



Press Release

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SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS SECURITY COUNCIL MIDDLE EAST CRISIS 'WORST IN TEN YEARS;' CALLS ON PALESTINIANS, ISRAELIS TO 'LEAD YOUR PEOPLES AWAY FROM DISASTER '

Following is the statement of Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Security Council's 12 March meeting on the situation in the Middle East:

Three weeks ago, I briefed the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East. I warned then that we were nearing the abyss. Since that day, the toll of dead and wounded – particularly among innocent civilians – has risen to levels that can be described, without exaggeration, as appalling.

Israeli-Palestinian tensions are at boiling point. The situation is the worst in ten years. Escalation has been met with escalation with little – in some cases no – regard for innocent civilian lives. Acts that are disproportionate in scale, and indiscriminate in their effect, are occurring on an almost daily basis.

The scale of the carnage is horrifying. Since the beginning of the current crisis in September 2000, there have been some 1,200 fatalities among the Palestinians. More than 180 of them have occurred in the last ten days. On the Israeli side, out of some 350 fatalities, well over 50 have occurred in the same ten days. I grieve as we all must for the families of those who have lost loved ones or been maimed or wounded. I grieve for Israel and Palestine.

In giving the Council my assessment of the situation on the ground, I would like to start by saying that I am profoundly disturbed by the increasing use of heavy weaponry by Israel in civilian areas. It has made life even more difficult and precarious for Palestinian civilians who were already subjected to severe physical and economic hardships.

Large-scale military operations in pursuit of Palestinian militants – involving ground troops, attack helicopters, tanks and F-16s – have taken place throughout civilian areas and refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza, causing large-scale loss of life. In addition, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other agencies are reporting growing disregard, on the part of the Israeli Defence Forces, for the safety of medical and ambulance personnel who are attempting to treat and evacuate wounded from conflict zones. Only last week, a United Nations staff member was killed in a clearly marked United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) ambulance.

On the other side, the Palestinians have played their full part in the escalating cycle of violence, counter-violence and revenge. Palestinian groups have carried out a series of attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets. They have attacked IDF checkpoints and settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Kassam II rockets have been launched against civilian areas in Israeli towns. I am particularly disturbed by suicide attacks which deliberately target civilians, spreading fear and anxiety throughout the general population.

Against this backdrop, I very much welcome the decision of the United States to send General Zinni back to the region. Both Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Sharon have taken steps to facilitate his efforts. Mr. Arafat has finally arrested all those suspected of involvement in the assassination of Rehavam Zeevi, the Israeli Tourism Minister. Mr. Sharon has wisely given up his demand for seven days of calm before beginning negotiations.

I hope both leaders will engage constructively with General Zinni in a renewed and intensified dialogue on the political, security and economic dimensions of the peace process. The alternative, for both sides, is continued bloodshed – delaying even further the prospects for an end to the occupation and the violence.

At this time, Mr. President, I feel I must speak directly to the people and leaders of both sides.

To the Palestinians I say: you have the inalienable right to a viable State within secure internationally recognized borders. But you must stop all acts of terror and all suicide bombings. The deliberate and indiscriminate targeting of civilians is morally repugnant. It is doing immense harm to your cause, by weakening international support, and making Israelis believe that it is their existence as a State, and not the occupation, that is being opposed.

To the Israelis I say: you have the right to live in peace and security within secure internationally recognized borders. But you must end the illegal occupation. More urgently, you must stop the bombing of civilian areas, the assassinations, the unnecessary use of lethal force, the demolitions, and the daily humiliation of ordinary Palestinians. Such actions gravely erode Israel's standing in the international community, and further fuel the fires of hatred, despair and extremism among Palestinians.

To the leaders on both sides – Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat, in particular – I say: you can lead your peoples away from disaster. You have accepted the Tenet understandings and the [Mitchell recommendations](#) as the basis for negotiations. Today, more than ever, you must recognize that security and a political settlement are indivisible. One cannot exist without the other. Many of your friends stand ready to support you if you seize this

opportunity.

In closing, let me say that the recent initiative by Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia set out a clear and compelling vision for peace in the Middle East, based on the bedrock of UN Security Council resolutions [242 \(1967\)](#) and [338 \(1973\)](#). I appeal to the leaders of the Arab world not to give up on the search for peace but rather to unite in support of this vision, showing the world – and the parties – that there is an alternative to war.

I call on Mr. Arafat and Mr. Sharon immediately to take the necessary political, security and economic steps on the ground which can help realize this vision. Finally, I call on the Security Council to lend its full authority and influence to the vital cause of peace.

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