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UN MEDIA SEMINAR ON MIDDLE EAST OPENS AMID 'GREAT UNCERTAINTY AND DIFFICULTY':

MEETING AIMS TO BOOST CONFIDENCE FROM BOTTOM UP, SAYS COMMUNICATIONS CHIEF

Violence Cause for Dismay, Not Despair, Secretary-General Says, Urging Media, Civil Society to Spread Message of Coexistence

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

TOKYO, 26 June – The fifteenth International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East opened in Tokyo today against the backdrop of “great uncertainty and difficulty” on the ground with an appeal for an end of violence and renewed dialogue at all levels, including at the grass roots.

In his opening statement, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, Kiyo Akasaka, stressed that the objective of the Seminar was, not only to sensitize the public about the situation in the Middle East, but to provide impetus and support for a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians and to help them sustain their hopes for a peaceful future. It aimed, “in a very modest way”, to contribute to the realization of those hopes.

The two-day Tokyo event — entitled “Re-engaging the Israelis and the Palestinians in the Search for a Comprehensive and Lasting Political Settlement” - has been organized by the United Nations Department of Public Information, in cooperation with the Government of Japan and the United Nations University in Tokyo.

Many had thought the seminar should have been postponed, owing to the events in Gaza and the resulting political and humanitarian concerns, Mr. Akasaka added. The United Nations was confident, however, that the value of the Seminar, which sought to build confidence for the prospects for peace from the bottom up, was even greater in the light of heightened tensions and uncertainties on the ground.

“We are fully aware of the power and responsibilities of the media,” Mr. Akasaka said, expressing hope that its members would continue to write, not only about the problems facing Israelis and Palestinians, but also about opportunities for advancing the peace process, as well as positive signs of cooperation for the welfare of both peoples.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, in a message delivered by Mr. Akasaka, that the current outbreak of violence should not lead to despair. “Instead, we must focus all our energies on finding a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. And we must take heart from the numerous opinion polls of recent years that point to consistently strong grass roots support in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory for peaceful coexistence within the framework of a two-State solution,” he pointed out.

Stressing that the media was a powerful medium to inform and influence people and to promote sustained dialogue and understanding, the Secretary-General expressed hope that participating media and civil society representatives would explore creative approaches to spreading the message of peace and coexistence. “Your gathering underscores the reality that each and every one of us must remain actively engaged in the search for peace,” he said. In myriad ways, everybody must contribute towards a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement, based on relevant Security Council resolutions and the principle of land for peace.

Welcoming the participants, the Foreign Minister of Japan, Taro Aso, said that, given the present situation of deepening disarray, one clearly could not hope for economic development of Palestine without ensuring political stability and security first. The cause of the chain of violence was despair and the lack of hope for the future. In an effort to promote stability and generate trust among the peoples in the region, Japan had proposed to create “the corridor for peace and prosperity” in cooperation with the Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians. The concept was to work collaboratively on projects to promote regional cooperation, such as establishing an agro-industrial park in the West Bank and facilitating the transportation of goods.

Rector of the United Nations University in Tokyo, Hans van Ginkel, stressed the importance of dialogue and the capacity to listen in today's increasingly complex and interrelated world. It was important to emphasize the points of agreement, rather than discord. He hoped the discussions in the next two days would promote mutual understanding and identify small steps that could be taken.

Professor van Ginkel also delivered to the Seminar today's keynote address by Michael Williams, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, who stressed the need to look at "what can be done to change current dynamics and channel energies in a more positive direction".

Towards that goal, the United Nations was working overtime to help address the serious humanitarian concerns emanating from the closure of the Gaza Strip. In his early work, the Special Coordinator had ensured that the Organization's contribution to promoting dialogue focused not only on the central Israeli-Palestinian track, but also at the regional level.

Entitled "Challenges and Opportunities for the New Emergency Palestinian Government and Israel", the panel discussion that followed the Seminar's opening focused on recent political developments. Its participants discussed prospects for restoring the path to peace, including how to get back to the Road Map.

Today's second panel addressed the theme: "Regional Dimension: the Role of Neighbouring Countries in the Middle East Peace Process". It examined the implications of recent developments in the region for Israeli-Palestinian relations and prospects for restoring the path to peace in the regional context.

The Seminar will be structured around three panel discussions, the first of which is going to address the issues of regional economic cooperation at 9:30 a.m. tomorrow, 27 June.

Message by United Nations Secretary-General

The message of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was presented by KIYO AKASAKA, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. Reading out the Secretary-General's statement, he said that after years of occupation, violence and mistrust, Israeli and Palestinian societies stood further apart than ever before. Alarming rifts had also surfaced in internal Palestinian politics, as armed clashes between rival factions spread death and destruction across the Gaza Strip.

The Secretary-General voiced his deep concern about that internecine violence, particularly in Gaza. It had set back the Middle East peace process, and the delivery of vital humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, the violence had spread beyond Gaza in recent weeks, and both Palestinian and Israeli civilian lives had been lost. The Secretary-General had repeatedly called on all sides to uphold international law and protect civilians. The cycle of violence had to end immediately and calm must be restored.

The current outbreak of violence was cause for great dismay, but it should not lead to despair, he continued. "Instead, we must focus all our energies on finding a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. And we must take heart from the numerous opinion polls of recent years that point to consistently strong grass-roots support in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory for peaceful coexistence within the framework of a two-State solution."

That resilient aspiration lay at the heart of the discussions on the role of civil societies in supporting the peace process, he said. It was heartening that the participants would do so within the framework of a media seminar. The media was a powerful medium to inform and influence people and to promote sustained dialogue and understanding.

"I hope the participating media personalities and civil society participants will explore creative approaches to spreading the message of peace and coexistence in these troubled times," he said. "Your gathering underscores the reality that each and every one of us must remain actively engaged in the search for peace. In myriad ways, we must all contribute towards a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement, based on Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 1397, and 1515, and the principle of land for peace."

Opening Statements

Welcoming the participants on behalf of the host country, Mr. ASO, Japan's Foreign Affairs Minister, expressed his Government's great disappointment over the fact that Palestine was now confronted with great difficulties and was in a state of division following the seizure of the Gaza Strip by Hamas.

It was a matter of serious concern that due to strife and collisions, humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip were deteriorating, he said, adding that it was also truly regrettable that many participants from the Gaza Strip had been unable to attend the Seminar. Japan firmly supported the efforts of President Abbas towards peace and called on all the parties to cooperate with his efforts to avoid any further aggravation of the situation. His country would spare no effort in that regard.

Following yesterday's Summit Meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas, Japan expected to see progress in the peace process in the coming months and years and supported the effort to achieve peace by both leaders, he went on. The Middle East stood at a critical crossroads now. Given the present situation, one clearly could not hope for economic development of Palestine without ensuring political stability and security first. The greatest cause for a chain of violence was not ethnic or religious in nature. Instead, it was despair and lack of hope for the future. Some 30 to 40 per cent of people in Palestine were unemployed. Restricted mobility exacerbated the situation.

In an effort to promote stability and generate hope and trust among the peoples in the Middle East, Japan had proposed to create "the corridor for peace and prosperity" in the region, in cooperation with the Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians, he noted. The project aimed at contributing to creating a viable Palestinian economy, based on private sector activities through the establishment of an agro-industrial park in the West Bank and facilitation of transportation of goods from the West Bank to, among others, the Gulf States via Jordan.

Elaborating on the initiative, he said that with Japan's help, tomatoes, olives and other products could be exported to the Arab countries and to Japan. In March this year, representatives of Japan, Israel, Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization had reached agreement on how to proceed with the initiative. Tomorrow, the first working-level four-way consultations would take place on the Dead Sea coast. Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Japan had all indicated their willingness to proceed with the project, despite the difficulties on the ground. If and when the project proceeded, it would generate hope for the future and income in Palestine. It could also nurture the relationship of trust among Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

United Nations Under-Secretary-General said that the Seminar was taking place at a time when Israelis and Palestinians continued to face impediments in their relations; when Palestinians faced difficulties among themselves; when concerns about food and medical shortages in Gaza were mounting; when human suffering continued; and when prospects for peace remained elusive. "Despite those difficulties, however, I believe that we must continue to hold out hope for the future," he said. Violence must end and dialogue must continue at all levels, including at the grass roots.

The objective of the Seminar was not only to sensitize the public about the situation in the Middle East, but to provide impetus and support for a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, and to help them sustain their hopes for a peaceful future, he said. It aimed, in a very modest way, to contribute to

the realization of those hopes.

He pointed out that the lives of Israelis and Palestinians were linked in many ways, and they shared a number of common interests and concerns, including those related to water, health and environment. "We must hope that civil society cooperation, which this Seminar aims to promote, as well as steps taken at the higher political levels, will eventually lead to a permanent political solution when both peoples can live in peace and harmony and devote their enormous energy and human resources to building a prosperous society for themselves and future generations," he said.

He added that many had thought the seminar should have been postponed, owing to the events in Gaza and the resulting political and humanitarian concerns. The United Nations was confident, however, that the value of the Seminar, which sought to build confidence for the prospects for peace from the bottom up, was even greater in the light of the heightened tensions and uncertainties on the ground. "We are fully aware of the power and responsibilities of the media," he said, expressing hope that its members would continue to write not only about the problems facing Israelis and Palestinians, but also about opportunities for advancing the peace process, as well as positive signs of cooperation for the welfare of both peoples.

Rector VAN GINKEL stressed the importance of the Seminar, adding that, although it was difficult to comprehend from Tokyo the full impact of the current conditions in the Middle East, everybody realized the importance of restoring the peace process there. What was absolutely essential in today's increasingly complex and interrelated world was the dialogue and the capacity to listen. It was important to emphasize the points of agreement, rather than discord. He hoped the discussions in the next two days would promote mutual understanding and identify small steps that could be taken.

He added that, as former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan had often said, there were no simple answers to complex problems. It was incumbent on all participants to try to find solutions and come to grips with the complexities of today's world. "We must create hope, there is no way forward without hope," he said. Reasonable optimism and hope could create the light at the end of the tunnel. Finding an overall solution would take a long time, but it was important to make small steps forward.

Keynote Address

In today's keynote address by Mr. WILLIAMS, delivered by Professor VAN GINKEL, Mr. Williams said that the Seminar's title "Restoring the path to peace" could not be more appropriate. Indeed, that was the Special Coordinator's exact mission. In the six weeks that he had held that office, the world had been painfully reminded of the depth of the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, and the enormity of the challenge of ending occupation and conflict, based on the principle of land for peace embodied in the resolutions of the Security Council.

The Palestinian struggle had been marked by many deep crises, but few were as profound in their potential impact as the deeply disturbing events of the last few weeks, he continued. Those events had led to a de facto division of the Palestinians along geographical and factional lines, once again placing at centre stage the challenges represented by continued rejection of the basic principles of the peace process. "Even if it is imperfect, this peace process is the only way to achieve a free and safe future for Israelis and Palestinians alike," he said.

The stability of Lebanon had also been greatly threatened by radical elements "feeding off the squalor and deprivation inside the Palestinian camps," he said. Opportunists among the radicals had sought to exacerbate the situation by attacking Israel with rockets, both from Gaza and Lebanon. Those rockets did not serve the Palestinian cause — instead they served to set it back. The plight of Palestinian civilians in Lebanon and Gaza remained a source of concern, as well as Israeli operations in Gaza and the West Bank.

"It would be easy to fall into despair at this state of affairs, but it would also be mistaken," he said. "We must instead look at what can be done to change current dynamics and channel energies in a more positive direction." Towards that goal, in Gaza, the United Nations was working overtime to help address the serious humanitarian concerns emanating from the closure of the Gaza Strip. Reopening the crossings into Gaza required cooperation of all parties, and, in that effort, the humanitarian imperative must be paramount.

The lack of personal security was the top concern for most Palestinians, he continued. If and where there was a process of internal Palestinian dialogue or new elections, the Palestinian people would take note of who had been successful in addressing their overriding concern for stability and order. It was also vital that political and financial support from Israel and the international community was immediately delivered to President Abbas and the Palestinian Government, starting with the release of all withheld Palestinian value added tax (VAT) and customs receipts. Also needed was action on previous Israeli commitments, including the evacuation of settlement outposts, removal of roadblocks and checkpoints and release of prisoners. Equally, the Palestinian Authority should act on previous commitments, not only to end violence, but also to thoroughly reform its institutions.

"Only through a combination of steps, combined with a wisdom and maturity on the side of Palestinians to keep an eye on the ultimate need to find national unity, are we likely to see a stabilization of the precarious situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory," he said. A political process that would address the Arab-Israeli conflict in all its dimensions was an urgent requirement. It was pleasing that the Quartet had been reactivated. The Arab League had recommitted itself to a comprehensive peace initiative, first launched in 2002.

In his early work, the Special Coordinator had ensured that the Organization's contribution to promoting dialogue focused not only on the central Israeli-Palestinian track, but also at the regional level, he said. That should include exploring the possibility of renewed negotiations between Israel and Syria. The parties were beginning to show signs of renewed interest in moving forward. President Abbas and the new Palestinian emergency Government were hoping to re-engage with the international community and enhance their dialogue with Israel.

He noted that the Israeli leadership, having responded positively to the Arab Peace Initiative, had said it hoped to return to its agenda as conceived following the April 2006 election: to withdraw from significant parts of the West Bank. Prime Minister Olmert had stated that Israel had no desire to rule over the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank. Under the current circumstances, the Government of Israel also realized that unilateral action was no longer an option and had committed to working with President Abbas to fulfil their objectives.

Only a process that focused on the end of occupation and conflict — and did so urgently and with a goal of reaching finality — would be credible for all involved. Still, Israel was understandably wary that the violence in Lebanon could spill over their northern border. Rocket attacks caused damage and took lives; the proliferation of weapons and militias beyond the control of the PA had caused many deaths and brought the Palestinians into unnecessary confrontations. The goal of such violence was to block the resumption of any peace process. So, too, were the efforts of those in Israeli society that continued to pursue the settlement of the West Bank.

"The question for all of us here is, will we continue to allow these forces to dictate the future of the peace process," he said. "Will we continue to allow attacks to derail our efforts? Will we continue to be inert in the face of those, who, whether by violence or by creating facts on the ground, seek to destroy the chance of the other side to exist in peace and security in their own State. For the path of peace to be restored, the answer is clear," he said.

Panel I

Entitled “Challenges and Opportunities for the New Emergency Palestinian Government and Israel”, the panel discussion was moderated by Mr. Akasaka. He said that the word “crisis” in Japanese meant both crisis and opportunity. In other words, crisis brought opportunities for change. The most recent crisis in Gaza had changed the dynamics of politics in the Middle East. It now presented new difficulties, as well as new opportunities. In that connection, he referred to yesterday’s meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh and the work of the Quartet, which was meeting to discuss the newly emerged situation at the high political level. “We will see what comes out of this Quartet meeting,” he said.

The first panellist, RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nation, said that one could not pretend that the tragedy of the Palestinian population did not exist — it was important to face that tragedy. For the past 40 years, the policies and practices of the Israeli occupation, many of them in violation of international law, had been influencing every aspect of the lives of the Palestinians. Those included illegal settlement activities. Without acknowledging such things, one could not achieve the two-State solution and the goal of Israel and Palestine living side-by-side. Israel’s Prime Minister Olmert had said recently that Israel did not want to control the Palestinians, but Israel was taking significant portions of the West Bank, turning the Jordan Valley into a military security zone, building Jewish exclusive highways, and dissecting the West Bank.

“Let us face reality in a straightforward way,” he said. All that had been the policy even before Hamas had occurred. From Oslo on, the Palestinian people had negotiated with good faith and tried to resolve the conflict with the Israeli side. The historic moment available now might be the last one. The Palestinian people and President Abbas were willing and ready to negotiate with the Israeli side unconditionally, bringing their concerns to the table. They expected the Israeli side to do the same. The Arab Initiative also presented a new opportunity. If this moment was not exploited, especially after what had happened in the Gaza Strip, the extremists on both sides would flourish and become stronger.

He added that the emergency Government had to deal with many tasks, including security in the West Bank and maintaining national unity. “We need to do more than talk about peace. We have been at the stage of releasing prisoners, holding tax money and then releasing it, establishing checkpoints and then reducing their number,” he said. All those measures were nothing more than bandages on the wounds. Courageous steps were needed to achieve a major breakthrough in the peace process. Otherwise, events similar to what had happened in Gaza could take place in the West Bank. If such a breakthrough was achieved, however, the Palestinian people would “turn things upside down in Gaza” and move towards peace, reconciliation and historic solution with the Israeli side. The majority in Israel was also for the two-State solution. Now, it was important to demand from people in office to move in the direction of peace, so that a new chapter in Israeli-Palestinian relations could begin.

MIKHAIL BELY, Ambassador of the [Russian Federation](#) to Japan, said that together with other members of the Quartet, Russia supported the action of President Abbas, who had used his constitutional powers to dissolve the Unity Government and form the emergency Government instead. Hamas disagreed with those actions, and the Palestinian Territory had been split in two. With the Gaza Strip fully controlled by the Hamas forces, the humanitarian situation was sharply deteriorating.

However, violence had been initiated, not by Hamas itself, but by its radical wing, he continued. Hamas had stated its intention to negotiate with President Abbas to restore Palestinian unity. Among today’s urgent tasks, there was the need to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Today, there was a legitimate Palestinian President, a legitimate emergency Government and a legitimate Parliament. Now, President Abbas should go to the Parliament and seek agreement on the composition of the new Government.

The situation was dangerous, he said, with some parties seeking to prevent the restoration of Palestinian unity and start a civil war. In that connection, he cautioned against “simplistic schemes”, saying that attempts to install “good guys in place of the bad guys” could result in new tragedies. Under the current circumstances, the Quartet of international mediators should live up to its responsibilities in restoring movement towards a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East.

BEN CASPIT, Senior Political Correspondent, *Maariv Newspaper*, Israel, insisted that, instead of “smearing each other with negative rhetoric”, the participants of the Seminar should try to understand each other. Picking up on what Mr. Mansour had said, he pointed out that Israeli settlements and military presence in the Gaza Strip were history. Disengagement had been a very courageous step. If “a pilot Palestinian State in Gaza” succeeded, the same could be done in the West Bank. Before the elections in Israel, Mr. Olmert had stated that he wanted another disengagement on 90 per cent of the West Bank unilaterally. After that, however, rockets had started falling on Israeli towns again, and Hamas took over the Gaza Strip.

Hamas victory in the Gaza Strip was a pyrrhic victory, he continued. The real division was between peace-seeking people and suicide bombers. He wondered if, as a result of the latest developments, Fatah had emerged as a partner of Israel. Israel, Fatah, Egypt and other forces in the region had suddenly found themselves on the same side of the fence, all of them fearing the same enemy of radicalism and fanaticism. Today, there was a huge historic opportunity. It was important to recognize the Abbas Government immediately. Among real possibilities today, he mentioned forming a Palestinian state in provisional borders and going for a permanent solution agreement at a later date; a series of interim agreements between the Fatah Palestinian Authority and Israel; and a timetable for a permanent agreement, or separation between signing a permanent solution agreement and its implementation.

“Stop the rhetoric and try to understand each other — then maybe we have a chance,” he insisted. A fresh start was required on all fronts. Peace needed “a bold decision, brave decision-makers and lots of luck”. The conflict was about mistrust and national traumas. People did not know each other. It was necessary to change that situation. Impressive agreements had been signed, but peace had never reached the people, who never “felt or smelled the real peace”.

TAHA ABDEL-ALEEM, Deputy Director of Al-Ahram Political and Strategic Studies Centre, Cairo, Egypt, said that without ending the occupation and solving the problem of Palestinian refugees, there would be no peace in the Middle East. The lessons from the takeover of Gaza by Hamas pointed to the failures of Israel, Palestinians and the United States. Peace had a condition: the implementation of relevant resolutions and the provisions of international law by Israel. It was the humanitarian situation of the Palestinians, their poverty and unemployment that had led to the events in Gaza.

He said that the failure of the United States concerned the way it had conducted its war against terrorism. Instead of solving the Israeli-Palestinian problem, it had actually fuelled extremism and terrorism in the region. Another mistake related to United States’ unconditional support of Israel’s occupation policy. Failures of the Palestinians included suicide bombings and targeting of civilians, which could not be justified.

Peace was an equation, which required concessions from both sides, including the withdrawal of Israel from all Occupied Territories, and an end of settlements on the one side and security guarantees on the other. However, security guarantees were also required from Israel, which had over 200 nuclear warheads. It was also important to deal with those who were against peace on both sides, had no tolerance and did not understand the importance of peaceful coexistence in the region. Another important constraint was the negative image of Israel in “the Arab minds and hearts”, as well as the negative image of Arabs in the minds of the Israelis.

When the floor was opened for comments, several speakers, in what the moderator characterized as an emotional debate, agreed that it was important to create more understanding and emphasize the positive points, instead of focusing on the negative. It was important to work together to promote mutual understanding between Israelis and Palestinians.

Palestinians were speaking about Israeli responsibility and Israelis were speaking about the Palestinian responsibility, but what did they have to say about their own responsibility? a participant wondered. Another speaker said that, obviously, the two sides could continue to blame each other, but it was important to focus on the future. Much had been said about the way forward. There was no need to reinvent the wheel and seek a new solution, or new terms of reference. The way to peace was in the implementation of what had been agreed, including the two-State solution. It was necessary to re-engage the Israelis and Palestinians within the framework of international law.

A journalist from Israel said that it was time to stop blaming each other. In that connection, she reminded the participants that, in 1929, Jewish families had been slaughtered by their Arab neighbours in Hebron. "Today, we are here not to manipulate history, but to talk about the future," she said. "If you want to be part of the future, you are welcome, but don't manipulate the past."

To that, Mr. Mansour said that he was not interested in the past. "What I want is to put an end to the tragedy of our people," he said. "You have to acknowledge that you are the occupier. Extend your hand to me, acknowledge that — so that we can move to the future of hope."

The role of the media was important, but to some extent, it had too much power in the Middle East, a participant ventured. The way foreign media covered the conflict, sometimes it seemed like the Israelis and Palestinians were killing each other "every day for breakfast, lunch and dinner". The media needed to be more responsible.

"The Palestinian Authority is an expert in crying," another speaker said, but it should also understand Israel's needs. Unlike Arafat, President Abbas was perceived as "wanting but not capable". The issue was not just about Israel's security — Israel could defend itself — internal Palestinian security was a serious challenge, as well.

A speaker said that provision of basic services, development of agriculture and increasing employment opportunities could give new hope to the people in Palestine, but even if all the settlements were destroyed, the solution was not as close as some believed. Children in the Gaza Strip were dreaming of becoming *shahid* (martyrs), and that kind of hatred and mistrust was difficult to overcome. In the same vein, another speaker spoke about the need to isolate those who hated Jews.

Among other issues that figured prominently in the debate were Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the Arab Peace Initiative. On the latter, a participant said: "The ball is now in Israel's court. Our hand is still outstretched in peace."

Panel II

Introducing the day's second panel on "Regional Dimension: the Role of Neighbouring Countries in the Middle East Peace Process", Mr. AKASAKA said that recent developments in the region, involving particularly Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Iran, continued to impact the peace process. The panel would examine the implications of those developments for Israeli-Palestinian relations and prospects for restoring the path to peace in the regional context.

The first of the panellists, YASUNORI KAWAKAMI of *Asahi Shimbun*, said that the current international approach to the Middle East, initiated mainly by the United States and the European Union, seemed to jeopardize the peace process. He had been wondering why those players had not supported the Unity Government, established earlier this year and had immediately welcomed the creation of the emergency Government. He was afraid that they were trying to create a *fait accompli* in the division of the Palestinian Territory.

He cautioned against further deterioration of the situation in the Gaza Strip and new fighting in the West Bank. One should not forget that Hamas had won in recent legitimate elections and represented the majority in the Legislative Council. The legitimacy of President Abbas' Government was supported by foreign countries, but not by the people of Palestine. Hamas was "part of the people" and had support for many of its activities.

The split of Palestine also stressed the divisions in the Middle East, with some countries supporting Hamas and others, the Abbas Government, he said. At this point, the international society should not exclude Hamas from the political process. It should not judge which side was right. The neighbouring countries should promote the reconciliation between the two Palestinian factions.

AIDA TAWIL, Columnist, *Addustour* daily newspaper, Amman, Jordan, spoke about her country's role in providing humanitarian assistance to Palestine. Among other things, Jordan was trying to create favourable conditions for some 8 million Palestinian refugees living in Jordan and ensure respect for their human rights. Jordan was also hosting a large number of Iraqi refugees. That placed a heavy burden on the country.

She also addressed the role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which was by far the largest United Nations operation in the Middle East. It was essential for the international community to support the efforts of local countries to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need.

AYALA HASSON, Israeli TV Channel 1, said that, rather than look at the past, it was important to focus on the future. "We all live in the same family. What has happened has happened." It was necessary to learn lessons from history, but also look to the future. She invited the participants to think about all the summits, initiatives and agreements, as well as the money invested in the peace process: Had they been just slogans, or real efforts? With the peace process still at Chapter I, she believed it was necessary "to change the language that we are using. We are all victims of the situation and we need to move forward."

According to all the polls, most Israelis believed in the two-State solution, she continued. Hopefully now, the world would not move on to "a three-State solution". The situation in Gaza was severe, indeed, and it was important to try to "diagnose the disease" and examine who was interested in perpetuating the conflict. In that regard, she mentioned Iran, Syria and Hizbollah, among others. She was not sure that the United States — after what it had done in Iraq — really understood the region. The countries of the Middle East needed to discuss the issue and face the new reality. "One cannot say that it is not raining, because it is raining," she said.

SABRIA JAWHAR, *Saudi Gazette* Newspaper, Jeddah Bureau Chief, Saudi Arabia, said that targeted assassinations, expansion of settlements in the West Bank, favouritism of the United States towards Israel and the passive role of the European Union were among the factors that had contributed to the current situation. From Madrid and Oslo to the Arab Initiative, the international community had been yearning for peace and settlement in the Middle East that would guarantee a stable future for both Palestine and Israel. However, the scale of power was heavily in favour of Israel now.

Now that Hamas — regarded by the United States as a terrorist organization — was in power, one had to wonder what would happen in the region, she continued. Favouritism and unlimited aid to Israel, along with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, had bred ill will towards the United States in the Middle East, and the blockade of Hamas by the United States and Israel had created confusion.

On the other hand, she said, the Arab Peace Initiative — a hand stretched out by 22 Arab countries — was a gesture of good will. Israel's response was that every peace plan needed to be discussed directly between Israel and Palestine, with the latter guaranteeing security.

She warned of an escalation by the United States against such influential countries in the region as Syria and Iran. It seemed that the Bush Administration was set on supporting the Abbas Government, while leaving the people in the Gaza Strip to the fate of isolation, accusing Hamas of being the main reason for their misery. However, one should not disregard the support for Hamas from such countries as Iran. Also, if Hamas lost control of Gaza, it would open a gate to new terrorism.

Participants of the interactive discussion that followed pondered whether it was necessary to engage Hamas in the political process, with several speakers stressing the need to isolate the radical elements.

Extremists really believed that they could win against Israel, as well as such moderate Arab countries as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, a speaker said. After the perceived victory by Hizbollah over Israel last year, Hamas was euphoric now. Syria and Iran wanted to preserve that situation. However, many Arab countries were prepared to promote peace in the Middle East. In that connection, several participants stressed the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative.

"Maybe the Arab world wants to sell us a product that we don't want," a speaker from Israel said in that regard. "Maybe Israel doesn't want peace — it wants security". Peace really meant prosperity, good universities and hospitals... In that sense, Israel had peace. "We will give them peace, if they give us security," he added.

Another speaker said it was significant that President Abbas had been authorized by all the groups, including Hamas, to conduct final status negotiations with Israel. Should the occupation end and a Palestinian State be created, living side-by-side with Israel in peace and security, what would Israel lose? The status quo was a disaster for both Palestinians and Israelis. Unless the international community moved in a bold way to find a solution, and unless there was political will for a breakthrough, which the Arab countries were now demonstrating, extremists would have an upper hand and those afraid of Hamas would see it becoming more influential.

"We don't want war, we don't need territories," another speaker from Israel said. As long as the leadership of President Abbas could be strengthened, Israel would be happy to negotiate with him. However, at this point, Israel did not feel that the President of the Palestinian Authority was not strong enough.

"We don't have many choices," a speaker from Palestine replied, stressing the willingness of the Palestinian Authority "to make the right decision". If international partners did not engage President Abbas in a meaningful way, the power of extremists could spread to the West Bank. "We have the vision, and people interested in peace should take the risk," he said. In fact, the popular vote for Hamas had never exceeded 43 per cent, and its influence was often exaggerated.

Security issues were stressed in further debate, with several speakers saying that security and peace were closely related. However, there was no excuse or justification for terrorism. Another speaker stressed that Palestinians needed peace, but before peace, they needed justice.

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