

New York, 11 May 2009 - Secretary-General's remarks to the Ministerial Meeting of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East

Mr. President,

The Council meets at the outset of a very important few weeks for the cause of peace in the Middle East. In this regard, I welcome and appreciate the participation of many distinguished ministers at this time and I appreciate the initiative of the Russian presidency.

After the inconclusive results of last year's negotiations, and the bloodshed in Gaza, the last three months witnessed almost no progress on the two key resolutions – 1850 and 1860 – recently adopted by this Council. I hope that your meeting today will help provide direction and momentum.

In the period ahead, US President Obama will host the Israeli and Palestinian leaders and key regional parties in Washington. I expect the Quartet to meet soon, and to consult closely with members of the League of Arab States. The challenge is to begin implementing transformative changes on the ground; and to kick-start a renewed and irreversible drive to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. The ultimate objective remains the emergence of an independent democratic and viable Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace and security with Israel and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the region.

Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is fundamental for the well-being of both peoples, the region and the world. This Council, the Quartet, states in the region, the international community as a whole and myself as the Secretary General must each play our full role. Security Council resolutions, previous agreements and obligations, and the Arab Peace Initiative give us the framework we need. We should be as determined as we are patient, as insistent as we are supportive, as principled as we are empathetic to the very real concerns of both parties. The parties need confidence that the process will address their vital interests. For that, they need confidence that commitments made will be commitments monitored and commitments kept.

In this regard, I believe there is a deep crisis of confidence among ordinary people on the ground, and for good reason. Palestinians continue to see unacceptable unilateral actions in East Jerusalem and the remainder of the West Bank – house demolitions, intensified settlement activity, settler violence, and oppressive movement restrictions due to permits, checkpoints, and the barrier, which are intimately connected to settlements. The time has come for Israel to fundamentally change its policies in this regard as it has repeatedly promised to do, but not yet done. Action on the ground, together with a genuine readiness to negotiate on all core issues, including Jerusalem, borders and refugees, based on Israel's existing commitments, will be the true tests of Israel's commitment to the two State solution.

Ordinary Israelis continue to seek reassurance that a future Palestinian state will guarantee their right to live in peace and security. In this respect, indiscriminate rocket attacks that have caused loss of life, civilian suffering and damage to property in Israel are not only deeply unacceptable, but also totally counterproductive, and must cease. The Palestinian Authority must continue its efforts to consolidate progress in developing and deploying an effective security structure and the functioning institutions of a future State – work which Israel must facilitate. For its part, Israel should refrain from using excessive force that kills and injures civilians, as it did during the recent conflict in Gaza with such devastating consequences. Firm and full respect for international humanitarian law by all parties is indispensable.

The beginning of Palestinian self-empowerment has been a key achievement of last year's efforts, and must not be imperiled by the financial crisis facing the Palestinian Authority. I appeal to donors, including in the region, urgently to meet unfulfilled commitments, including for budget support and Gaza's reconstruction.

I remain extremely worried about the situation in and around Gaza, with internal Palestinian divisions and Israeli-Hamas tensions trapping the civilian population in a vortex of hopelessness. The United Nations continues to fully support Egypt's efforts to achieve reconciliation among Palestinian groups and is ready to engage a government that unites Gaza and the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. As an interim measure, we would also welcome the establishment of practical mechanisms that could help Palestinians in Gaza focus on reconstruction, security issues and preparations for elections.

Mr. President,

I am convinced that the policy of continued closure of the Gaza Strip does not weaken Israel's adversaries in Gaza, but does untold damage to the fabric of civilian life. Nearly four months after the conflict, in which 3,800 houses and 2 health care centres were destroyed, and 34,000 homes, 15 hospitals, 41 health care centres and 282 schools sustained varying degrees of damage, we cannot get anything beyond food and medicine into Gaza to assist a population that had been in the midst of a war zone. This is completely unacceptable.

I call on Israel to respond positively to repeated calls to allow glass, cement and building materials into Gaza. In the aftermath of the war, and the level of human suffering now evident on the ground, I seek the support of all members of this Council and the Quartet for the United Nations efforts in Gaza. We are ready to work with local businessmen to help start action to repair and rebuild houses, schools and clinics. I can assure all of you that we will continue to ensure the full integrity of programmes and projects.

Indeed, the provisions of Security Council resolution 1860 must be fulfilled – a durable and fully respected ceasefire, prevention of the illicit supply of weapons to Gaza; reopening of the crossings in accordance with the Agreement on Movement and Access; and progress on Palestinian reconciliation under the legitimate Palestinian Authority.

Efforts on these elements, as well as a prisoner exchange, remains the only way of meaningfully altering the dynamics on the ground for the better.

Finally, Mr. President, let me emphasize the important regional context. Arab countries have reaffirmed their commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative, which offers Israel the opportunity for acceptance and security within the region on the basis of land for peace. This remains a key framework around which a comprehensive approach to peace can and must be built. I continue to believe strongly in the potential for activating the regional tracks of the peace process, alongside a rejuvenated Palestinian track, including between Israel and Syria, on the basis of land for peace. I support the convening of an international conference in Moscow. I also look to Arab and regional countries to play a positive role regarding the internal Palestinian situation by urging all parties to turn away from violence and weapons acquisition, and towards reunification under one Palestinian Authority committed to PLO principles – and, indeed, the Arab Peace Initiative itself.

Mr. President,

Like a bicycle that falls over when left at a standstill, the situation on the ground could easily deteriorate unless proper direction is given and real momentum is quickly generated. Violence and terror will not bring the Palestinians statehood and dignity, and settlement expansion and closure will not bring Israel security or peace. And no two State solution can be reached if the situation between Gaza and southern Israel continues on its present destructive course, or if Palestinians remain permanently divided.

I call on the parties to honour all existing agreements and previous commitments and pursue an irreversible effort towards the two State solution, including by fully implementing commitments on the ground. I also believe the international community's credibility is at stake. We are a long way from where we hoped to be when we embarked on a fresh push for peace less than two years ago. However, I take heart that there is a deep consensus about the scale of the challenge and the importance of meeting it. Let us move forward with confidence and resolve, knowing that if we rise to our responsibilities, we will help the parties rise to theirs too.

Thank you, Mr. President.