
Jerusalem, 20 March 2010 - Secretary-General's remarks to the press before dinner hosted by President of Israel Shimon Peres

Mr President,

Distinguished senior government officials of Israel,

Ladies and Gentlemen of the media,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be back in Israel. I remember that I was standing here together with Mr President. A little over one year after, I am standing here again. I was here in January last year. It was a very critical period of the Gaza conflict.

My visit this time is also being made at a critically important juncture. Thank you very much for your warm welcome and hospitality.

I'm bringing here a clear message from the Quartet, which was held yesterday in Moscow; that is negotiations for a two-state solution are the only way for Israelis and Palestinians to realize their rights and aspirations. For Israelis, negotiations must lead to real, permanent security. I am very much aware and appreciate the challenges of the security of your people and of government. As Secretary-General, I have been and I will continue to be always fair and objective and open minded in working together with the international community in bringing peace to the Middle East so that Israel and Palestinians will be able to live together side by side in peace and security.

As we seek a diplomatic way forward it is vital to ease tensions on the ground. We've got to bring an immediate end to all violence, calm the situation and protect civilians.

I welcome the commitment by the Israeli Government to the two-state solution. The main focus should be to create the conditions in which efforts towards peace can succeed and to refrain from actions that undermine trust or seem to prejudice or undermine the outcome of the negotiations. This includes a settlement freeze.

Our common goal, as stressed by the Quartet, is to complete negotiations on a settlement of all core issues within 24 months. For this to happen we have to get negotiations under way. And I fully agree with your point Mr President when you said negotiations should start.

I fully support the efforts of the United States to facilitate proximity talks and the eventual resumption of talks.

I urge both the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to take advantage of this opportunity. And I believe that this proximity talks should eventually lead to bilateral direct talks.

Today in the West Bank I encouraged Prime Minister Fayyad to engage fully in the process. I will do the same when I meet with Palestinian President Abbas and other Arab leaders at the Arab League Summit in Libya next week. I will also have an opportunity to report to the Security Council when I return to New York.

The Palestinian Authority has a committed and able leadership. They are working hard and achieving progress in delivering Palestinian commitments. I urge you to do more to support them. They can be good partners in working together to achieve peace.

Tomorrow I will visit Gaza, where the situation is deeply worrying. I appreciate the steps, the positive steps, the Israeli leadership has taken to allow some United Nations civilian recovery projects. This enables me to bring the people there a small message of hope. I understand and share Israel's concerns about the security challenges posed by Hamas. But Israel's blockade continues to impose unacceptable hardship while empowering extremists. I am confident that the blockade can be lifted while addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns.

In Gaza I will also repeat my call on Palestinian militants to immediately end rocket fire and to release Gilad Shalit on humanitarian grounds.

We must also address the wider regional picture. Peace between Arabs and Israel must be comprehensive. The situation between Israel and Lebanon remains a priority, and I appreciate Israel's commitment to Security Council resolution 1701. I support a resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria. There is an international consensus on the need to address the Iranian nuclear issue.

Mr. President, I know how much Israelis yearn for lasting security. That is my goal too. I am here to say that peace is just not necessary and urgent. It is also achievable.

Let me close on a separate matter entirely. I would like to express my sincere gratitude as Secretary-General of the United Nations to the Israeli Government and people of Israel for the quick, very generous and very effective response to the earthquake in Haiti.

Israel's actions helped many Haitians as well as the United Nations mission. Your field support, field hospital, and search and rescue teams were very courageous and effective, and I met them myself and I applaud such generous support. This was a wonderful expression of global solidarity and great humanity.