



Press Release

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SECURITY COUNCIL, IN PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENT, CONGRATULATES PALESTINIAN PEOPLE ON PARTICIPATION IN RECENT ELECTION

Hears Briefing on Middle East Situation, Farewell Statement by United States Representative Danforth

The United Nations Security Council today welcomed the recent Palestinian Presidential election, and congratulated the Palestinian people "who demonstrated their commitment to democracy by participating in the election under challenging conditions".

Reading out a consensus statement following a briefing on the situation in the Middle East and the question of Palestine, Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Antonio Biélsa, whose country holds the Council's presidency for the month, said members of the 15-nation body commended the credible and fair character of the 9 January vote, and paid tribute the Central Elections Commission, which had played a key role in ensuring the successful conclusion of the ballot.

Council members also congratulated the newly elected President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and pledged support for the Authority's efforts to strengthen Palestinian institutions, he said. They looked forward to the convening of Palestinian legislative elections in the near future and affirmed their continuing support for the Palestinian people in their democratic process.

Calling upon both Israelis and Palestinians to relaunch a genuine political process, the Council also stressed the need to fully implement the Quartet-backed "[Road Map](#)" peace plan for the creation of an independent, viable, democratic and sovereign State of Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

In his briefing to the Council on the situation in the Middle East, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Kieran Prendergast, said that optimism had, at least for now, replaced long and bitter years of disillusion, despair and hopelessness in the region. Although he said risks remained, and the possibility of setbacks was real, this was the second straight month that he had presented a modestly encouraging picture of the "enormous potential" for progress towards settling the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

"There is a palpable sense of expectation of real, substantial and sustainable change in the region", he told the Council, citing the democratic election of a new Palestinian President who has called for an end to attacks on Israel, and the formation of a new Israeli coalition Government to carry out the evacuation of settlements in the occupied Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.

"The potential is there. But so is the danger that the fragile new process might falter and fail. We must not let that happen", he said, adding that both Israelis and Palestinians had a lot of work ahead of them, and while their respective new leaderships were in a position to carry out much of it, they would continue to need help from the international community. He urged both sides and the international community to push ahead with the Road Map peace plan.

At the top of the meeting, Mr. Antonio Biélsa bid farewell to United States representative John Danforth, who is leaving his post today. The Argentine Foreign Minister said that Mr. Danforth would likely be remembered for having initiated and led the Council's historic meeting in Nairobi, where, this past November, parties were negotiating a peace accord to end the long-running conflict in the Sudan. He said that the fact that those parties had been finally able to reach an agreement last week, had been due in no small part to the Council's efforts, under Mr. Danforth's leadership.

For his part, Mr. Danforth said that from the start, he had been impressed by the way very diverse nations had joined together to address the critical issues of the day. At the same time, it had struck him as odd how the Council often got caught up in "wordsmithing" – debating the use of words like "demands" rather than "urges", or "measures" rather than "sanctions". But he understood now that such exercises were perhaps illustrations of how people tried to bridge differences to solve very serious problems.

He said that many people, in the United States and elsewhere had criticized the United Nations – and, indeed, there was a lot to criticize, from the "oil-for-food" programme to the abuses by peacekeepers in the Congo. But such criticisms should not detract from the crucial work being done here, he said. The United Nations provides a place for the United States to listen, as well as speak", he said, declaring that the Organization was important for the welfare and stability of the world and the United States, as well.

The meeting began at 10:20 a.m., and adjourned at 10:55 a.m.

Presidential Statement

Following is the full text of the presidential statement, to be issued as document S/PRST/2005/2:

"The Security Council welcomes the Palestinian Presidential election held on 9 January 2005. It commends the credible and fair character of the vote and congratulates the Palestinian people who demonstrated their commitment to democracy by participating in the election under challenging conditions. The Council pays tribute to the Central Elections Commission which played a key role in ensuring the successful conclusion of the election, and expresses its appreciation for the contribution of international observers and for the support of the United Nations.

"The Security Council congratulates the newly elected President of the Palestinian Authority on his election.

"The Security Council looks forward to the convening of the Palestinian legislative elections in the near future, and affirms the Council's continuing support for the Palestinian people in their democratic process.

"The Security Council supports the Palestinian Authority and its efforts to pursue the process of strengthening institutions.

"The Security Council underlines the importance of enhanced and expeditious international assistance to the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority.

"The Security Council stresses the need for the full implementation of the Quartet Road Map, as endorsed by the Security Council in resolution 1515 (2003), for the creation of an independent, viable, democratic and sovereign State of Palestine living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

"The Security Council calls upon Israelis and Palestinians to relaunch a genuine political process and advance towards a just and lasting peace in the region."

Statement by Representative of United States

Bidding farewell to the Security Council, JOHN DANFORTH ([United States](#)) thanked the Council members, saying he had had an excellent experience over the past six months. He recalled that, when United States President George Bush had phoned him to offer him his post, the President had assured him that the job of United States Ambassador to the United Nations was an important one. And his experience had born out just how important the Organization was to the United States and the world.

During that time, he said the Security Council had, indeed, played an important role, launching several important peace missions and actively supporting the peace process in the Sudan, among others. The system-wide response to the South Asian tsunami had also had been a prime example of the vital work of the United Nations.

From the beginning, he said, he had been impressed by the way very diverse nations had joined together to address the critical issues of the day. At the same time, it had struck him as odd how the Council often got caught up in "wordsmithing" – debating the use of "demands" rather than "urges" or "measures" rather than "sanctions". But he understood now that such exercises were perhaps illustrations of how people tried to bridge differences to solve very serious problems.

He said that many people, in the United States and elsewhere had criticized the United Nations – and indeed there was a lot to criticize, from the "oil-for-food" programme to the abuses by peacekeepers in the Congo. But such criticisms should not detract from the crucial work being done here, he said. Many people in the United States had complained that the United Nations did not support America on the path to war in Iraq. And sometimes people in the United Nations Secretariat and elsewhere in the system often "made comments we might prefer they not make", he said.

But the United States was a large and well-meaning country, trying to do the right thing, he continued. But especially because it was such a big, strong country, it should be open to diverse views. It was important for the United States to consider the views of others even if it did not necessarily agree with those views. "The United Nations provides a place for the United States to listen, as well as speak", he said, declaring that the Organization was important for the welfare and stability of the world and the United States as well.

Briefing by Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs

KIERAN PRENDERGAST, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said that in his last briefing to the Council, he had highlighted the potential for positive developments in the Middle East. There remained risks, and the possibility of setbacks. But this morning he was pleased to report that the overall trend in recent events tended to confirm that there existed a real opportunity to begin the long-delayed implementation of the Road Map's provisions and to start once again moving towards a settlement of the conflict.

He welcomed new Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and praised the ballot, which had reportedly been held in a potentially competitive yet peaceful atmosphere. Mr. Prendergast also congratulated the entire Palestinian population in the occupied territories, as well as the Palestinian Central Election Commission for the organization of credible and genuine elections under challenging conditions. "The Palestinians have successfully completed another critical step in the historic democratic transition in the occupied Palestinian territory", he added.

Highlighting some specifics from the election, he said that 775,146 Palestinians had cast their votes last weekend, some 60,000 more than had voted in the 1996 elections. Some 800 international observers and 7,000 national observers had been on hand to monitor the vote. The observers had reported that the election had been contested vigorously and administered fairly, and that election day had been orderly and generally peaceful. Israel had played a commendable part in facilitating the elections, he said, adding, however, that some problems remained and observers had had to raise the issue of restrictions of freedom of movement.

He also recalled that the first round of municipal elections had been held in 26 communities on 23 December, with some 150,000 eligible voters choosing from more than 800 candidates. Those elections, the first at the municipal level since 1976 had witnessed a high local voter turnout of up to 81 per cent. One encouraging result had been that women had won 51 out of a total of 297 seats in the 26 municipalities. The next round of local elections – for 11 communities in the Gaza Strip – was set for 27 January.

"The commitment of the Palestinian people to democracy and its institutions was a strong foundation on which President Abbas can build", he said, "we look forward to working with the new President of the Palestinian Authority on the implementation of the Road Map and towards the realization of a viable two-State solution."

But there was now not only new Palestinian leadership, he said, there was also a new Israeli coalition Government in place to tackle the implementation of Prime Minister Sharon's withdrawal initiative. The new Israeli cabinet, in which the Likud party had been joined by Labour, as well as United Torah Judaism, was expected to decide later this month on the evacuation of settlements in Gaza and parts of the Northern West Bank. Mr. Prendergast reiterated his support for the Israeli disengagement initiative as an important step towards achieving the overall common objective of an end to the occupation that had begun in 1967 and the establishment of an independent, viable and contiguous Palestinian State alongside a secure Israel.

"Set in this context, Prime Minister Sharon's initiative provided a real opportunity to move ahead", he said, adding that the plan should be undertaken within the framework of the Road Map and in coordination between the new Israeli Government and the new Palestinian leadership. It was welcome news that Mr. Sharon

and Mr. Abbas had already spoken of their intention to meet in the coming weeks, he said.

More generally, he believed that the international community would need to engage proactively, to help the process along, and to determine how best it could contribute to the realization of a sustainable peace between the parties. "The present period of opportunity challenges not only the parties, but all of us", he said. Situations such as the present one in the Middle East were dynamic – they either evolved positively or regressed. They did not stand still for too long. Confidence-building measures could be very helpful in restoring trust, he said, adding that he was pleased to report today the "very positive development" of Israel's release of 159 Palestinian prisoners in late December.

"Yet, though the potential for positive change and progress continued to be enormous, both have, literally, come under fire on an almost daily basis since my last briefing", he said, adding: "In the past month, 64 Palestinians and three Israelis have been killed, and 243 Palestinian and 46 Israelis have been wounded."

In the six weeks before the elections, Palestinian militants had fired a total of 210 rockets and mortar shells against Israeli settlements in Gaza and civilian targets inside Israel. That marked increase in attacks came despite the admirable efforts by then PLO Chairman Abbas to end such actions. Mr. Prendergast said he hoped the Palestinian leadership would meet its security obligations under the Road Map, and do its utmost to prevent such attacks and bring to justice the perpetrators.

Over the same period, Israeli forces had conducted a total of 40 incursions and military operations, causing death and injury to Palestinian civilians, as well as militants. In one tragic incident just last week, seven Palestinian civilians had been killed, including five children in the same family, when an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) tank shell hit an agricultural area in Beit Lahia. "Once again we have to remind Israel of its legal obligations under international law to ensure the safety of Palestinian civilians and refrain from the disproportionate use of force", he said.

Following a call for both sides to exercise restraint and focus their efforts now on ending the violence, the terror and the military incursions that had killed and injured civilians and destroyed civilian property and infrastructure, he reported the positive sign that a recent poll had shown that some 60 per cent of the Palestinian people expressed support for an end to the armed struggle as the way to confront the occupation. He also reported that this past Tuesday, the Secretary-General, as requested by the General Assembly had sent a letter to the Assembly President setting out the work details for the establishment of a register to record damages in connection with the building of a barrier in Gaza.

On the Syrian track, he reported a "stark illustration" of how fragile the situation in the Middle East remained, saying that nearly six months of relative quiet along the Blue Line had been broken on 9 January – the day of the Palestinian elections – in a "deplorable" incident in which a Hezbollah roadside bomb attack against an Israeli military patrol vehicle had killed one IDF soldier and wounded three others.

Subsequent Israel Defence Forces tank and machine gun fire had killed a French officer serving with the United Nations Observer Group in Lebanon and wounded a Swedish colleague. The Hezbollah attack and its aftermath constituted grave violations of the Blue Line and had been condemned by the Secretary-General, he said. Overall there had been no movement on the Syrian-Israeli track, despite yet another offer of mediation, this time by the Turkish Government. The resumption and completion of peace negotiations between those two sides, and the implementation of the relevant Security Council resolution, remained indispensable ingredients of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, he added.

Looking ahead, Mr. Prendergast said there was a palpable sense of expectation of real, substantial and sustainable change in the region. "Optimism, at least for now, has replaced long and bitter years of disillusion, despair and hopelessness. The potential is here. But so is the danger that the fragile new process might falter and fail. We must not allow that to happen."

He said that both Israelis and Palestinians had a lot of work ahead of them, and, while their respective new leaderships were in a position to carry out much of it, they would continue to need help from the international community. "We..., particularly through the Quartet, need to lend our support, our assistance, and our creative engagement to make clear to both parties that we expect real progress", he declared. The parties, in turn, need to take those steps necessary to implement the Road Map, halt the bloodshed and suffering, and move forward to achieve the goal of a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement in which two independent and viable States, Israel and Palestine, lived side by side in peace and security.

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