

Gaza, 20 January 2009 - Secretary-General's press conference in Gaza (unofficial transcript)

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

It is particularly significant for me as Secretary-General of the United Nations to stand in front of this bombed site of the United Nations (UNRWA) compound. I am just appalled. I am not able to describe how I am feeling having seen this site of the bombing of the United Nations compound.

Everyone is smelling this bombing still. It is still burning. It is an outrageous and totally unacceptable attack against the United Nations. I have protested many times, and am today protesting in the strongest terms, and am condemning it. I have asked for a full investigation and to make those responsible people accountable.

I have come to Gaza to see for myself the extent of the damage caused by the last three weeks of fighting and to demonstrate my solidarity to the population of Gaza, and to assure you of the United Nations and the international community's full support to help you overcome this difficulty.

I will try to mobilize all humanitarian resources, and I am going to dispatch a humanitarian needs assessment team on Thursday - the day after tomorrow - led by the UNSCO Director, Special Representative Mr. [Robert] Serry, and my Humanitarian Coordinator, John Holmes, to lead this mission.

I have also come to Gaza to express my deepest admiration and solidarity with the staff of the United Nations – UNRWA and UNSCO – for their bravery for their dedicated commitment, to help you, the population of Gaza, during the past three weeks. I commend their leadership, their commitment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have seen only a fraction of the damage. This is shocking and alarming. These are heartbreaking scenes. I am deeply grieved by what I have seen today.

To the people of Gaza I have this to say. I have seen only a fraction of the destruction and suffering caused to this tiny and crowded place by more than three weeks of heavy bombardment, shelling and street fighting on top of months and years of economic deprivation.

I will do all I can, as Secretary-General of the United Nations, to help in this time of need.

I have condemned from the outbreak of this conflict the excessive use of force by the Israeli forces in Gaza.

I view the rocket attacks into Israel as completely unacceptable.

We need to restore a basic respect for civilians. Where civilians have been killed, there has to be a thorough investigation, full explanations and, where it is required, accountability.

International humanitarian law must be upheld and respected by all. I am very worried by the potential long-term impact of the recent crisis on this entire society, and particularly young children. I am sobered by the extent of the damage, and by the extent of relief and recovery challenges ahead. I promise the United Nations will do all we can.

I also want to make an appeal to the Palestinian people. We need Palestinian unity. I know that this is not [inaudible] but without unity we cannot succeed in achieving Palestinian self-determination.

Palestinian unity is the framework for international agreements to be restored, for crossings to be opened, for the whole world to help you build Gaza, for elections, for political negotiations with Israel.

I appeal to Fatah, Hamas, to all Palestinian factions, to reunite within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. The United Nations will work together with a united Palestinian Government encompassing Gaza and the West Bank.

To the staff of the United Nations, you have my deepest respect and thanks for your hard work. You have performed heroically. I know this is easy to say, but it is very difficult to act. Without you, many more people would have died. Without you, the suffering of thousands upon thousands of innocent people would have been all the more greater. To the world, I have this to say: The repeated violence felt by Palestinians and Israelis is a mark of collective political failure.

A genuine effort was made in 2008, but it was not enough. We all must do more. I will be speaking to many world leaders about what I have seen, including to the new President of the United States. As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I will uphold the need for an end of occupation, a just and lasting resolution of the refugee issue, and the creation of a Palestinian state in accordance with international law and resolutions of the Security Council. I believe a massive and united international effort is required to help Palestinians achieve statehood and Israel and Palestine to live side by side in peace and security. I am more determined than ever to see this achieved.

Thank you very much. Shukran Jazeelan.

Q: in Korean, on what SG felt having seen situation in Gaza]

SG: As I said, I do not have any proper, adequate words to express, to describe how I feel about all this tragic and human tragedy and destruction of infrastructure and human suffering. I will convey my deepest sympathy and condolence to the families who have lost their families and loved ones. Having seen what had happened during the last three weeks that reminds all the people in the world that Palestinians and Israelis should reconcile so that they can live in two-state formula, living together side-by-side in peace and security. The peace process must begin.

Q: If the UNRWA, the UN cannot protect their Headquarters in Gaza, how they can protect the Palestinians in Gaza, and when the Palestinian state should be achieved?

SG: I have expressed my utter frustration, utter anger, at what has happened to the UNRWA compound. That does not mean that the United Nations is not capable of protecting you. We will protect we have been protecting. You have seen many good success stories of the United Nations who have helped those people from the war, those people from the poverty, those people from the disease - that's what the United Nations is committed to continue. I am sorry what has happened to the Palestinian people here, but I will continue to first of all provide humanitarian assistance so that you can live a normal life, so that your children can go to school, so that you can have your own job, that will require some time, but I am mobilizing all possible resources under my power, together with the international community.

Q: [inaudible] is this a political rather than humanitarian crisis?

SG: This crisis is a political failure. This issue, the Palestinian unity, whatever difference there may be must have been resolved through dialogue in a peaceful means. We have launched a vigorous peace process, they have launched a peace process. Israel and Palestinian authorities there has been largely a lack of political will to resolve this issue. I have sent a strong message to the world that this is a collective political failure therefore I urge again to all the political leaders, the parties concerned and all the major world leaders to help create an atmosphere politically, socio-economically conducive to the resolution of this issue so that Israel and Palestinians can live in peace and security side-by-side. That is our vision and as Secretary-General I am working very hard and this effort will continue.

Thank you very much.