



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

AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, 10 FEBRUARY 2009

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great pleasure to see you again.

As you know, I have been traveling for much of the past month. I have been to Gaza and seen, with my own eyes, the human suffering there. I have been to Kabul, Islamabad and Baghdad, Davos and New Delhi, and some other places. Wherever I went I spoke for ordinary people – people at risk from climate change, people living in fear or war, people who have lost their homes, their livelihoods, their children and families.

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I remain no less concerned about the situation in Gaza. I saw, with my own eyes, how difficult life has become for ordinary people. These difficulties have not diminished since my visit. All but one border crossing remains closed. Nearly 1 million refugees depend on daily UN aid. Yet we are getting in supplies for only 30,000.

Meanwhile, Hamas militants on two occasions seized UN aid. The material has since been returned but I have demanded that it not happen again. Who pays the price? It is ordinary people – people without homes, without food or medicine.

That is why, in Davos, I launched a Flash Appeal worth \$613 million to respond to emergency humanitarian needs in Gaza. That is why I am going to take part in the Cairo Conference on March 2nd, co-sponsored by the governments of Egypt and Norway with the United Nations and the European Union. And that is why I returned to New York determined to work harder than ever for peace in the Middle East.

It is critical that we consolidate the ceasefire, promote Palestinian unity and revive the peace process. I welcome the speed with which the new U.S. President has engaged on this issue, particularly with the appointment of George Mitchell as Special Envoy to the Middle East. As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I will devote every effort to helping push the peace process forward.

Lastly, I should say that I have initiated steps to establish a UN Board of Inquiry into incidents involving death and damage at UN premises in Gaza. The Board will be headed by Ian Martin of the United Kingdom and will include legal advisers and a military expert. It should start work immediately and report to me within a month.

Thank you. And now your questions.

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Q: Following elections today in Israel, the Government there is expected to move to the right, and I'm wondering how you think that might impact UN efforts in Gaza. In particular, Mr. Netanyahu, one of the leading candidates, doesn't support a two-state solution. He wants further military action, or he has suggested that he would support further military action against Hamas. How will you deal with this Government on the issue of Gaza? And also, have you gotten any update on Israel's investigation into UN attacks? Are you pleased with the progress on that front?

SG: I think it is a bit early for me to make any comments on this ongoing, continuing election process. I understand they are still in the process of election. We have to see who will be the winner of this election and what kind of government they will establish. Then I think we will discuss all the matters concerning this Middle East peace process.

Whoever may be in power in Israel, it will be important and desirable that they engage in the peace process as soon as possible. We have a very fragile ceasefire in Gaza, which needs to be translated into a durable and sustainable one. This is what the international community expects. And for the investigation, as I have stated, the United Nations is going to engage in its own independent investigation. When I met Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Olmert, when I was in Israel, I urged [them] strongly to investigate and look into this matter thoroughly. He promised me that he would look into this issue and investigate and will come back to us. And I am awaiting that report.

Q: You've been calling now for several days – we're coming on weeks – for Israel to open the crossings and there has been no reaction to that that anyone can see. We still have the same status today that we did before the war and now after the war. What is your opinion of the Israeli Government's actions in this case? Would you describe this as a crime, to seal off so many people from humanitarian aid? We're not even talking about recovery and rebuilding materials. We're talking about food and humanitarian aid.

SG: It's not even recently, all the times, I have been consistently and persistently demanding that the Israeli Government should open all crossings to allow humanitarian assistance smoothly and also to allow easy movement of Palestinians in Gaza. That is one of the ways to make this ceasefire a durable and sustainable one.

Now there is another way of making this ceasefire a durable one. There should be some measures to prevent illicit import of weapons and ammunition into Gaza.

Therefore, I would urge again that there should be all the crossings opened. I understand that again today, because of the election in Israel, the crossings – all but one – are all closed. We are having serious difficulty, particularly our office in UNRWA, which has been taking care of all humanitarian assistance on a daily basis to three-quarters of the total population of the Palestinians in Gaza. We are experiencing serious difficulty in getting all the materials, humanitarian assistance. So it is absolutely necessary that they open the crossings. I will continue to urge that.

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Q: ... And on Gaza, the investigation board, do you have assurances from the Israelis that they are going to work with you, they are going to allow this team in? Because they have a history of rejecting such boards to come in - Ahtisaari and others - do you have assurances that they would cooperate, especially that you have been under a lot of attack, and some people are telling you to distance your own UNRWA, they are asking you, I don't know if you feel bullied by that? And lastly, on the Tribunal, do you expect indictments soon? Because in the past you have said, well, take it easy, we're not going to go into indictments right away – do you now feel that you should leave that to the Court? Do you have any idea you will be going faster or slower on the indictments?

SG: On this inquiry, I have informed both the Israeli Government and Palestinian Authority. I do not have any doubt that they will cooperate fully. I hope they will fully cooperate on the conduct of this inquiry commission. And this is their responsibility. And since Prime Minister Olmert has promised me to look into this issue himself and his Government, then I can expect smooth operation of this commission inside Gaza and with other concerned parties.

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Q: In your participation at Davos in the forum on Gaza, I saw you writing, and there were presentations by the Prime Minister of Turkey and the Secretary-General of the Arab League, both saying the importance of engaging with Hamas as a representative of the Palestinian people. I wondered if you had any response to their presentations made in that session and, in general, to the need to have something, more of a way of building a unity among the Palestinian representatives, by not choosing one entity to support and another entity to not support?

SG: I have been talking with and contacting the representatives of the Palestinians – the elected, legitimate regime of the Palestinian Authority – that's the basic policy of the United Nations and the Quartet. But, at the operational level, the United Nations has necessarily engaged with Hamas, but on issues of governance and the peace process, the United Nations, along with its Quartet partners, engages with the legitimate Palestinian Authority. This brings a very important issue: the unity of Palestinian people. It is clear to me [that] for any sustainable political progress to occur, and for Gaza to properly recover and rebuild, Palestinians must engage in reconciliation. That is why Palestinian unity is such a priority. After this Gaza crisis, I think this Palestinian issue has surfaced as the issue of Palestinian unity. I made passionate appeals during my mission for Palestinians to overcome divisions and to work toward one Palestinian Government within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority.

Q: In terms of reference of the Commission of Inquiry. What are you going to do with the report that you are going to get from your experts? And, also, why limit it to the UN facilities only, and not what happened in Gaza in general, considering that the United Nations presents its assistance to three quarters of the Palestinian people? Shall we expect asking Israel to pay, for example, for the damage that happened to the UNRWA premises?

SG: The report will first of all be examined by the United Nations and myself, and the future course of action will be determined, will have to be determined, by myself and the United Nations. As for a broader issue, involving investigating what has happened, in fact over the last three weeks, unacceptable and very serious things happened, involving human tragedies and casualties, destruction of properties. If there are any serious allegations of violations of international humanitarian law, then there must be, I think, a thorough investigation. But these issues should be dealt with by proper judiciary organizations, agencies, at first at the national level, and then I think we will have to see what course of action should be taken.

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