

Ramallah, 30 August 2006 - Secretary-General's press conference with President Mahmoud Abbas (Secretary-General's comments only) (unofficial transcript)

SG: Thank you very much, Mr. President. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. President, I want to thank you for receiving me so graciously today and as you indicated we had a very productive meeting, during which you briefed me on the political and economic situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. The suffering of the Palestinian people must not be forgotten as we strive to bring peace to Lebanon. I have come here to Ramallah to meet with you, Mr. President, not just as an act of symbolism but of substance. It is important that I have been able to witness the suffering of the Palestinian people first hand.

President Abbas, I fully agreed that an end to the occupation and the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel is key to resolving the problems of this troubled region. I am in constant touch with regional and international leaders looking for ways to resolve the current crisis and get a political process rejuvenated. We have to implement all Security Council resolutions and that includes, of course 242 and 338.

The immediate problems are those of daily life. And I mean "life" quite literally. Over two hundred Palestinians have been killed since the end of June. This must stop immediately. I have made my feelings known in talks with Israeli officials. Beyond preserving life, we have to sustain life. The closure of Gaza must be lifted. Crossing points must be opened not just to allow goods in, but to also allow Palestinian exports out as well.

I spoke with President Abbas about the ongoing efforts to secure the release of the abducted Israeli soldier, to bring about a cessation of Qassam rockets, to stop all Israeli incursions, to release parliamentarians and officials recently arrested by Israel and to address President Abbas' long standing demands for progress on Palestinian prisoners. It seems to me that, with a little bit of reasonableness and goodwill on both sides, there is a way to resolve the current crisis and I will be continuing my efforts to support the resolution of these problems.

I also discussed with President Abbas his ongoing efforts with Prime Minister Hannieh to form a National Unity Government. This is a very important process. If the Palestinians can unite around a common and realistic programme, and if this can help bring the security situation under control, it would be a very positive step indeed. The United Nations will do whatever it can to support you in this effort.

It is also imperative that we find a credible political horizon. Continued stagnation will only strengthen radicalism and those who espouse violence. Opinion polls have consistently shown that the Palestinian people want to live in peace alongside Israel. I fervently support all efforts to allow Palestinians to achieve this dream and live in peace and in dignity. They deserve nothing less. Thank you, Mr. President, for receiving me so well and we will take your questions.

Q: [inaudible]

SG: We don't have immediate plans for the deployment of international troops to the Palestinian territories.

Obviously there are internal discussions going on among the Palestinians and we have a difficult situation also in Israel. But once the Palestinians have drawn up a programme, settled their differences and rallied around a unified position and have engaged with the Israelis, just as we have done in Lebanon, whatever programme emerges, the international community will be prepared to support you, depending on what the requirements of the agreement would be and of course, in the case of Lebanon, if that included a deployment of troops – and the two parties have agreed to that -- and the internal discussions within the Palestinian group will make progress. I think that is an essential first step for us to be able to move forward and resolve this issue. And I applaud President Abbas for his initiative and would urge all Palestinians to think of the future, to think of future generations, to think of the Palestinian state, put their differences behind them and work with the President to help to achieve a credible programme that one can push forward.

Q: Mr. Annan, Israel has said that it rejects the lifting of the blockade of Lebanon unless the 1701 resolution is fully implemented and many are saying that the key rests with Tehran and Damascus. Is that why you are going to Damascus? Do you think that is the case?

SG: Let me say that I believe that resolution 1701 should be fully implemented. This is a resolution that has been endorsed and accepted by the government of Israel and the government of Lebanon, including Hizbollah. And it was endorsed by both cabinets. So we need to implement this resolution fully as the desired wish of the two parties. In doing that I think it is important that we obtain the support and cooperation of regional players. This is part of the reason for my visit here and I'll be visiting other capitals in addition to Damascus and Tehran, I'll be going to Saudi Arabia. I'll be going to Qatar. I will go to Egypt and I will be in Amman and Turkey, working with regional countries as well as the international partners to really insure that the resolution is implemented, not only fully but so it becomes a basis for a longer peace settlement, between Israel and Lebanon.

Q: [inaudible]

SG: You have heard from the President, that's what we discussed this morning. I was also able to raise the issue with the government of Israel, to encourage the dialogue between the sides to continue. I would hope that it will not be too long before there is a meeting between President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert to discuss some of these issues and I know that there are governments in the region – particularly Egypt – that have also been playing a role in this and I think we should work with all forces of goodwill to get this issue resolved.

Q: Paul Adams of the BBC, with a question for both of you if I may. Secretary-General, on the blockade which you referred to earlier, there was clearly no meeting of minds that we could discern this morning, between you and the Prime Minister [Olmert]. You seem to have completely different views about whose responsibility it is to ensure that Hizbollah is not rearmed. Can these differences be reconciled in your view? And Mr. President, when are you and Hamas going to resolve your differences on the formation of a national unity government? There was a document signed in June which seemed to point the way forward. Here we are quite a long time later, it all seems very bogged down. There doesn't seem to [be] any sign of real progress. How long can this political drift go on, while your people are suffering so much?

SG: Let me say that there isn't that much of a difference between Prime Minister Olmert and myself as to the requirements of resolution 1701. Resolution 1701 reaffirmed 1559 which requires that all militias in Lebanon should be disarmed. So the disarmament of all armed elements, outside government forces, is the requirement of the resolution and it is a must. And the Lebanese themselves have discussed this in the past and I would urge them to go ahead and resume their discussions and come up with a national consensus leading to the disarmament of all militias within Lebanon. There has been some question in the past as to whether the international forces are coming in to disarm Hizbollah. And we have made it clear that the responsibility to disarm Hizbollah rests with the Lebanese government and the army and should be based on political and national consensus. I should also hasten to add that there are many disarmament programmes that are taking place around the world. Historically the IRA is a good example. It doesn't always have to be done by force. There has to be a certain political consensus and in some cases if you try to do it by force, you compound the problem. And I think the disarmament has to be done but we have to find the most effective way of doing it. I think the resolution seems to support this view. Thank you.