



Secretary-General
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TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE BY SECRETARY-GENERAL BAN KI-MOON

AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, 12 JANUARY 2009

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

It seems only yesterday since we were last together. As you know, this was to be our opening press conference of the year. We were to look ahead toward the big issues of 2009. This is the year of climate change. The economic crisis is still very much with us. So is the food crisis. We face grave challenges to peace and security.

But today, the big issue is the situation in Gaza. Today is Day 17 there. My message is simple, direct and to the point: the fighting must stop. To both sides, I say: Just stop, now. Too many people have died. There has been too much civilian suffering. Too many people, Israelis and Palestinians, live in daily fear of their lives. And in Gaza, the very foundation of society is being destroyed: people's homes; civic infrastructure; public health facilities; and schools.

We have a Security Council resolution demanding an immediate and enduring ceasefire. In the name of humanity and international law, this resolution must be observed. I expect the parties now meeting in Cairo to do what is required. They must agree to the elements of an immediate ceasefire. At a minimum, that means a halt to rocket attacks by Hamas militants and a withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. It is time to stop. It is time to stop the killing and the destruction.

As you know, I leave for the region tomorrow. My goal is to step up the pace of our joint diplomatic efforts and ensure that urgent humanitarian assistance reaches those in need. It is one thing to speak to world leaders, as I have done daily in seeking to resolve this crisis. And it is another thing to be present oneself.

It is my duty as Secretary-General to uphold the United Nations Charter and its principles. We have 10,000 staff on the ground in the Occupied [Palestinian] Territory and in Israel. I want my visit to be a tangible expression of support for their work under the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. I salute their bravery and their dedication to the UN's mission.

Most of all, I want to demonstrate my deep concern and empathy for the innocents caught in these terrible circumstances, both in Israel and the Occupied Territory. More than 900 Palestinians have died. About 4,000 more have been injured. They have no place to hide, no place to run.

I will begin my trip in Cairo and move on to Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Lebanon and Syria. My trip will conclude in Kuwait. The Arab League summit offers us an opportunity to take stock of our progress and chart the next steps ahead.

At each stop, I will repeat my call for an immediate and durable ceasefire and insist that Security Council [resolution 1860](#) be respected fully. To repeat, this means an immediate end to military operations in Gaza – an end to Israel's offensive and a halt to the rocket attacks by Hamas. The international community must come together to stop the smuggling of weapons into Gaza. By the same token, border crossings into Gaza must be reopened in full. Innocent civilians, whether in the Occupied Territory or southern Israel, cannot live in a state of fear or under a de facto state of siege. Let normal life resume. That is the only path to lasting peace.

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Question: I was wondering whether you will be discussing any specific proposals during your visit to the region. Because there is a lot floating right now – Egypt proposals, Turkish proposals. So, are you going to take part in this mediation effort, and shall we expect the firing to stop while you are in the region?

Secretary-General: My visit to region will focus first on helping to ensure that the ceasefire is implemented, as has been demanded, requested by the Security Council immediately, and that urgent humanitarian assistance reaches those in need, and also encourage the diplomatic efforts currently under way – opening of the crossings and how to provide the humanitarian assistance, how to protect the Palestinian population in Gaza and how to strengthen the border, have security. All these are important issues and there is another, the issue of national unity of Palestinians – how to reunite Palestinian people in the West Bank and in Gaza.

There had been several initiatives, initiated by Egypt and some other countries. And I will have an opportunity to discuss all these issues with President [Hosni] Mubarak of Egypt and leaders of Israel, including the Prime Minister, President and Foreign Minister. And these will be the main issues which I will dwell on with all the leaders in the region, wherever I visit.

Question: How important is it to hold the first Arab Economic Summit in Kuwait in the middle of the global financial crisis? And are you concerned that it will turn into a political summit because of Gaza?

Secretary-General: This was planned a long time ago, and I planned to participate in that Arab Economic Summit meeting in Kuwait. And I think it will be a good opportunity for me and for Arab leaders to discuss all matters, including how to overcome the economic crisis, as well as to address this Middle East peace process. I understand that the League of Arab States Secretary-General is now looking at the possibility of arranging some extra sessions to discuss this situation in Gaza on the occasion of this Arab Economic Summit meeting. And I will be happy and pleased to engage in talks with them.

Question: The ceasefire resolution is now more than three days old. I wonder if you could tell us what you have done so far to try and make it stick, please, and specifically what contacts you have had with the American Government, and what they are telling you about trying to make it stick.

Secretary-General: I have been very much frustrated and concerned that Security Council resolution 1860 has not been fully observed, and fighting is still going on. On the very next day, after the fighting, last Friday, I talked to [Israeli] Prime Minister [Ehud] Olmert and strongly urged him to implement the Security Council resolution and to stop the military operation. And I have also spoken with President Mubarak the following day on how to ensure the full implementation of the Security Council resolution, how to ensure an immediate ceasefire, how we can build on all other issues which he has initiated; and I am really looking forward to discussing this matter. I have been discussing daily with many leaders, European leaders, Arab leaders and Israeli leaders on these issues.

Question: [inaudible] What have they been telling you?

Secretary-General: Also with the Americans, we have been discussing every day with the Americans, so the Americans can also influence the Israelis. I'm not going to tell you anything in detail on which I have had discussions.

Question: Are you getting any help from the Americans on influencing Israel to abide by a ceasefire? And what exactly are you taking with you to the region? We know what everyone is trying to do. Are you taking any modalities for the mechanisms of monitoring, and basically, are you going to ask the Syrians and the Turks to help you with Hamas?

Secretary-General: There are certainly some countries or leaders who can influence Hamas to stop firing rockets against Israel. And there are some countries that can also influence Israel. And that is why I am now trying to visit all these countries that, I think, can make a difference, that can make a contribution to first of all, bring an immediate ceasefire and make this ceasefire durable and sustainable, which can be fully respected by all the parties concerned. And also we have to immediately think about how we can provide the necessary humanitarian assistance and also some construction of the devastated Gazan society.

Question: What are you bringing with you [inaudible]?

Secretary-General: I am going to discuss with the leaders what I have in my mind, but I think it's not proper to disclose it in advance, before my visit.

Question: Hamas has said that it will not abide by a ceasefire, because it was not a party to the resolution. Do you believe this will stop only when there is an agreed ceasefire by both parties, or is it enough for Hamas to stop firing rockets, or for Israel to stop its military action for there to be peace?

Secretary-General: As I said, both sides must stop now, the fighting. If you want to negotiate to end the fighting, it will take many, many days, and, during that time, many more people will die. My message, as I said, is quite clear, simple and direct, to the point – just stop now and let us discuss how we can make this ceasefire a durable and sustainable one. That's my message. And I urge again, that Hamas militants – they must stop, they must look to the future of the Palestinian people.

Question: You will be staying two days in Lebanon. What kind of message are you bringing there? You might speak also at the Parliament – can you tell us what is the message you are making?

Secretary-General: In addition to all my talks on this current Gaza situation, I encourage the Lebanese people and Government leaders to solidify the national unity of Lebanon, so that they can fully restore peace and stability. I will also strongly encourage them to improve their relationship with neighbouring countries, including Syria. That will be a very important message for me. Of course, I will engage in talks on how to implement Security Council resolution 1701 and most immediately, how Lebanon, as an Arab leader, how they contribute to stability and peace in Gaza.

Question: Your main mission is to make sure that the resolution is implemented. What are ways, you think, to make sure that the resolution is going to be implemented? What are you going to do for that? And also, is there any possibility of you having any contact with Hamas?

Secretary-General: The Security Council resolution is a binding one and all the Member States should fully comply with the Security Council resolution. Unfortunately we have not seen the full implementation of this resolution. I am going to discuss with world leaders in the region how we can ensure the full implementation of this Security Council resolution. About Hamas – as the Secretary-General, I deal with the internationally recognized Palestinian leader, President Abbas. The UN system on the ground, however, has appropriate contacts with all factions as required, including with Hamas. This will continue. Our message to Hamas is again very simple and clear – stop the rockets, so that a ceasefire can take hold and the people of Gaza gain some relief, so that they can return to their normal life.

Question: You say you are very frustrated and concerned that the Security Council resolution has not been implemented. How are you going to answer critics in the region and elsewhere who say that this is just another indication of the impotence of the United Nations, that they call for things and nobody listens?

Secretary-General: Just criticizing the United Nations in such a way is unfair. Look at how much the United Nations has contributed to peace and stability and development and protection of human rights during the last 60 years. Of course, there were, sometimes, some occasions when we were not able to fully address all the situations as the international community would have expected. This Gaza situation may be one such situation. That is why I am going to visit the region and discuss this matter with the leaders in the region, very sincerely and in depth, and in an honest way. So let us see. Many world leaders are concentrating and exerting their utmost efforts. You have seen many initiatives taken by many leaders, and this is very encouraging. But, first and foremost, the parties concerned, they must first stop and heed the calls of the international community and must fully comply with the Security Council resolution. That is where the problem lies, not the United Nations.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, the Human Rights Council and Commissioner called to launch an investigation into Israeli war crimes. Will you launch that

investigation? Also, will you launch an investigation into the use of human shields? Is that a war crime? And also, did you say that you won't meet with any Hamas officials?

Secretary-General: No, I didn't say that. I said that I deal with the internationally recognized leader, President Abbas. But on the ground, United Nations officials, for the purpose of delivering humanitarian goods, have been making some contacts with Hamas for necessary administrative reasons.

Now, I have called for an independent investigation. The High Commissioner for Human Rights also did, as did UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] – investigations into shooting incidents involving UN-contracted workers and UNRWA schools. I am awaiting a response from Israel to my request. For other issues, we will have to first of all assess all the situations. Since we have not been able to assess all the situations on the ground in Gaza, let us see what we have to do.

Question: Are there war crimes in Gaza?

Secretary-General: That's something which the ICC [International Criminal Court] or other international organizations will have to determine.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, I wish you a Happy New Year, if not a peaceful one. I've wanted to ask you about Hamas. Why is it that the United Nations cannot deal with them? They did win an election in 2006. They are very much the root the problem, if not the root of the solution, as well. Doesn't it make sense to deal with them on some level, even through the Quartet?

Secretary-General: You know the position of the Palestinian Authority. Then, as I said, the United Nations deals with the internationally recognized leadership of the Palestinian Authority: that is President Abbas. That is what the Quartet has agreed.

Question: Mr. Secretary-General, you said that one of the main purposes of your visit is to give support to the personnel of the United Nations that are working

under dire conditions there. Is there any way to see your visit in Gaza, or announcing it, in a way to make more pressure to get that ceasefire that everybody is looking for?

Secretary-General: In fact, I am deeply anguished over the situation in Gaza. It is tragic and heartbreaking to see so many civilian people have been killed and are suffering from this crisis. I would like to personally visit Gaza, but under these circumstances, I am not sure whether I will be able to visit and show my concern, first of all. In any event, I will be doing all that I can while visiting the countries to draw the attention of the international community to this critical situation. And I am sure that I will have an opportunity to have direct contact with our UN staff in Gaza, who have been doing a great job under such very difficult circumstances.

Question: [inaudible] ...from now to then, would you consider such a visit?

Secretary-General: As soon as a ceasefire is ensured, I am considering first of all dispatching an assessment team to the region, to Gaza, to determine the extent of the damage and the extent of the humanitarian needs, after which we will discuss this matter, how to help the Palestinian people to reconstruct their society. I have already discussed this matter with the Malaysian Government, who is holding the co-chair of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee [AHLC], together with me. On the basis of all the assessment team's recommendations and report, as well as a result of the AHLC, we will try to have some kind of international pledging conference. But for that to be possible, first and foremost, there must be a ceasefire and stability must be ensured.

Question: I want to once again follow up with the Hamas question. Don't you think there could be a situation when you and the United Nations have to negotiate with Hamas?

Secretary-General: The Egyptian Government has been in contact with Hamas, and there are some other countries, like Syria and Turkey, who have been talking with Hamas people. So let us see. I think, first and foremost, Hamas needs to stop this fighting. They must fully cooperate and observe Security Council resolutions, so that there can be peace and stability. For that, Israel also must fully cooperate. Then we can discuss other related issues.

Question: Happy New Year to you, Mr. Secretary-General. When the Security Council resolution passed last Thursday, the United States abstained. Do you feel

that that hurt the message that was being sent by the rest of the Council, since it wasn't a unified message?

Secretary-General: I won't comment on the voting pattern of any Member States; that's a decision of the United States. I had hoped that this resolution could have been adopted by unanimity. But it is also encouraging that this resolution was adopted with 14 votes in support of this. Therefore, we regard that this resolution has the broadest possible support, which must be fully implemented and respected.

Thank you very much for your best wishes, particularly for this new year. I should have also reciprocated my best wishes to each and every one of you at this time, but, as you probably understand, I have been deeply concerned and have been heavily engaged, even from January 1, to address this situation. But I would like to take the opportunity again that we work very closely together, and I wish you continued good success and good health and happiness to you and your family. Thank you very much.

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