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Français

SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR ISRAEL AND HER ADVERSARIES TO COMMIT THEMSELVES TO COMPREHENSIVE PEACE

Following is the text of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's address on "Israel and the United Nations" to the Israel Foreign Relations Council and the United Nations Association of Israel, in Jerusalem today:

I am pleased to join you today on my first official visit to Israel as Secretary-General of the United Nations. I have been here many times over the years, most recently as Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations. Very early in my career, I served as a civilian official with the United Nations Emergency Force. So, in visiting Israel, I am again amongst people I know well, people with whom I know I can work in pursuit of the goals we share and hold dear; among friends.

I have come at a time of considerable uneasiness in the region: over tension concerning Iraq, over the slow pace of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, over the absence of movement on the other tracks of the Middle East peace process.

I have come to the Middle East to listen and to learn, to hear the concerns of the leaders and peoples of the region, to reflect together with you, and to reassure you of the support of the United Nations and of its Secretary-General, in helping to resolve these complex issues. I know that Israelis and Arabs alike long to lead peaceful, stable lives, lives free of fear and upheaval.

My first message to the Israeli public concerns the peace process. Almost two decades ago, your nation welcomed President Sadat to Jerusalem and made peace with a former enemy. And five years ago, almost no one, not even in this land of prophets and visionaries, would have predicted that such dramatic gains could be achieved in your relations with the Palestinians.

But the political map of the Middle East has changed profoundly. Israelis and Palestinians have begun to treat one another as partners, not as enemies. Of course, many problems remain. No one said that forging a lasting peace would be easy.

At such times, we must remember the comprehensive peace settlement that the Oslo process has brought firmly into view. The simple fact remains: the pre-Oslo status quo was untenable; there is no viable alternative to Oslo; and potentially grave consequences loom should the process fail.

I am painfully aware that the Oslo accords have not marked the end of violence and terror among Israelis and Palestinians. More than 100 Israeli civilians, among them many women and children, have lost their lives in senseless and despicable acts of terrorism, including several devastating bomb attacks in the heart of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Many innocent Palestinians have also fallen victim to extremist violence; more than 40 were killed during prayers at the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, a site sacred to both Jews and Arabs.

And only 28 months ago, on one of the saddest days in the recent history of the region, a man for whom I have enormous respect, admiration and affection, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, became a martyr of the peace process which he himself had led.

That was indeed a mournful day for Israel, the region and the world. Israelis and Palestinians, I pray, will not allow the peace process, launched so valiantly by Yitzhak Rabin and his Palestinian partners, to be taken hostage by the enemies of peace.

They will not, I pray, surrender to those extremist elements who kill and maim in order to wreck the peace process. So my first message is this: Israelis and Palestinians must persevere. There is no alternative, unless you want relations with your Palestinian partners, and perhaps others, to regress and revert to the enmity of old.

My second message concerns United Nations itself and our long history together. It will surprise none of you to hear me describe the

United Nations as an indispensable institution in today's global era.

The founding of Israel and the founding of the United Nations are connected in spirit and in history, in promise and in peril. Indeed, Israel's birth was enshrined in a historic United Nations resolution: the partition plan of 1947. When war erupted with the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948, the United Nations stood by Israel. The Security Council called for an immediate ceasefire and established a truce commission.

The efforts of Ralph Bunche to help produce a negotiated solution won the Nobel prize for peace. Before and since, United Nations officials, civilian and military, made the ultimate sacrifice in search for peace between Israel and its neighbours. First among all, of course, was Count Folke Bernadotte.

In the decades since, the United Nations has represented the international community's abiding interest in a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. The Oslo negotiations are founded on Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, which are a cornerstone of Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan.

On the ground, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the Office of the Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories, the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund are among the myriad of United Nations organizations providing much-needed humanitarian and economic assistance to the Palestinians. Our peacekeeping operations have, for decades, helped maintain stability in this area.

I am well aware, however, that for many Israelis the image of the United Nations has not lived up to its founding spirit. I know that the United Nations is regarded by many as biased against the State of Israel.

I know that Israelis see hypocrisy and double standards in the intense scrutiny given to some of its actions, while other situations fail to elicit the world's outrage and condemnations. I know that Israelis are offended when other nations' delegates leave the room as Israelis rise to speak. Abba Eban, one of the most eloquent and effective diplomats ever to grace the United Nations halls, was at one point so discouraged by events at the United Nations that he wrote, "The world seemed to belong to our foes."

I would like to respond to your concerns with a solemn pledge: I believe that it [is] time to usher in a new era of relations between Israel and the United Nations. Everyone stands to benefit: Israelis, Palestinians, the rest of the Arab world, and the international community in general. My contacts with Israelis over the years convince me that we can, together, overcome the suspicion and misunderstanding.

One way to write that new chapter would be to rectify an anomaly: Israel's position as the only Member State that is not a member of one of the regional groups, which means it has no chance of being elected to serve on main organs such as the Security Council or the Economic and Social Council. This anomaly should be corrected. We must uphold the principle of equality among all United Nations Member States.

The normalization of Israel's status within the United Nations would help normalize Israel's view of the United Nations. The United Nations is not just a political body, and there is much more on its agenda than Middle East issues. Israelis know this already, but increased participation can only promote a more balanced view of the United Nations work.

I see great potential here. Israel already contributes more to the work of the United Nations than most people realize. I am thinking, for example, of Israeli experts serving on human rights bodies, on election observation teams, and of Israeli medical teams sent to help deliver emergency relief to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Israel has still more to gain by participation in all that the United Nations seeks to achieve in peace and development.

But normalization cannot happen unless Israel has confidence on another, much deeper level. Israelis were understandably enraged last year when Israel was accused in the Commission on Human Rights, which, as you know, is a body made up of Member States, of injecting Palestinian children the AIDS virus.

Such baseless allegations are totally unacceptable and deserve universal condemnation. I have said on more than one occasion that I would expect all such statements to be challenged whenever and wherever they are made. Having chaired the opening session of this year's Human Rights Commission just last week, I am pleased to say that the allegation was once again condemned.

Indeed, I would like to underline this message by citing the statement of Ambassador Miroslav Somol, the Chairman of last year's Commission, which he delivered on 16 March: "It is essential that our debates are carried out in a manner observing basic standards of mutual respect. Allegations that contain racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, discriminatory or other similar unacceptable features must be avoided because they are not compatible with the established working procedures or with a kind of code of conduct of this distinguished body. As the outgoing Chairman with specific experience in facing such a difficult situation and allegation, I would strongly appeal that all speakers, be it representatives of Member States, observers or non-governmental organizations, respect these limits in order to avoid hurting any nation, race, religion, or vulnerable group of people in discussion."

I hope this statement can put this issue behind us once and for all. Still, the broader fight against anti-Semitism must be addressed. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We must use the occasion to denounce anti-Semitism in all of its manifestations. This brings me to the lamentable resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 1975, equating Zionism with racism and racial discrimination. That was, perhaps, the low-point in our relations; its negative resonance even today is difficult to overestimate. Fortunately, the General Assembly rescinded the resolution in 1991.

I now come to the third and most difficult message of my visit. It is easy to talk of peace and to express regret about the past.

It is not so easy to present challenges, especially to sovereign nations facing the kinds of difficulties that Israel faces. But at this crucial moment, that is precisely what I need to do.

As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I am now, as I have always been, a friend of Israel. But I am also a friend of those with whom you may not always see eye to eye. Here is my challenge. I want Israel and its partners to make the difficult choices required for peace.

As a friend, it gives me no pleasure to recite a list of the grievances which the international community has against Israel. But I think it is important for you, my Israeli friends, to try to understand that those grievances do not come out of a clear blue sky. Here is what the great majority of the Member States of the United Nations say: they regard Israel as having been responsible, directly or indirectly, for provocative acts that undermine goodwill and spark hostilities.

In their view, Israel has not abided by Security Council resolutions. They point out that you have been slow to fulfil your obligations under the Oslo agreements, and that you have made your implementation conditional in a way that the Oslo accords did not. They see that you have expanded old settlements, and started new ones. They are concerned by the closures, roadblocks and other restrictions that aggravate the economic and humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinians. They regret other actions that take from Palestinians their homes, their land, their jobs, their residence permits - their very dignity.

Friends, I ask you to accept that the great mass of world opinion, including many countries that are sympathetic to Israel and to the Israeli dilemma, genuinely feels that Israel is doing a great disservice to its cause and to its standing by persisting with these practices. And that despite its position of strength -- economically, militarily and scientifically -- Israel has not seemed ready for reasonable compromise. The promise of 1993 has become the crisis of expectations of 1998, for both peoples.

I ask Israel to accept that, just as you are entitled to ask your Palestinian partners to do their best to live up to their side of the bargain under the agreements reached, so they too are justified in asking you to fulfil your obligations.

In my talks in the region, almost every Arab leader I have met has expressed strong support for a just and comprehensive peace with Israel. I take encouragement from that. But I have found those same leaders depressed about the stalled state of the peace process; sceptical about the good faith of the current Israeli Government; inclined to suspect that Israeli conditionality marks an unwillingness to carry out your side of the bargain. I have found, in short, a crisis of confidence.

There is a way out of this crisis of confidence, a way well known to all. A road map exists. It is for you and your partners to follow it, past all obstacles and exits, to its logical, inevitable destination -- a comprehensive peace settlement. And just as there is peril in driving too fast, so in this case is it dangerous to move too slowly.

We are engaged in a process that will either move forward or will move backwards, but that cannot for long remain stalled. It is, therefore, essential that Israel -- and her adversaries in the region -- commit themselves to a comprehensive peace based on the principles enshrined in resolutions 242 and 338, and reflected in the Oslo accords -- most fundamentally, land for peace. It is the only principle that has a chance of bringing peace to this land.

At the same time, I would like to reiterate the unequivocal commitment of the United Nations, and my own personal commitment, to uphold the right of all peoples to live in peace, and to pursue their daily lives free from terror, threats and acts of aggression.

I would like to take this opportunity to make clear to you the nature, the demands and the promise of the agreement I reached with the Government of Iraq. I went to Baghdad, with the full authorization of all members of the Security Council, in search of a peaceful solution to the crisis. That crisis has, at least for now, been averted.

The mandate of the Security Council has been reaffirmed.

The access of United Nations inspectors has been not only restored, but expanded to include any and all sites. The authority of the Executive Chairman of the United Nations Special Commission has been acknowledged and strengthened.

Whether the threat to international peace and security has been averted for all time is now in the hands of the Iraqi leadership. It is now for them to comply in practice with what they have signed on paper. If they do, it will bring nearer the day when Iraq can fully rejoin the family of nations. In the meantime, the expanded "oil-for-food" programme should help alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people.

The agreement reached in Baghdad was neither a "victory" nor a "defeat" for any one person, nation or group of nations. Certainly, the United Nations and the world community lost nothing, gave away nothing and conceded nothing of substance. But by halting, at least for now, the renewal of military hostilities in the Gulf, it was a victory for peace, for reason, for the resolution of conflict by diplomacy.

In closing, I would like to congratulate you on the occasion of Israel's fiftieth anniversary. You have chosen to describe this anniversary as marking "an era of hope for peace". For my part, I sincerely hope that, in this new era, the United Nations will be seen in Israel as a vehicle for realizing the universal values of the Jewish people.

I emphasize the universality of those values because I believe that the values of tolerance and mercy, of respect and the dignity of all peoples, are inherent to the human rights of the entire human race. They are rights that are longed for by all, and rights that belong to all.

During this fiftieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I have said, and I have said often, that human rights are African rights, Asian rights, American rights and European rights. They are also Palestinian rights and Israeli rights. I have said also that true faith elicits respect, while fanaticism breeds hatred. The problem, in my view, is not faith. The problem, all too often, is the faithful.

I have illustrated my appeals to human rights and my fervent belief in their universality by citing a call from the depth of the unique and universal horror of the Holocaust.

Allow me to quote Martin Niemoller:

"In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. They came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up."

I come today to speak up -- for Israel, for the Palestinians, for peace. For when we speak up, individually and collectively, with one voice or with a multitude of voices, we can and we must overwhelm the sounds of war.

We can and we must overcome the seeds of intolerance. We can and we must forge the peace and justice that all peoples seek, that all peoples deserve.

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* Reissued to correct transcription errors.

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