

New York, 24 March 2010 - Secretary-General's briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Question of Palestine

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome this opportunity to brief the Security Council at this important juncture in our work for peace in the Middle East.

As you know, I have just returned from visiting Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, following the meeting of the Quartet in Moscow last Friday.

Before the Quartet meeting, I had a series of bilateral meetings with the Russian leadership, including President Medvedev and Foreign Minister Lavrov. I thanked Russia for its enhanced contribution to the United Nations agenda and activities, and we discussed the UN-Russia partnership on regional and global issues.

Also in Moscow, I signed a joint declaration with the Collective Security Treaty Organization aimed at strengthening cooperation in counterterrorism, drug trafficking, conflict prevention and other areas.

Tomorrow I depart for Sirte, Libya, to attend the Summit of the League of Arab States.

These missions take place amid continuing efforts to start Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks and a crisis of confidence spurred by the announcement by Israel of its intention to advance planning for the construction of 1,600 new settlement units in East Jerusalem.

The statement issued by the Quartet in Moscow reflected strong agreement on all main points.

First, Quartet members stressed the need for proximity talks to move ahead, and to become direct negotiations as soon as possible, with the goal of resolving all final status issues within 24 months.

Second, the Quartet emphasized that the parties should respect the conditions which made proximity talks possible, and act in accordance with international law and the Roadmap.

This includes a freeze of all settlement activity by Israel and fulfillment of security obligations by the Palestinians. The Quartet condemned the recent Israeli settlement announcement, reaffirmed the international position on Jerusalem, and agreed to closely monitor developments and keep under consideration any additional measures that may be necessary. Both sides were urged to refrain from provocative actions and inflammatory rhetoric.

Third, the Quartet expressed strong support for the Palestinian Authority's state-building agenda, launched in August last year with the goal of completing preparations for statehood in 24 months.

Fourth, the Quartet agreed on the need for an immediate easing of the closure affecting Gaza, and restated its commitment to a durable solution to the issues of security, unity and crossings, as envisaged in Security Council resolution 1860.

Mr. President,

I carried these important messages to the Israeli and Palestinian leaders and their publics.

In Ramallah, I met Prime Minister Fayyad and other senior figures. President Abbas was in Jordan recuperating from his recent fall, so I will meet him in Sirte.

I was strongly assured of President Abbas's commitment to proximity talks and a negotiated settlement on all core issues. Concern was expressed at changing facts on the ground, which prejudice the outcome of negotiations and undermine trust. The importance of Israel meeting its Roadmap obligations was stressed, including to freeze settlements, remove outposts, and re-open Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem.

The Palestinian authorities emphasized their wish to see a greater Quartet role in defining the endgame, given the desire to avoid past failures. Indirect talks were viewed as a vehicle to achieve progress on substantive core issues, in advance of a direct phase of final negotiations.

Prime Minister Fayyad took me to the Masyoun lookout point, on the border between Area A, which is under Palestinian administration, and Area C, which is under Israeli control. The lookout and a subsequent briefing I received make the Palestinian dilemma quite clear.

Palestinians need to be able to use more of their land -- for housing, agriculture, industry, water, construction materials and more. Yet they have limited access to Area C and no role in zoning. These restrictions prevent Palestinian economic and social development. I could also see the Barrier snaking through the West Bank.

I have strongly advised the Israeli authorities, while addressing their security concerns, to find a way to further ease the constraints that restrict Palestinian life and risk undermining the eventual viability of a Palestinian state.

Despite these difficulties, the Palestinian Authority is making important gains, becoming more transparent, accountable and effective. I was impressed by the efficiency of the security services and the signs of economic activity.

I was also impressed by the Palestinian determination to build positive facts from the ground up as a complement to the political process. Palestinian statehood must become an emerging reality, based on legitimate Palestinian rights, positive Palestinian actions, and a negotiated political settlement.

I confirmed to the Prime Minister the determination of the United Nations country team to continue and expand its support for these state-building efforts. International support remains crucial.

It was also brought to my attention that almost all recent disturbances between Israelis and Palestinians have taken place in areas where Israeli forces are present in Palestinian-populated areas.

I received appeals for an end to incursions, a further removal of checkpoints, and for more responsibility to be given to Palestinian Authority security forces in Palestinian-populated areas.

We discussed the essential Palestinian commitment to non-violence, and legitimate protest in that context. I expressed my concern about Palestinian prisoners, and publicly urged Israel to release prisoners as called for by the Palestinian Authority.

I was deeply dismayed that four Palestinians below the age of twenty were shot and killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank during my visit. Israeli Defence Minister Barak assured me that Israel would investigate these incidents. [I made publicly clear my condemnation of all such violence and the importance of protecting civilians.]

I also met with representatives of two families who were evicted from their homes. I made it clear that all settlement activity is illegal, and that inserting settlers into Palestinian communities in Jerusalem is particularly troubling. This leads to tensions and undermines prospects for addressing the final status of Jerusalem. Yesterday's announcement that final approval has been given to build 20 settlement units in Sheikh Jarrah is unacceptable.

Mr. President,

In Gaza, I drove nearly a full circuit of the strip. I saw destroyed houses and poverty; formerly functioning industrial zones and vast greenhouses lying in ruin; and a visible security presence by the de facto authorities.

In Khan Younis, I met with a number of civil society and business leaders.

They stressed that the closure of Gaza was morally unacceptable and counter-productive, and I agree with them. "We are surviving, not living", one said.

I was briefed by UN staff and by Gazans on the perilous state of the water and sanitation situation; on difficulties in every sector, from fishing and agriculture to health care and manufacturing; and on the limitations on travel and basic freedoms caused by the closure.

What struck me most were the children, and what worries me most is their future. More than half of Gaza's population is under 18 years old, and population growth rates are high.

UNRWA schools are a symbol of the commitment of the international community to ensure that Palestinian youth receive an education, as is their right. We need to build more schools, but lack the materials.

The only cement available in substantial quantities in Gaza today is smuggled in through tunnels. Those who work with smugglers can build. But the United Nations and others who use legitimate products cannot.

I was pleased to be able to announce in Khan Younis that, after three years of closure, the Israeli Government has now approved the entry of material required to complete 151 housing units in Khan Younis, carry out a water and sanitation project in Tel el Sultan, and repair the El Bader flour mill. Israel has also agreed to expand the list of imports to include aluminum and wood.

I welcomed this decision, but would like to emphasize that this is only a first and very modest step. One hundred and fifty-one units amount to far less than 1 per cent of the needs in the shelter sector alone, to say nothing of other needs. I have informed Israel that we will come back with more far-reaching proposals.

A rocket fired from Gaza into Israel by radical elements a few days before my visit killed a civilian, and during my visit to the region there were further rocket-firings. While in Gaza I condemned rocket fire and made a public appeal for non-violence and Palestinian unity.

Mr. President,

In Israel, I met with President Peres, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defence Minister Barak and other senior officials.

My interlocutors stressed that there was no alternative to direct talks if core issues are to be resolved.

They stressed the positive steps taken by Israel, including the call for direct negotiations, the removal of obstacles to movement, the government's commitment to a two-state solution, and the policy of partial settlement restraint. However, the Prime Minister reiterated that Israel would not freeze construction in settlements in East Jerusalem.

I stressed the need for all parties to do everything possible to facilitate proximity talks.

My Israeli interlocutors acknowledged significant progress in the West Bank by the Palestinian Authority, and their readiness to do more to enable progress, while also expressing the concern that peaceful protest not turn violent, and the importance of restraint on both sides.

I discussed Gaza with all my interlocutors. I called once again for the closure policy to be changed.

I met the parents of Corporal Shalit, who pointed out that their son had been denied the basic right of any prisoner: that of third party visits.

My interlocutors expressed Israel's frustration with the situation in south Lebanon, where Israel believes that Hezbollah is rearming at an alarming rate. I understand Israel's legitimate security concerns and the importance of addressing them, along with the concerns of all parties, as efforts continue to achieve the implementation of UN resolutions on Lebanon. At the same time, I conveyed my belief that a genuine and viable peace process, leading to the end of the Arab-Israel conflict as envisaged in other resolutions of this Council, is the key to long-term stability in the region.

The Israeli Government also raised another regional matter: the Iranian nuclear issue. I share and appreciate Israel's concerns. I noted that there is an international consensus to address this question, and a crucial diplomatic process under way. I emphasized the need to approach the matter in this context.

Mr. President,

At the Arab League Summit in Sirte, I will brief Arab leaders about the Quartet meeting and my visit to the region. I will urge them to support the proximity talks. It is crucial for the Arab countries to help create a favorable atmosphere in which the talks can succeed.

Let me close by stressing four key messages that emerged from my visit:

First, there is no alternative to negotiations for a comprehensive and just resolution of the conflict, and no alternative to addressing all the core issues for a two-State solution. Negotiations must start without delay.

Second, we must not let negotiations be disrupted by provocations. No doubt there will be tests. The parties themselves must take steps to meet obligations and build trust. Extremists and spoilers must see that the parties are determined to press ahead.

Third, the situation on the ground is crucial. There have been too many negative facts being created on the ground, and these need to stop. We need more positive facts such as calm and restraint, reconstruction in Gaza, and transformative change in the West Bank.

Fourth, while peace is in the hands of the parties themselves, the international community must continue to play a crucial role -- supportive, insistent and at times, catalytic.

I felt a strong consensus on the way forward in Moscow, and a determination to review progress collectively, and to work more closely with both parties and the region, including the Arab League. Regional support for the peace effort, and a regional approach to peace as a whole, are both crucial. I will carry these messages to Sirte, Libya.

Let me assure you of my commitment, and that of the United Nations as a whole, to this agenda.

Thank you very much for your attention.