Land Cast Pall Over Positive Developments

The announcement by Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that he would withdraw the military and settlements from the Gaza Strip was a bold step that should be welcomed by all the United Nations top Middle East envoy told the Security Council this morning

Terje Rød-Larsen, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority said that no Israeli Prime Minister had previously had the vision to say he would remove settlers, as long called for by the international community, and initiate a plan for its implementation. The proposed step — withdrawal from occupied territory in the Gaza Strip where Israel controlled about 40 per cent of the land — had already been welcomed by the Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei as the first step of a broader withdrawal. The Secretary-General had also said that the withdrawal from Gaza must be seen as a first step, to be made in the context of the ["Road Map"](#) and as part of a cooperative engagement between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the international community.

The announcement had set the stage for three possible scenarios, he continued. One is the resumption of a vigorous peace process. The second is unilateral Israeli disengagement from parts of the occupied Palestinian territory. The third centred on the inability of the parties to enact that withdrawal. Such a scenario would be deeply against Palestinian and Israeli interests and could be a destabilizing element in the region. The only viable long-term option for both peoples was the first one: the resumption of the peace process.

He said it was unlikely that, in practice, an orderly withdrawal of thousands of settlers from the Gaza Strip could take place without cooperation from the Palestinian Authority. As long as the removal of settlers in the Gaza Strip was a true withdrawal, it should be supported as a bold confidence-building act and a first step to the fulfilment of the United Nations' calls to the Government of Israel to end its occupation.

The cautiously positive view of the situation was tempered by the grim reality confronting Palestinians and Israelis, Mr. Rød-Larsen continued. Since the briefing of 16 January, a total of 11 Israelis and 65 Palestinians had died. In all, nearly 10,000 people had lost their homes since October 2000. He called on the Government of Israel to fulfil its international law responsibilities to protect civilians, and on the Palestinian Authority to fully ensure that only authorized individuals within defined security forces had access to weapons.

The relative reduction of terrorist attacks had been shattered on 20 January by a suicide bombing in Jerusalem. No cause could justify such heinous crimes, he said, and he urged the Palestinian Authority to take the steps necessary to bring those who plan, facilitate and carry out such attacks to justice.

The humanitarian situation remained dire in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There was still high unemployment and widespread poverty. However, according to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Palestinian Ministry of Finance, the West Bank economy, partly due to an easing of closure, grew by 4.5 per cent last year. That growth rate roughly matched the population growth. However, the stabilization underscored that, if closure were eased as part of a peace process, the Palestinian economy could start to recover.

That development could only be put on a sound footing, however, if the Palestinian Authority continued to make strides in reforming the way it conducted its business. The area of security was particularly vital. An announced decision to channel Palestinian security personnel salaries directly into bank deposits must be implemented without delay. Efforts to overcome the obstacles to unifying the disparate Palestinian Authority security services into one framework under the authority of the Prime Minister must be supported by all.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) continued to face financial difficulties, he said. Last year it had received less than half of the \$196 million that it requested to feed some 1.1 million Palestinians, rebuild destroyed shelters, create jobs, and provide emergency health services. UNRWA had now launched a new appeal for \$193 million covering 2004, and he hoped the international community would respond generously.

The continued construction of the Barrier on Palestinian land, including around Jerusalem, had cast a pall over positive developments, he continued. On 9 February, Israel's Supreme Court had started deliberating on petitions by Israeli groups opposed to the current construction. On 12 February, the Israeli Government had decided that it would not attend the International Court of Justice hearing, stating that it did not recognize the Court's jurisdiction over the matter. Israeli officials had stated that the Barrier construction was based on security considerations and was temporary. At the same time, the Government had stated it would alter the route of the Barrier so that it hewed closer to the Green Line. He renewed his call on the Government to cease construction of the Barrier on Palestinian land in compliance with General Assembly resolution [ES-10/13](#).

The litany of negatives, coupled with Mr. Sharon's positive announcement on the Gaza Strip withdrawal, highlighted the importance of restarting the peace process through the Quartet's Road Map, he continued. Last June, the essential principle of parallelism had been abandoned and a succession of small steps had stalled almost immediately. Now, however, the parties had to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the potential resumption of the peace process based on the Gaza withdrawal initiative. The leaders of both peoples must begin to work to fulfil their obligations under the Road Map. The Quartet must also re-engage with the parties and revitalize its efforts.

Addressing the situation between Israel and Lebanon, he said the Government of Israel and Hizballah had agreed, through German mediation, to an important prisoner exchange. Hizballah's attack on 19 January on an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) bulldozer attempting to remove an explosive device was a regrettable and unwarranted escalation.

Despite numerous calls for their cessation, Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory and anti-aircraft fire by Hizballah had continued, he said. While one violation did not justify another, he stressed the difference between an overflight and actions that posed obvious mortal risk. The absence of the requisite governing authority in southern Lebanon allowed groups who did not share the Government of Lebanon's desire for peace to take actions that jeopardized security throughout the region. He vigorously reiterated the call of both the Council and the Secretary-General for the Government of Lebanon to exercise its authority everywhere in southern Lebanon through the activities of the Joint Security Forces and the Lebanese Army. Meanwhile, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) would continue to contribute to the restoration of peace and security.

The situation in the Golan had remained calm and served to exemplify how ultimately all parties could exercise restraint and work through diplomatic channels to resolve their differences. President Assad's recent overture to resume peace negotiations with Israel was encouraging and it would be in the interest of peace for Israel to respond positively to that outstretched hand. He hoped both parties seized the opportunity to forge a peace agreement.

In conclusion, he said the parties had another chance for peace and the international community had another opportunity to make the Road Map process work. He had repeatedly called for the parties to take bold steps to build confidence and jump-start the peace process. An Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip had the earmarks of such a step. He awaited the details and timetable for the withdrawal and urged the Palestinians to meet the plan with meaningful, reciprocal confidence-building measures, most imperatively in the area of security. The humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip should not be allowed to further deteriorate. The people of each side deserved to be free of violence, terror, fear and harassment.

The open meeting, which started at 10:10 a.m., was adjourned at 10:40 a.m., after which the Council went into closed consultations on the subject.

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