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'URGENT NEED' FOR CONTINUED SUPPORT TO ISRAEL, PALESTINIANS IN EFFORT TO REACH

COMPREHENSIVE AGREEMENT, SAYS SECRETARY-GENERAL IN MESSAGE TO SANTIAGO MEETING

Following is UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's message to the United Nations Latin American and Caribbean Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace, delivered by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean, in Santiago, Chile, 11 December:

I send warm greetings to all the participants in the United Nations Latin American and Caribbean Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace, held under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

This regional meeting is very timely. The international community recognizes the urgent need to continue supporting the parties in their efforts to reach a comprehensive agreement on all permanent status issues. The goal of such an agreement is clear: an end to the occupation that began in 1967, and the establishment of a Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel.

It is regrettable that attainment of this objective appears unlikely before the end of this year, as had been hoped. However, we must not diminish what has been achieved. As the parties told the Quartet last month in Sharm el-Sheikh, they are committed to and engaged in vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues, without exception. It is crucial that the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships remain committed to this process, including during the current time of transition.

While there has been some progress on the ground, much more remains to be done.

Settlement expansion and construction of the barrier continue, and the number of obstacles to movement remains high. I call on the Israeli Government to halt the funding of settler outposts, to dismantle those built after March 2001, to completely freeze settlement activity, to open Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, and to refrain from unilateral actions in Jerusalem, such as house demolitions, which undermine trust or alter the status quo. Attacks by Israeli settlers against civilians must be stopped and properly investigated.

The recent deterioration of the humanitarian and security situation in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel is a cause for serious concern. Rocket fire from Gaza continues to endanger Israeli civilians, and incursions into the Gaza Strip have caused Palestinian casualties and the destruction of homes and property. I reiterate my unequivocal condemnation of rocket fire by Palestinian groups into Israel and against crossing points. I urge all parties to exert efforts to fully uphold and extend the period of calm that entered into effect on 19 June and to respect international human rights and humanitarian law.

I am extremely concerned that food and other lifesaving assistance are denied to hundreds of thousands of civilians. Measures that increase the hardship and suffering of the civilian population of the Gaza Strip as a whole are unacceptable and must cease immediately. I call on Israel to allow a steady and sufficient supply of fuel and humanitarian assistance, and to facilitate the work of the United Nations, including through unimpeded access for United Nations officials and humanitarian personnel.

The deepening split among Palestinian organizations and groups is also of utmost concern. The establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian State needs a united people. It is indispensable that the West Bank and Gaza Strip are reunified within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority, in a manner that allows the peace process to move forward. I commend Egypt's efforts to help Palestinians to overcome their differences.

I am encouraged that the Arab Peace Initiative is being looked at seriously as a possible platform for regional peace. It is also my hope that the new United States Administration will engage early, as a matter of the highest priority.

As we face a global economic downturn, I appeal to donors to deliver on their commitments. The United Nations system will continue to stand by the Palestinian people in these difficult times. For my part, I shall continue working towards achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East based on the principle of land for peace and the relevant Security Council resolutions. Please accept my best wishes for a successful meeting.

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