



Secretary-General SG/SM/10453

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TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE ON MIDDLE EAST BY SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI ANNAN.

QUARTET PRINCIPALS. AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS. 9 MAY 2006

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,

As you know, we have just concluded a day-long series of meetings.

The Quartet would like to thank the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia for travelling so far to join us today. Their perspectives enriched our discussions.

We have also written to our former Envoy, James Wolfensohn, to express our deep appreciation for his outstanding services.

We have just issued a statement. Let me give you some of the highlights.

The Quartet underscored its continued commitment to a two-State solution, as embodied in the Road Map, as well as the need for both parties to avoid actions which could prejudice final status issues.

We reiterated our grave concern that the Palestinian Authority Government has so far failed to commit itself to the principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Road Map. The Quartet's donor members expressed their willingness to work toward the restoration of international assistance to the Palestinian Authority once it has committed to these principles.

The Quartet condemned the Palestinian Authority's failure to take action against terrorism and its justification of the 17 April suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, which President Abbas rightly condemned.

The Quartet expressed concern over Israeli military operations that result in the loss of innocent life, and asks Israel to bear in mind the potential consequences of its actions.

We also expressed concern about settlement expansion and the route of the barrier.

The Quartet expressed serious concern about deteriorating conditions in the West Bank and Gaza, and about the delivery of humanitarian assistance, economic life, social cohesion and Palestinian institutions. We call on the international community to respond urgently to assistance requests by international organizations, especially UN agencies, and urges both parties to take concrete steps to implement their obligations under the Agreement on Movement and Access.

We also expressed our willingness to endorse a temporary international mechanism, limited in duration and scope and fully accountable, that ensures direct delivery of any assistance to the Palestinian people. The Quartet welcomed the EU's offer to develop and propose such a mechanism, and invites donors and international organizations to consider participating. The Quartet urges Israel, in parallel, to take steps to improve the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people.

The Quartet welcomed Prime Minister Olmert's call for negotiations with a Palestinian partner committed to the Road Map, as well as President Abbas's continued commitment to a platform of peace. The Quartet is encouraged by these statements of intent.

Finally, we reiterated our previous statements and our commitment to relevant Security Council resolutions.

We will now take your questions.

Thank you very much.

Question: My first question is to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. It is stated in the statement that there is a temporary mechanism which has been developed to ease the aid to the Palestinians. How soon will it begin? Because it says, "as soon as possible", is the word. How soon will it begin? And the other thing is, Israel is holding all kinds of duties and all kinds of other collections that it makes on behalf of the Palestinian people. When will it be able to release those monies back to the Palestinian people?

Condoleezza Rice, United States Secretary of State: First of all, the European Union will take the lead in developing and proposing such a mechanism. We do believe that a well-designed, temporary and clearly defined in scope and duration mechanism — I think the full statement refers to reviewing the need for such a mechanism after a period of three months — but let me just say that the thrust of the statement is that the international community is still trying to respond to the needs of the Palestinian people.

The United States is today making available \$10 million in in-kind assistance to meet the emergency needs on the medical side, and the international community is trying to respond. We call on Israel to respond. But ultimately, the resolution to this is a Palestinian Government that accepts its responsibilities for governing, that accepts the Quartet's requirements and the norms that would help us get to a two-State solution and back onto the Road Map. But since the EU is, in fact, going to take the lead, perhaps I could ask Benita to talk about the timing.

Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for External Relations: Yes, indeed, what we propose is to have a meeting of experts as soon as possible in Brussels in order to really draw up the parameters and thus, of course, try to get this together as speedily as possible. But, of course, since it is not an easy mechanism, it is not a matter of days, but I do hope it is a matter of weeks.

Question: Can we be more specific about this mechanism? Is this the proposal from the EU that was supposed to go to the World Bank, and is this to pay Hamas salaries, or the salaries of those people in the Government that Hamas controls? How limited — how long would this survive? You talk about a limited... do we know how limited that is? And while I have the mike, should Israel and Abbas have direct talks, Secretary of State Rice?

Ms. Rice: Again, the European Union is going to take the lead. In fact, we looked at several proposals. We have said that after three months this will be evaluated. The goal here is not to transfer responsibility for meeting the needs of the Palestinian people from [their] Government to the international community. It is to provide assistance to the Palestinian people so that they do not suffer deprivation and do not suffer humanitarian crisis. That's the goal here. That's why it's of limited duration and of limited scope.

As to talks between the Prime Minister and President Abbas, they have both noted that there have been talks before that have been useful, and, obviously, we always want people to talk, but I think it's going to be up to the Governments as to whether or not and when those might take place. But they have been partners before, and I suspect that won't stop.

Ms. Ferrero-Waldner: Let me say that we will invite the World Bank, the United Nations and other international donors in order to see that, really, a big group of people can come in. On the question of what will be there, of course it is particularly for basic human needs — thinking of health, of education, for instance. But, of course, now we have to set it up, so I cannot give you any details at this stage. What I can tell you is that it is about, on the one hand, a clear fiscal transparency and control, and, on the other hand, a distribution directly to the Palestinian people without going through the Palestinian Government.

Question: In your statement, the Quartet welcomes the Prime Minister of Israel's readiness to talk, but it says he needs a partner. President Mahmoud Abbas wrote to all of you today or yesterday, saying, "I am the partner, according to the laws of Oslo." There is no such recognition of his readiness to be the partner or to encourage an acceptance of him by Mr. Olmert to be the partner. Why is that, Secretary Rice? Why is it that you're not endorsing Mahmoud Abbas as a partner in these negotiations?

And Mr. Lavrov, do you still think there is a way to engage Hamas one way or another? What are you proposing? I hear that you said that there is still a way to engage Hamas. If that is true, what do you mean?

Ms. Rice: We have the deepest respect for Mahmoud Abbas, and I think you can see it throughout this statement. We respect him for what he has tried to do for the Palestinian people, for his personal integrity, and for the fact that he has condemned terrorism and tried to lead the Palestinian people along the Road Map. So I think the Quartet has the deepest respect for him.

We have a new situation on the ground. There have been elections in both the Palestinian territories and in Israel. The circumstances politically in the Palestinian territories are complicated. What we are committed to is that we would like to see the political conditions evolve in a way that would permit a return to the Road Map and, indeed, that would permit parties to re-engage each other on how to get to a two-State solution. But I think it is early to start to prescribe precisely how that is going to go forward.

What we are doing is welcoming the intent of Prime Minister Olmert to seek a negotiated solution and welcoming the intent of President Mahmoud Abbas to remain committed to the two-State solution. I think we will have to see how the political situation evolves.

Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation: [interpretation from Russian] As for the second question, of course we feel it essential to continue to work with the Hamas Government. That same view is also supported by the countries of the region, and that was clearly confirmed today during the meetings of the Quartet with the ministers for foreign affairs of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

We note that Hamas has still not implemented the conditions that were formulated by the Quartet and supported by the international community. Our position remains unchanged. Hamas must make progress in that area. The first, although insufficient, sign that Hamas has heard this signal is its expressed readiness to meet under the Arab peace initiative if Israel recognizes that initiative. We also note that Hamas does not oppose Mahmoud Abbas' meeting with Prime Minister Olmert. We have expressed our support for President Abbas. Given the scope of his authority, he has the right to resolve issues related to negotiations with Israel.

As regards Hamas, we feel that it is only through joint efforts and the joint involvement of Hamas that we can achieve results. Isolation will not help us to reach the goal we wish to reach.

Question: Madam Secretary, my question is on Iran. Given the discussions that were held between political directors earlier, what kind of incentives would Iran be offered if they did agree to suspend uranium enrichment? In the letter that they wrote yesterday, the United States largely dismissed it as purely philosophical, when actually they do refer to scientific and technical progress, which surely is referring to their nuclear programme.

Ms. Rice: Well, I would just point you to what has been on the table with the Iranians for some time. There is a European proposal; there is a Russian proposal. I think that if the political directors were to look at the ways in which the Iranian Government could be once again apprised of ways that they could pursue a civil nuclear programme, that would be within the context of the international consensus that Iran should not have the fuel cycle.

Now, Iran can have a civil nuclear programme. No one is disputing that. They can have scientific progress. No one is disputing that. But because of the history

here, the fuel cycle – enrichment and reprocessing on Iranian territory – is a problem. That is what the international community has asked them to suspend and to come back to negotiations.

But I want to be very clear: Any discussion of what Iran might be able to do on the civil nuclear side now takes place also in the context of Iran's having repeatedly refused to live up to the obligations that the international community has placed on it, and it takes place in the context of a discussion that is going on in the Security Council about a resolution that will make very clear to Iran that it has to indeed live up to those obligations; it has to accept the Board of Governors' resolution.

So, this is not "Iran gets incentives". This is a question of showing Iran that there is a course that they could adopt that would get them to a civil nuclear programme that the international community would support, but also saying to Iran that there is also a price to be paid for continuing to defy the international community. This all takes place in the context of the discussion of a resolution, which we fully expect to take to the Security Council, that compels Iran to live up to its obligations.

Question: [inaudible] ...then would all be proposals that are already on the table, that we've already heard about?

Ms. Rice: I did not say that. What I said is that the political directors are examining how to show Iran that there is a path that could lead them to a civil nuclear programme that would be acceptable to the international community. We are also, however, very clear that there is a path that, if Iran continues down it, is going to lead them to isolation. That is why we are continuing to discuss and, indeed, intend to propose and pass a resolution that makes it very clear to Iran that living up to their obligations... to the obligations set out by the Board of Governors... is obligatory.

Question: I have a question for the Foreign Minister of Austria. Can you tell us what specifically Israel and the Palestinian Authority will have to do so that the principles of the Road Map can be implemented? Can you be very specific? Thank you.

Ursula Plassnik, Foreign Minister of Austria: Well, we have been specific, we have been consistent and we have been clear with our measures [inaudible] work of the Quartet principles. We are not changing our course. There has to be a renunciation of violence. There has to be a recognition of the right of Israel to exist, and there has to be the acceptance of the agreement that has been [inaudible] expressed. We have been taking a very close look to see whether there was detectable progress on moving in that direction and, so far, the result has not been encouraging.

So, I think the signal we have been giving today in the international community is also very clear. Here, I thank the Secretary-General for inviting the partners from the region also. We do care for the Palestinians. We do care for the Palestinian population and their needs, and we are ready to take concrete, practical steps.

The European Union is proposing to set up an international mechanism to be able to channel assistance [inaudible] with that respect. We are going to work on that very rapidly, and we are going to work on that with international partners.

Question: Foreign Minister Lavrov earlier said that he expects the statement to include a very strong statement about unilateral motions by either side. Obviously, the Israeli side has said that if the Palestinians do not fulfil those conditions set on them, they will take unilateral moves. What is your position on unilateral moves by the Israelis?

Ms. Rice: Well, first of all, I would note that Prime Minister Olmert has said that he would like to have a negotiated solution. And that we totally agree with. Secondly, we have not had a chance to discuss with the Israelis what their thoughts are about what the future might look like. I am not going to have that discussion in the press. We are going to have that discussion with the Israelis.

I would just note that the disengagement from Gaza, which was in fact a unilateral decision by Israel, in fact led to the first return of territory to the Palestinians in this entire period of time. And that was a very good thing. But I think we would all like to see a negotiated solution, but the political circumstances have got to be right, and one of the political circumstances that has to change is that the Palestinian Government needs to be committed to the principles on the basis of which negotiation with a partner takes place. And that is that at the very least you have to recognize the right of your partner to exist and to renounce violence against that partner. So, I think we are all working to see if we can get to that situation.

Secretary-General: If I may add, the Quartet is on record as saying that in fact, in the context of Gaza, by its standards, such withdrawals ought to be coordinated with the Palestinians. We are also clear that the final borders will have to be negotiated, regardless of how withdrawal takes place.

Ms. Rice: Let me just support that. The President, for instance, has been very clear that final status is something to which the parties have to agree.

QUARTET STATEMENT – 9 MAY 2006

Following is the complete text of today's statement by the Middle East Quartet:

Representatives of the Quartet – United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, High Representative for European Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, and European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner – met today in New York to discuss the situation in the Middle East. The Quartet also met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdelrahman al-Khatib, and Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal to exchange views on regional issues.

The Quartet expressed its appreciation for the service of James Wolfensohn as Quartet Special Envoy for Gaza Disengagement, and noted his central role in the conclusion of the Agreement on Movement and Access and the promulgation of an agenda for Palestinian economic recovery.

The Quartet underscored its continued commitment to the principles of partnership and negotiation leading to a two-State solution, as embodied in the Road Map. A lack of action by the parties in certain key areas has stalled progress on the Road Map. The Quartet underscored the need for both parties to avoid actions which could prejudice final status issues or undermine progress toward this goal.

The Quartet reiterated its grave concern that the Palestinian Authority Government has so far failed to commit itself to the principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Road Map. The Quartet noted the absence of a commitment to these principles has inevitably impacted direct assistance to that Government and expressed its deep concern about the consequences for the Palestinian people. The donor members noted their willingness to work toward the restoration of international assistance to the Palestinian Authority Government once it has committed to these principles.

The Quartet discussed the current situation in Israel and the West Bank, and Gaza. It condemned the Palestinian Authority Government's failure to take action against terrorism and the justification of the 17 April suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. The Quartet urged it to act decisively against terrorism and bring an end to violence. The Quartet noted that President Abbas condemned the 17 April attack as he has consistently condemned all acts of terrorism in the past.

The Quartet expressed its concern over Israeli military operations that result in the loss of innocent life. The Quartet calls for restraint and asks Israel to bear in mind the potential consequences of its actions for the population. The Quartet expressed its concern about settlement expansion. It continues to note with concern the route of the barrier, particularly as it results in the confiscation of Palestinian land and cuts off the movement of people and goods. The Quartet reiterated the importance of both parties avoiding unilateral measures, which prejudice final status issues.

The Quartet discussed the humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza. It expressed serious concern about deteriorating conditions, particularly in Gaza. The Quartet expressed concern about delivery of humanitarian assistance, economic life, social cohesion, and Palestinian institutions. The Quartet reiterated its support for assistance directed to help meet the basic human needs of the Palestinian people and promotion of Palestinian democracy and civil society, and called upon the international community to respond urgently to assistance requests by international organizations, especially UN agencies, active in the West Bank and Gaza. The Quartet urged both parties to take concrete steps to implement their obligations under the Agreement on Movement and Access.

Recalling its commitment of 30 January that it is mindful of the needs of the Palestinian people, the Quartet expressed its willingness to endorse a temporary international mechanism that is limited in scope and duration, operates with full transparency and accountability, and ensures direct delivery of assistance to the Palestinian people. If these criteria can be met, the operation of the temporary international mechanism should begin as soon as possible and be reviewed after three months to determine whether it should continue. The Quartet welcomed the offer of the European Union to develop and propose such a mechanism. It invites other donors and international organizations to consider participation in such a mechanism. It urged Israel in parallel to take steps to improve the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people. The Quartet reiterates that the Palestinian Authority Government must fulfil its responsibilities with respect to basic human needs, including health services, as well as for proper fiscal management and provision of services.

The Quartet welcomed Prime Minister Olmert's call for negotiations with a Palestinian partner committed to the principles of the Road Map, as the most stable and desired basis for the political process. The Quartet welcomed President Abbas' continued commitment to a platform of peace. The Quartet is encouraged by these statements of intent.

Finally, the Quartet reaffirmed its commitment to its previous statements and to a just, comprehensive, and lasting settlement to the conflict based upon UN Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 1397 and 1515. The Quartet will remain seized of the matter.

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