



# Press Release

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Français

## **SECRETARY-GENERAL'S STATEMENT AT OPENING OF 2000 SESSION OF COMMITTEE ON EXERCISE OF INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF PALESTINIAN PEOPLE**

Following is the text of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's statement this afternoon at the opening of the 2000 session of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People:

Let me at the outset congratulate you on your unanimous re-election to the leadership of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. It is clear recognition of the unstinting commitment you, Ambassador Ka, and your country have shown in the search for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Today, you open your first session in the year marking the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ -- a momentous event for the world and of particular significance in the Middle East. The General Assembly has marked it with the adoption of the "Bethlehem 2000" resolution, and this Committee helped promote world support for the restoration and renewal of Bethlehem, and other Palestinian cities and communities.

At the outset of the millennium, we are witnessing a restoration and renewal of hope in the peace process in the Middle East. As we meet today, there are real reasons for optimism. The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are back on track. They are, in fact, in the midst of a crucial phase, with the prospect of further progress in the coming months. I know there are hurdles, but let's be hopeful.

Already, following the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum last year, we have witnessed the further redeployment of troops from the West Bank; the agreement on prisoners; the opening of safe passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; and the resumption of the negotiations on permanent status issues.

The November trilateral summit in Oslo helped the parties set up additional negotiating mechanisms, as well as a timetable for the framework and final settlement agreements to be concluded this year.

Let me, therefore, commend Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority, and Ehud Barak, Prime Minister of Israel, for their courage and their commitment to the cause of peace and reconciliation. Their work has rekindled our hopes that peace, based on Security Council resolutions [242 \(1967\)](#) and [338 \(1973\)](#), may be within reach at last.

And yet, the situation on the ground is not without problems. There is much anxiety among Palestinians over the construction and expansion of settlements and roads, and the impact this might have on the permanent status negotiations. I have called on the parties to preserve and build, instead, on the fragile accomplishments of the peace process, and to refrain from actions that might prejudice the outcome of the negotiations. I would also urge the parties not to lose sight of the need for a just solution to the refugee question, without which peace and stability cannot take hold.

Nor can there be peace and stability without improved economic and social conditions. Some progress has been made in health and education, in employment opportunities, and in industrial development and Palestinian institution- building. But much remains to be done. Through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other entities, the United Nations will continue to contribute to these efforts.

In particular, I would like to emphasize the key role that UNRWA has played for 50 years in providing much-needed assistance to Palestinian refugees. Despite chronic financial constraints, it remains a vital source of humanitarian assistance to more than three million refugees. It is my sincere hope that UNRWA will get the resources it needs to continue this crucial mission on behalf of 3 million men, women and children, whose basic needs constitute a humanitarian imperative beyond other considerations.

At this stage, it is all the more crucial to ensure that United Nations support for the peace process is well-prepared and coordinated, and that United Nations development assistance play an effective part in that support. That is why I am glad to have secured the services of Terje Rød-Larsen of Norway -- who has been closely involved in the peace process since the early stages of the Oslo negotiations -- as Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, and as my Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority.

I know that, in the critical transitional period ahead, Mr. Rød-Larsen will spare no effort in making the assistance provided by the United Nations more effective and more focused.

For a quarter of a century, this Committee has worked steadfastly to bring closer the day when Palestinians will be able to exercise their inalienable national rights. As we enter the new millennium, it is my hope that the parties will overcome the remaining hurdles on the road to peace and that the international community will do all it can to help them on that journey. I pledge that the United Nations will spare no effort in this regard, and I wish you all a most productive session.

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