



## General Assembly GA/PAL/1042

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

### **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS HOLD POTENTIAL TO OVERCOME VIOLENCE, DESPAIR,**

### **SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS UN MEETING ON ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE**

(Received from a UN Information Officer).

ROME, 22 March — United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a message to the United Nations International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace, read out by Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, that the Meeting was taking place at a critical moment for the future of efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East. Taken together, the important recent developments held the potential, if not yet the promise, to overcome a period of violence and despair and replace it with a future of dialogue and hope.

He said the recent Mecca Agreement, resulting in the formation of the National Unity Government, had brought relative calm to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and was a very significant step forward. Hopefully, the Agreement would also lay the groundwork for that Government to respect existing agreements with Israel that reflected Quartet principles. It was also encouraging that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had continued their dialogue, along with Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State of the United States, on ways to ensure that existing commitments were met and a political horizon could be made clear. Equally vital were the efforts of regional countries to stretch out the hand of peace on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative.

However, serious obstacles remained, threatening to block progress, he cautioned. The humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory continued to worsen. Israeli military operations, continuing settlement activity and severe movement restrictions were eroding prospects for socio-economic recovery, while the expansion of settlements and construction of the barrier in the West Bank intensified feelings of mistrust, anger and despair, pushing the chances of peace farther away. At the same time, continued rocket attacks on Israel and indiscriminate violence against civilians were totally unjustified and reinforced a sense of insecurity among Israelis. A parallel commitment by the parties was clearly essential to advancing on key issues.

Paul Badji, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said the continued restrictions on financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority may lead to a collapse of the mechanisms established since the beginning of the Oslo peace process, particularly the institutions governing the daily lives of more than 3.6 million Palestinians.

Speaking during the opening session of the Committee-sponsored United Nations International Meeting, which was being held at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), he pointed out that many years of effort and tremendous resources had been focused on establishing and consolidating those institutions, which were seen as the foundations of a future Palestinian State. To abandon them would mean wiping out the notable progress that had been made in the peace process, causing a major setback for the ultimate goal of a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine.

Emphasizing that the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people must not depend on political constraints, he expressed the hope that the recent formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government, which had been the focus of recent international attention, would allow the restoration of much-needed economic and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people. Other welcome recent developments included the firm engagement in the peace process by Arab countries, which would soon hold a summit to revitalize the important Arab Peace Initiative put forward by Saudi Arabia in 2002.

Participants in the Meeting also heard an opening address by Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization, as well as a statement by Qais Abdul-Kareem, Member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, who represented Palestine at the Meeting.

Statements were also made by the representatives of Cuba to the United Nations (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), Tunisia, Malaysia (on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference), the African Union, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Pakistan, Syria and Morocco.

The Meeting will reconvene at 3 p.m. today, for Plenary I, which will discuss "Peace in the Middle East: A key to the advancement of the dialogue between cultures and civilizations".

Statements

JACQUES DIOUF, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recalled having hosted the Bethlehem 2000 Conference, saying that the agency was mandated to ensure food security for all. Without food security, there could be no peace and thus no food security. It was thus fitting that FAO was the backdrop for the Meeting.

He said that the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights proclaimed the right of all to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, a right that included the right to sufficient food. Without adequate food, people could neither lead healthy and active lives, nor care for their children, who, in turn, would be unable to learn how to read and write. The fulfilment of that right was at the heart of FAO's mandate to ensure a world free from hunger. Against the backdrop of the alarming situation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the agency was requesting approximately \$5 million to address the structural causes of food insecurity in both places. It would provide technical expertise to Governments and NGOs and contribute to efforts to focus on rehabilitation of destroyed agricultural facilities and infrastructures in the Gaza Strip.

FAO, he said, was also the lead agency on the avian influenza and had initiated the Inter-agency Framework. As part of that response programme, it wished to strengthen the capacities of veterinary services in the West Bank and Gaza to respond to outbreaks, while providing decision makers and partners with accurate and timely information on food insecurity and vulnerability. Therefore, it was contributing to the establishment of a food insecurity and vulnerability information and mapping system.

SERGEI ORDZHONIKIDZE, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, reading out the message of Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said the Meeting was taking place at a critical moment for the future of efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East. Taken together, the important developments taking place among Palestinians, and between Palestinians and Israelis, held the potential, if not yet the promise, to overcome a period of violence and despair and replace it with a future of dialogue and hope.

The recent Agreement reached in Mecca had brought relative calm to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and the formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government last weekend was a very significant step forward, he said. Hopefully, it would also lay the groundwork for a Government that would respect existing agreements with Israel that reflected Quartet principles. The international community would naturally be following closely the actions of that new Government in the hope that expectations for it would be fulfilled.

He said it was also important and encouraging that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had continued their dialogue, both in a bilateral setting and in a trilateral one, along with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on ways to ensure that existing commitments were met and a political horizon could be made clear. Equally vital were the efforts of regional countries, based on the Arab Peace Initiative, to stretch out the hand of peace.

However, serious obstacles remained, threatening to block progress, he cautioned, pointing out that the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory continued to worsen. Israeli military operations, continuing settlement activity and severe movement restrictions eroded prospects for socio-economic recovery, while the expansion of settlements and construction of the barrier in the West Bank intensified feelings of mistrust, anger and despair, pushing the chances of peace farther away. At the same time, continued rocket attacks on Israel and indiscriminate violence against civilians were totally unjustified and reinforced a sense of insecurity among Israelis.

A parallel commitment by the parties was clearly essential to advancing on key issues, he stressed. A majority of Israelis and Palestinians supported a negotiated settlement and it was vital that their leaders take concrete actions which showed their commitment to the goal of two States living side by side in peace and security. The United Nations would remain fully engaged in efforts to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement, based on Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 1397 and 1515, the Arab Peace Initiative and the principle of land for peace.

Speaking in his own capacity, the Director-General urged participants in the Meeting to seize the opportunity to debate the findings of the report of the High-level Group on the Alliance of Civilizations, one of whose key findings involved the great symbolic meaning that the civilizations of both peoples held for many peoples far removed from the region.

Echoing the Secretary-General, he said efforts by regional countries were vital to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There was no doubt that discussions in a regional dimension could help make progress in that regard. Having witnessed the loss of thousands of lives in the conflict over the years, the world was now in a critical position to help resolve the unacceptably unstable situation in the region. With a common vision for peace, the challenges could be overcome.

PAUL BADJI ( Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, noted recent welcome signs of an even more firm engagement by Arab countries, adding that they would hold a summit of the Arab League, during which they would be revitalizing Saudi Arabia's important 2002 Peace Initiative. Meetings of the Quartet had also been held more frequently lately and the Committee looked forward to the results of its next one. Bilateral meetings between Israeli and Palestinian leaders had also resumed, thanks to the initiative of United States Secretary of State Rice, who was expected to meet the parties shortly. Also, last year, when prospects for reviving the peace process started to fade, some European countries had proposed to convene an international conference for Middle East peace.

The formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government had also been the focus of attention for several months, he said. Hopefully that development would allow the restoration of much-needed economic and humanitarian assistance. The continued restrictions on financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority may lead to a collapse of the mechanisms established since the beginning of the Oslo peace process, particularly the Palestinian institutions governing the daily lives of more than 3.6 million Palestinians. Many years of effort and tremendous resources had been focused on establishing and consolidating those institutions, which were seen as the foundations of a future Palestinian State. To abandon them would mean wiping out the notable progress that had been made, causing a major setback for the ultimate goal of a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine. Furthermore, there was a need to recognize that the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people must not depend on political constraints.

Major international peace efforts, such as the Quartet's Road Map, should now be revisited and adjusted, he said. The convening of an international peace conference could give the boost necessary for the achievement of that goal, particularly if it incorporated indispensable regional arrangements and other initiatives, including the Arab Peace Initiative, to establish peace in the whole region.

He said national parliaments and inter-parliamentary organizations played an important role in guiding public opinion, formulating guiding principles that could ensure that international legitimacy was respected in support of a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The experience and political influence of lawmakers and their organizations could contribute to the consolidation of the democratic process and institution-building in the territory under the Palestinian Authority, and to strengthening the dialogue between the parties and in applying the principles of international law in the quest to resolve the conflict.

Underscoring that the United Nations should maintain its responsibility for the question of Palestine until it was resolved in all its aspects, he said the Committee would work with all concerned in pursuit of that objective. The continuing occupation, now in its fortieth year, remained the root cause of the conflict and there was an urgent need for a negotiated solution that would allow the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable rights, and provide security for the State of Israel. It was crucially important that all parties abstain from unilateral measures that could undermine efforts to achieve a lasting peace.

QAIS ABDUL-KAREEM, Head of the Social Affairs Committee of the Palestinian Legislative Council and Representative of Palestine to the Meeting, said the Palestinian people continued to look to the international community for much-needed support and assistance in the search for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace. For nearly 60 years they had been stateless, the majority of them refugees. For 40 years they had suffered under the oppressive and belligerent Israeli military occupation of their lands. Indeed, as many years had passed, their situation had dramatically deteriorated, making the prospect of peace seem more elusive than ever and the drive for a peaceful resolution more urgent than ever.

Under Israel's occupation, the Palestinian people continued to suffer the daily, widespread and grave violation of all their human rights, the further dispossession of their land, constant humiliation and assaults on their dignity as a people. Israel continued to carry out military attacks against civilians, killing and injuring men, women and children; to destroy Palestinian homes, properties and agricultural lands; to construct, expand and fortify its illegal settlements and to construct the monstrous apartheid wall, intensifying its siege and isolation of occupied East Jerusalem; and to impose all means of collective punishment upon the Palestinian people, including the severest restrictions on the free movement of persons and goods throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, as well as to and from the outside world. Additionally, for the past year, the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority had suffered a debilitating and devastating international, financial and political siege, imposed following the democratic election of the Palestinian Legislative Council. The cumulative result had been a dire economic, social, political, security and humanitarian situation.

Emphasizing that an end to the occupation was long overdue, he said the Palestinians must have their freedom, exercising their inalienable right to self-determination in an independent State of Palestine. The international community must redouble its efforts to promote the realization of two States living in peace and security, on the basis of the 1967 borders, and the long-overdue rights of the Palestinian people, including their right of return based on General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The Palestinian side was ready to resume a genuine peace process and undertake final status negotiations immediately towards an accelerated resolution of the prolonged conflict and the achievement of the peace and justice for which they had long suffered and striven.

Hopefully, the new Government would receive the broadest international support, he said, adding that its formation should facilitate the expeditious resumption of final status negotiations. Not only was there an authorized Palestinian negotiating partner, but there was also now national unity authorizing the President to undertake that important responsibility. It was the Palestinians' strong hope that the formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government would allow the lifting of the unjust financial and political blockade, and the delivery of sorely-needed aid to the Palestinian people, which would in turn allow the rebuilding of Palestinian institutions and the recovery of their destroyed economy.

The Chairman then introduced the other members of the Bureau of the Committee, including its Vice-Chairmen and Rapporteur, before giving the floor to representatives of Governments and intergovernmental organizations.

RODRIGO MALMIERCA DÍAZ ( [Cuba](#)), Vice-Chairman of the Committee, spoke in his capacity as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, expressing deep concern over Israel's continued and excessive use of force against Palestinian civilians, which had caused numerous casualties and great material losses. The Non-Aligned Movement rejected Israel's measures aimed at imposing unilateral and illegal solutions, and welcomed the formation of the new Palestinian National Unity Government, which would, hopefully, lead to the lifting of the sanctions unjustly imposed on the Palestinian Authority and people since January 2006.

He also expressed the hope that the formation of the National Unity Government would lead to the revival of the long-stalled peace process. There could be no just, peaceful solution to the conflict unless Israel ceased its aggression against its neighbours, abided by its obligations under the Geneva Convention and ended its efforts to legitimate its actions by continuing to construct settlements and the separation wall. Israel's unilateral actions would never lead to a solution to the conflict and would only serve to prolong it. The current situation benefited nobody, including the people of Israel.

HABIB MANSOUR, Ambassador of [Tunisia](#) to Italy, expressed concern over events in the region due to Israel's continued aggression against the Palestinian people as well as its recent excavations in the area of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, adding that his country had always protested against attempts to Judaize Muslim holy sites. A supporter of the peace process and a believer in dialogue and negotiation as well as international legitimacy, Tunisia called on the Security Council to shoulder its responsibility to make Israel comply with international law. Tunisia was also pleased with the reconciliation resulting from the Mecca Agreement.

LILY ZACHARIAH, Ambassador of [Malaysia](#) to Italy, spoke in her capacity as Chair of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), saying that the international community's inability to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the single most important reason for the instability and disquiet in the Muslim world. Malaysia called for Israel's total and complete withdrawal from all Arab lands and an end to its excavations around and beneath the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The international community must act impartially and with equal firmness on both sides to enforce the pre-1967 borders, which would be followed by Israel's adherence to United Nations resolutions. Malaysia called on the Security Council to exert pressure on Israel to adhere to the Quartet's Road Map and United Nations resolutions. Malaysia also urged the international community to accept the Palestinian National Unity Government and withdraw the economic sanctions against the Palestinian Authority and people.

MUFTAH ZAWAM, representative of the [African Union](#) to the Meeting and to the League of Arab States in Cairo, said on behalf of Alpha Oumar Konare, Chairman of the African Union Commission, that the regional body, and the Organization of African Unity before it, continued to pay particular attention to the situation in the Middle East, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which was a permanent item on the Union's Ministerial Council and Summit. The continuing injustice and subjugation suffered by the Palestinians under Israeli policies of suppression, and witnessed in silence by the international community, had resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Palestinian and Israeli civilians, in addition to the thousands of injuries to people on both sides.

He reiterated the African Union's full support for, and solidarity with, the Palestinian people's legitimate struggle under the Palestine Liberation Organization; reaffirmed its support for a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in accordance with international law and United Nations resolutions; strongly condemned Israel's repressive measures, inhumane aggression and acts of State terrorism against defenceless Palestinian civilians; affirmed the importance of the United Nations taking concrete measures to protect the Palestinian people by compelling Israel to allow investigations into war crimes and atrocities against Palestinians; and condemned Israel's ongoing construction of the separation wall and settlement expansion.

HAZEM MOHAMMED KARKUTLY, head of the delegation of Saudi Arabia to the Meeting, said the Arab people had chosen peace as a strategic option and the Kingdom had stood firm in support of the peace process since its launch in 1991. Saudi Arabia's position stemmed from a policy laid out by its

founder, King Abdul Aziz, and followed by his heirs, including King Abdullah, who renewed his call for the convening of an international conference on the question of Palestine, to be attended by all parties in order to transform the peace initiatives and resolutions of international legitimacy into prompt practical steps.

AFFONSO CELSO DE OURO-PRETO, Ambassador-at-Large of Brazil for the Middle East, said that his country, comprising a significant contribution from Arab as well as Jewish immigration, had been following the situation in the Middle East with utmost interest. The Brazilian Government had noted with great satisfaction the approval by the Palestinian Legislative Council of the National Unity Government, believing that it would contribute to the de-escalation of tension and internecine strife. It would also facilitate the normalization of relations between the Palestinian Authority and the international community and revive the peace process, in line with the Road Map. Despite the latest developments, however, renewed energy was plainly needed to move the peace process forward.

ATA UL MUNIM SHAHID, the representative of Pakistan to the Meeting, said that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was at the heart of multiple issues confronting the Middle East. In the context of the increasing and multiple threats to peace in the Middle East, a core group of Muslim countries had been constituted to evolve a comprehensive approach and provide fresh impetus to resolving the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The President of Pakistan had explained that new initiative to the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates. It was to be hoped that a group of leading Muslim countries would soon meet at a high level to bring their collective weight to bear in favour of a just and fair solution to the Palestinian question and other problems afflicting the Middle East.

The representative of Syria to the Meeting, SOUHA JAMALI, said Israel's desecration of holy Muslim places included its recent excavation near the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It was still acting in a barbaric way against the symbols of the democratically-elected Palestinian leadership. It was still continuing practices that had been condemned by the international community under the pretext of self-defence and the war against international terrorism, while flouting United Nations resolutions and remaining adamant in following a policy of faits accomplis. A just, comprehensive and lasting peace could still be achieved by compelling Israel to comply with existing United Nations resolutions and other peace initiatives.

TAJEDDINE BADDOU, the representative of Morocco, said King Mohammed VI had repeatedly stressed the importance of finding a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the establishment of a Palestinian State, on the basis of international agreements and the Arab Peace Initiative. Morocco was also concerned about Israel's recent excavation of Holy Muslim sites.

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