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SECRETARY-GENERAL, BRIEFING SECURITY COUNCIL, WARNS OF FULL-FLEDGED WAR IN MIDDLE EAST, BUT SAYS PATH TO NEGOTIATING TABLE STILL EXISTS

Following is the briefing by Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Security Council on 21 February:

The news from the Middle East is grim. Day by day, the toll of dead and wounded on both sides mounts. Day by day, the bitterness and mutual distrust between Israelis and Palestinians intensifies. Increasingly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict risks sliding towards full-fledged war. Truly, we are nearing the edge of the abyss.

During the past seven days, there have been more than 60 deaths on both sides. Unless something happens to change the dynamic, it is all too likely that violence will escalate still further. Particularly alarming is the growing belief, among both Palestinians and Israelis, that there can be no negotiated solution to the conflict. As we all know, hopelessness and despair tend to lead to more extreme measures, with tragic consequences for the region.

Eighteen months after the beginning of the second "intifada", the cost to both Israelis and Palestinians grows ever higher in terms of human suffering, bitterness, disillusion and mistrust. The key problems remain occupation; security — the need to end violence including terrorism; and economic deprivation and suffering. These are inter-linked problems, encompassing the political, security and economic domains.

Yet, even at this darkest of hours, there is still room for hope. In the midst of the bitterness and the despair, with clamor on both sides for revenge and for ever more desperate and reckless measures, there **is** a path back to the negotiating table — if the parties choose to take it.

Let us not forget, Mr. President, that the parties have agreed, in principle, that there is a way out, namely the Tenet understandings and the [Mitchell recommendation](#). Taken together, these documents defined an array of security, economic, and political measures that would have moved the parties back to the table to negotiate the fundamental issues that divide them.

However, "in principle" is not "in practice". In fact, as we know, the parties have not implemented either of these plans. If Tenet and Mitchell have not failed, they can certainly not be said to have succeeded. Clearly, the situation that is now unfolding requires urgent steps, moving beyond a discussion focused on how to pursue Tenet and Mitchell.

New thinking and imaginative new ideas are now being proposed from several quarters. This is to be welcomed and such ideas should be considered promptly and thoroughly both by the parties and by the international community.

A reduction in the violence is the most immediate priority. But I have become more and more convinced that trying to resolve the security problem on its own cannot work. Security cannot be dealt with in isolation. It has to have a context. It has to be addressed alongside key political issues, particularly the question of land, and the economic and social issues, including the increasingly critical desperate conditions of the Palestinians.

Failure to address these issues together will only spawn new and perhaps deadlier exchanges of reciprocal violence. Unless both parties have a political horizon on which their hopes for peace and an improved livelihood can be based, there will be no enduring ceasefire. It is imperative that both parties exercise maximum restraint, particularly with regard to attacks against civilians. It cannot be overemphasized that both parties must adhere to their obligations under international law to protect basic rights of civilians, including the right to security.

The lack of mutual confidence between the two sides makes a third-party role essential. The breakdown of trust is so total that neither side will believe the other when it comes to the implementation of agreements. I truly believe that it is imperative for the Security Council and the wider international community to work in a concerted manner with the parties towards a just, lasting and comprehensive peaceful settlement of the conflict in the Middle East.

As the Council knows, I and my representatives have throughout been in very close contact with leaders on both sides, in the region and among the international community. However, in light of the gravity of the situation, I have asked my Special Coordinator, Terje Rød-Larsen, to intensify his consultations with the parties, with members of the "Quartet", as well as with regional and international actors.

Mr. President, the outlook is bleak. But the present course of events is not irreversible. There is a high road — which the parties themselves had been on not so long ago — as well as a low road. Let us do everything in our power to persuade the parties to pull back from the brink, and return to the high road.

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