

31 March 2003

Secretary-General's remarks to a delegation of visiting Palestinian journalists (unofficial transcript)

Let me first of all say how delighted I am to see all of you here at UN Headquarters. You come here at a critical time when this house has been consumed by questions of war and peace, and I am sure that you are as frustrated and as disappointed as all of us in this building are that we were not able to resolve the Iraq crisis peacefully through inspection.

I think, as you know, we've never had the kind of activity and attempts Member States made to find a way forward. To have three ministerial meetings in about a month on one topic demonstrates the concern and the attempt leaders and members of the [Security] Council made to try and seek a common position, and, hopefully, a peaceful one.

The other interesting thing about this crisis is also the fact that the peoples around the world joined in, pleading for a peaceful settlement, insisting on the role of the UN, and to have this many people out there demonstrating for peace –and I think it was [Judge] Garzon of Spain who referred to it as the “people's revolution for peace,” which was quite remarkable –and the attention they focused on the UN is an indication that, for governments and peoples around the world, what happens in the Security Council is important, and they expect a lot of the Council, which also puts quite a lot of challenge on us.

Unfortunately, the efforts to find a common position failed and now we have a war in Iraq. A war in Iraq that is worrying –I have always said that war is a human catastrophe. And we are seeing the consequences of war, with casualties on all sides, with women and children caught in the middle. Our own planning for humanitarian purposes has indicated that there could be many millions of people affected, depending on what happens. I think you're beginning to see some of the difficult humanitarian situations in the cities like Basra and other cities that may be under siege.

Last week, the Security Council approved a resolution that would allow us to resume the oil-for-food programme. I was grateful for that resolution, and we are organising ourselves, all the UN agencies, to resume our work as soon as practicable. I have stated quite clearly, in the Council and publicly, that the responsibility for the welfare of the people in times of war remains with the belligerents and, for any area that is occupied, it is the occupying power that has responsibility to ensure the welfare of the population. But we, the UN and the international system, will do our best, to assist the people. I think the Iraqi people, who have gone through so many crises in the past, so many wars, need our help.

Obviously, most of us had hoped that the inspections would have been given more time and that the inspectors would have been able to do their work, and we would have done this thing peacefully, but that was not to be. And that was also one of the reasons why we pulled out the UN staff. I think this is something maybe I should say a word about. There has been some concern; some people believe that if we had not pulled out the inspectors and the UN staff, there would not have been war. War did not come because these people were pulled out. They were pulled out because of the war. We have a humanitarian situation because of the war. In fact, we left on Tuesday, and war was declared on Wednesday. Most embassies had already left; we were among the last to leave. I have responsibility for all the staff, and the UN procedures [are] such that when you get to these situations, you need to evacuate them and not leave them in harm's way. But let me assure you, they will go back as soon as it is practicable.

I think maybe I should turn to your own issue. Everybody these days talks about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I am very happy that recently [U.S.] President [George W.] Bush has reasserted that he intends to press ahead with the Roadmap. [British] Prime Minister [Tony] Blair, who came to see me after he was in Washington, also agrees that we should press ahead with the Roadmap as soon as possible. I would hope that now that Abu Mazen has been appointed Prime Minister, the Roadmap will be released and the parties can sit at the table to discuss its implementation.

You'll notice that the Roadmap makes a difference in the sense that we demand parallel steps from both parties. The sequential approach of the past, in my judgment, has not worked. And so there will be parallel demands and performance from both parties and it also envisages a

monitoring mechanism to ensure that both parties are performing, as indicated in the plan that we hope they will accept.

I know this issue poses a particularly difficult problem for you and the region. We've often been accused of double standards. Given the war in Iraq, and the UN insistence that all resolutions should be implemented, you often think that, if all resolutions should be implemented, it should be done across the board. I know this is a question that you've all always raised, and I understand that in this particular period, the question takes on even a more urgent tone. But I am particularly happy that the Quartet is determined to move ahead with the plan, and I hope that we can work with your government, and also with the Israelis.

The last thing I should say is that, as you may recall, the Israeli Foreign Minister [Silvan Shalom] came to see me here last week, and we did discuss the issue of the Roadmap. I also raised with him the tragic humanitarian situation on the ground, which I appealed to his government to take steps to ensure that we can ease the suffering, and particularly to take some steps on the closures, which prevent people from leading normal economic lives and moving around.

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