

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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ADDRESS TO THE ARAB ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND DEVELOPMENT SUMMIT

Kuwait, 19 January 2009

Your Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah,
Your Majesties,
Distinguished Heads of State and Government,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and privilege to be here in Kuwait for this Arab Economic, Social and Development Summit. I congratulate the Amir of Kuwait for hosting this Economic Summit. I would like to express my gratitude to His Highness the Amir of Kuwait for his hospitality and commitment to the United Nations. I also thank Egypt for co-hosting this summit, and Mr. Amre Moussa, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, for his role in making this gathering possible.

I must tell you that I join you here today with strong feelings of grief, of relief, and of determination regarding the situation in Gaza.

I feel grief at the death and injury of thousands of civilians in the past 22 days. The loss of life and scale of trauma has been unbearable.

I am relieved that, early yesterday Israel announced a cessation of hostilities in Gaza and that later Hamas, too, announced a temporary ceasefire.

I also feel determination to do all possible to ensure that immediate steps are taken to bring relief to the people of Gaza, and to embark without delay on the process of recovery, rebuilding and reconstruction.

I will dispatch this week a high-level humanitarian and early recovery assessment mission to Gaza. Within ten days of this mission, I will launch a Flash Humanitarian Appeal. Already, I have directed UN staff to begin the assessment process.

UNRWA's more than 17,000 Palestinian national staff will be a backbone of these efforts. I salute their courageous and tireless efforts under most difficult conditions – they deserve our utmost respect.

The key challenge before the leaders gathered here today is to do all possible to make sure that this tragedy does not occur again. I look to President Mubarak to continue his vital efforts to ensure that a durable and sustainable ceasefire is quickly put in place and I thank him and the many other Arab leaders I have worked with this last week. And I look to you all to come together to prevent further violence, help the people of Gaza in this hour of desperate need, and restore stability.

The first step is a durable ceasefire. Hamas must cease firing rockets. Israel must withdraw its troops from Gaza.

A durable ceasefire needs an open functioning system for the crossings in and out of Gaza, one that will immediately allow full access for humanitarian goods and personnel, and that will also ensure that we return, sooner rather than later, to the conditions reached in the Agreement on Movement and Access.

As well, the Palestinians themselves must face the challenge of reconciliation, and work to achieve a unified government under the leadership of President Abbas within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. I call on all Arab leaders to unite and support this endeavour. We cannot rebuild Gaza without Palestinian unity.

A true end to violence, and lasting security for both Palestinians and Israelis, will only come through a just and comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This effort must have at its centre the implementation of Security Council resolutions and the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative. The occupation that began in 1967 must end.

We do not need new plans and processes. We have the tools we need. We need only political will and action. Peace has remained an elusive goal for far too long.

Your Majesties, Excellencies,

Peace would be a tremendous foundation for economic and social progress throughout the region – the very subject of this timely and important Summit.

The United Nations is strongly committed to development in the Arab world. We want to do our part to ensure that every child in the region can live up to his or her potential; that every family can live in security and dignity; that every state has the institutions and capacity to provide for the prosperity and well-being of its people.

That is our commitment to you. That is what thousands of UN staff are doing, from Morocco to Oman, from Syria to Sudan. Peacekeepers, UN agency staff, human rights experts, and development specialists of every stripe are working alongside your own people.

Many Arab states have made significant strides towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Your region is one of great economic diversity and progress towards the MDGs has been distributed unevenly.

However, the region's achievements in the educational sector have not yet translated into significantly greater economic and political participation of women. Women's representation in Arab parliaments remains among the lowest in the world. And violence against women and girls persists.

The extreme volatility in commodity prices is undermining confidence and making it hard to plan for the future.

Climate change heralds an even more troubling context for resource management. And rapid urbanization continues to pose environmental and socio-economic challenges.

Sadly, armed conflict continues to take a terrible toll, not just in lost lives but in lost development. The Arab world is home to some of the largest refugee populations in the world. In Lebanon and Jordan, refugees make up 10 per cent or more of the population, and in Syria approximately 8 per cent. In Iraq and in Somalia, one of every ten people is internally displaced.

Excellencies, Distinguished Heads of States,

I offer this list of challenges not to increase our despair, but to take honest measure of the road ahead. And let me stress: no one should ever underestimate the resilience and determination of the Arab people or the great opportunities that exist in the region.

The Arab region possesses important human and material resources. If this wealth is mobilized now, both the region and the global economy would benefit.

Excellencies,

I see several promising ways forward.

First, it is important to strengthen regional cooperation and integration. Many of the region's most pressing challenges, from migration to managing water resources, require cross-boundary solutions. Regional cooperation is your strength.

Second, Government policies and spending priorities should be more strongly oriented toward sustainable and equitable development. Investing in people will make the economic engine work.

Third, the private sector and civil society should be fully engaged. Public-private partnerships have great potential to help meet the needs of the poor. I am pleased that the role of the private sector will be discussed during this Summit, and hope that the suggestions of civil society are also heard.

Fourth, ensuring greater access to information and communication technologies will be crucial.

And fifth, I urge Governments to do more to open greater space for public participation and for various forms of democratic practice. All citizens of the region yearn for more opportunities to be active participants in their societies.

Your Majesties, Your Highnesses, Distinguished Heads of States, Ladies and Gentlemen,

From the global economic crisis to violence in Gaza and elsewhere in this region, we can all sense the perils of our current passage. The United Nations is uniquely positioned to promote global cooperation for global progress. And we will continue to be your partner in your efforts to achieve peace and development for the entire Arab world. I look forward to working with you in that endeavour.

Thank you very much.