

Sderot, Israel, 20 January 2009 - Secretary-General's press encounter after meeting Mayor of Sderot

SG: Mr. Mayor, District Commander, Citizens of Sderot,

I come to Sderot in the aftermath of conflict between Israel and Hamas with profound concern for the future of Israelis and Palestinians alike. In normal circumstances my visit should be a very pleasant one but I am standing with a very heavy heart here as you may understand.

I have just been in Gaza and spoken to the Palestinian people I now wish to hear from the people of Israel and I just wanted to see for myself the challenges the citizens of Sderot and the challenges and concern the people of Israel have been undergoing. I am here to see for myself the terrible human consequences of this tragedy; you live every day with the threat of a rocket falling from the sky, no human being can live for long in a state of fear in such a way. I condemn the rockets that have been fired at your homes and cities for many years from Gaza. The rockets which I have seen are just appalling too, these attacks are unacceptable. I know that your families and friends have been killed and injured in schools, homes and streets by these indiscriminate weapons. I note the trauma caused by these rockets to you, your children and your communities.

I expect basic International Humanitarian Law to protect the citizens to be respected and restored, not repeatedly violated as Hamas has done. I expect there to be accountability. Hamas must cease firing these rockets and I have always insisted on this. It is important that measures will be taken to prevent the resupply of weapons to the militant groups in Gaza.

All people wish for much the same thing, the chance to live an ordinary life, free from war, free from fear. Palestinians must be able to live a normal life just as Israelis are entitled to do. With the past weeks of conflict, a step followed quickly by political events may end the rockets for a little while but in the longer term will only serve to feed desperation and radicalism among Palestinians. And desperation only strengthens Hamas. This is in no one's interest.

I know that Israel's exit from Gaza in 2005 could and should have helped pave the way for a political process and it is regrettable and frustrating that this did not happen but let us all acknowledge that Gazans, like all Palestinians and all Israelis need a comprehensive political solution to all the issues. There is no other way.

I will continue to work with you and with your leaders to ensure that this is finally done. We need the two-state solution. I remain totally committed to Israel securing its rightful place as a nation within secure and recognized borders, fully recognized and at peace with its neighbours, thank you very much and shalom toda.

Q: How do you turn this ceasefire into a lasting peace? What is the mechanism?

SG: Now the ceasefire is agreed, I believe and you know that this ceasefire is very fragile. This ceasefire must be turned into a durable sustainable and respected fully by all the parties concerned. That is the responsibility of the international community, particularly leaders of the concerned parties. There are many elements and the Egyptian Government has proposed [?] an initiative to each of Israel, the Israeli Government and Hamas. They have arrived quite close to an agreement, but I know that there is still more to be done to be agreed on, I hope that these elements should be agreed as soon as possible; the humanitarian aspects and trying to mobilize all necessary humanitarian resources.

However, there is another humanitarian aspect, all crossings must be fully opened and these crossings should operate as envisaged in the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access. As opposed to security there should be a clear and transparent and effective border management. There should be a calm, firmly established framework which can prevent the smuggling of illicit weapons and arms into Gaza. The recent agreement between Israel and the United States, and also to be supported by technical agreement and assistance by many European countries, will serve very effectively and efficiently and the Egyptian Government should also try to do their own work to prevent that such a thing happens.

To help this ceasefire be durable there needs to be reconciliation and unity of Palestinians. Without Palestinian unity, if this division of Palestinians continues, this may not be expected to be durable. There should be support by all Arab leaders and Arab nations in a united way so that Palestinians will be able to engage in reconciliatory dialogue to promote their national unity. These are some elements, I hope that all these elements will be able to be agreed for a package which can ensure a durable and sustainable ceasefire, thank you.

Q: On the border we are waiting about 25 days and the Israeli Government doesn't let us into Gaza, do you spend some efforts with this as well, what do you think?

SG: I have also crossed at these crossings and I see all the procedures and administrative things. For me as a Secretary-General, I didn't have any problems but I suspect that there must have been much difficulty for ordinary Palestinians to cross these crossings. Crossings are important to help Palestinians maintain a normal life. It is important for the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations and workers to provide and deliver humanitarian assistance while ensuring the security which also should be a very important one. I know that you have concerns but at the same time organizing these crossings in an effective way and removing all restrictions and removing all limitations for Palestinian people and humanitarian workers to move freely I think will be very important, and this ceasefire should lead to a durable one ensuring the full opening of the crossings and we are working very hard and concerned parties are engaging in negotiations on this matter. Thank you very much.