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DAY OF PALESTINIAN SOLIDARITY 'A DAY OF MOURNING

AND A DAY OF GRIEF', SAYS SECRETARY-GENERAL

Following is Secretary-General Kofi Annan's statement on International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, delivered on his behalf by S. Iqbal Riza, Under-Secretary-General and Chef de Cabinet, New York, 29 November:

I am pleased to take part in the observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, and I deeply regret that I am unable to do so in person. I am grateful to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for having invited me, and congratulate them on their important and urgent work.

This Day of Solidarity is a day of mourning and a day of grief. The human and material losses sustained by the Palestinian people in the last two years have been nothing short of catastrophic. The deplorable situation in the occupied Palestinian territory has kept the whole region in a continuous state of crisis for over two years now, with no end in sight. Hundreds of lives have been lost, mostly among Palestinians, but also among Israelis. Tragically, and unacceptably, many of the victims have been children.

Excessive and disproportionate force has often been used by the Israeli authorities, along with extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, deportations and collective punishment measures such as house demolitions. Such actions only intensify rage, desperation and a desire for revenge. At the same time, cruel and devastating terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians, including suicide bombings, have claimed large numbers of innocent lives, and wounded many more. Such actions only set back the Palestinian cause. The result of these actions has been the near-total destruction of the belief on either side that there is a genuine partner for a just peace.

Since last March, major West Bank cities have been reoccupied in the course of Israeli military operations. Wide-scale destruction has brought economic activity in the occupied Palestinian territory to a standstill, resulting in a humanitarian crisis that the outside world is only beginning to appreciate. Tight closures and curfews have further stifled the Palestinian economy and have reduced life for thousands of Palestinian households to a harsh struggle for daily survival. The capacity of the Palestinian Authority to function has been severely diminished. Chairman Arafat has been confined to the last building standing in his Ramallah headquarters. There are even reports of plans to expel Chairman Arafat from the West – an act that the international community could not accept.

Despite this descent into a seemingly endless cycle of killing and destruction, a parallel process of diplomatic and political progress has taken place. There is today a global consensus on a solution that should satisfy the fundamental needs of both sides and win the widest international support. It is the two-State vision affirmed in Security Council resolution 1397 and accepted by all parties. Achieving this objective requires "complete cessation of all acts of violence, including all acts of terror, provocation, incitement and destruction", as again demanded by the Council in its latest resolution 1435.

Through contacts on the ground and in the world's capitals, the Quartet of international mediators has been trying to help the parties move away from confrontation and towards a resumption of a political process. At our meeting in New York on 17 September, the Quartet principals agreed on a "road map" for the achievement of a final settlement, including Palestinian statehood, within three years. We are in constant touch with the parties in order to work out with them the specifics of the "road map", strongly urging them to embark swiftly on this path. We are assisted in this effort by regional and other interested Powers and we have been encouraged by initiatives like that of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, which was adopted by the Arab League Summit in Beirut last March.

I would like to say here once again that sustainable progress can only be achieved if simultaneous steps are taken on the security, economic, humanitarian and political aspects of the conflict. There can be no solution imposed by force. No lasting progress can be made without a clear political horizon: namely a clearly defined final settlement acceptable to both sides.

Reform of Palestinian institutions is essential, primarily for the benefit of the Palestinian people themselves. However, to take root and produce tangible results, it must be matched by Israeli measures that would create favourable conditions for the resumption of Palestinian economic activity. This includes the conclusion of a Palestinian/Israeli security agreement ensuring the end of all forms of violence, withdrawal from Palestinian-controlled areas, the immediate cessation of settlement activity, the lifting of restrictions on movement of people, goods and essential services, and the disbursement of all outstanding value-added tax and customs revenues owed to the Palestinian Authority.

In the meantime, the Palestinian people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and emergency relief, as Catherine Bertini, who visited the region as my Personal Humanitarian Envoy, clearly indicated in her report. The international donor community has to continue to contribute generously in this time of great

need until the crisis is over and the situation has stabilized. The Israeli Government should now implement its stated commitments, lift the restrictions and provide unfettered access of humanitarian convoys and relief missions to the civilian population in the occupied territory.

The United Nations has been trying to do its part, not least through the efforts of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other bodies. Most importantly, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) continues to play a central role in dealing with the mounting needs of the refugee community.

Within the framework of the Quartet, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Terje Roed Larsen, continues to work very closely with the parties and with various representatives of the international community in supporting the peace process and the coordination of international assistance.

I would like to take this opportunity to renew my commitment to working with all parties until a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine is achieved, on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242, 338 and 1397 and the principle of land for peace. With the intensified efforts of all of us, the day will come sooner rather than later, when the Palestinian people will be finally able to enjoy their inalienable rights, including the right to self-determination and to a sovereign State called Palestine.

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