

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

REMARKS TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

New York, 26 January 2016

Sadly, 2016 has begun much like 2015 ended – with unacceptable levels of violence and a polarized public discourse across the spectrum in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory.

Stabbings, vehicle attacks, and shootings by Palestinians targeting Israeli civilians – all of which I condemn -- and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces, have continued to claim lives.

But security measures alone will not stop the violence. They cannot address the profound sense of alienation and despair driving some Palestinians – especially young people.

The full force of the law must be brought to bear on all those committing crimes – with a system of justice applied equally for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Palestinian frustration is growing under the weight of a half century of occupation and the paralysis of the peace process.

Some have taken me to task for pointing out this indisputable truth.

Yet, as oppressed peoples have demonstrated throughout the ages, it is human nature to react to occupation, which often serves as a potent incubator of hate and extremism.

So-called facts on the ground in the occupied West Bank are steadily chipping away the viability of a Palestinian state and the ability of Palestinian people to live in dignity.

In an effort to overcome the political impasse, Quartet Envoys met Israeli and Palestinian officials on 17 December last year.

They reiterated the urgent need for significant steps, in line with previous agreements, to strengthen Palestinian institutions, security and economic prospects while addressing Israel's security concerns.

Changing Israeli policies is central to advancing this goal, particularly in Israeli-controlled Area C, which comprises 61 percent of West Bank territory and is home to some 300,000 Palestinians.

Approvals of master plans for Palestinian sectors of Area C would allow for much needed growth in these areas and prevent demolitions.

Progress towards peace requires a freeze of Israel's settlement enterprise.

Continued settlement activities are an affront to the Palestinian people and to the international community. They rightly raise fundamental questions about Israel's commitment to a two-state solution.

I am deeply troubled by reports today that the Israeli Government has approved plans for over 150 new

homes in illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank.

This is combined with its announcement last week declaring 370 acres in the West Bank, south of Jericho, as so-called "state land". These provocative acts are bound to increase the growth of settler populations, further heighten tensions and undermine any prospects for a political road ahead.

I urge the Israeli Government not to use a recent decision by the Israeli High Court affirming a large tract of land south of Bethlehem as state land to advance settlement activities.

The demolitions of Palestinian homes in Area C of the occupied West Bank continue. So do the decades-long difficulties of Palestinians to obtain building permits.

The Bedouin community, in particular, is paying a heavy price. I reiterate the UN's call for an immediate end to Israeli plans to forcibly transfer Bedouin communities currently living within the occupied Palestinian territory in the Jerusalem area.

At the same time, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains perilous.

Eighteen months after the end of hostilities, conditions have not significantly improved. I condemn the continuing rocket fire into Israel from militant groups in Gaza.

Chronic security and governance challenges and funding shortages have slowed the pace of reconstruction. Much work remains to be done. Meanwhile, the people of Gaza face dire unemployment, water and electricity needs.

Meeting these concerns must be a top priority. However none of this can be accomplished without critical support from donors, the fulfilment of pledges from the Cairo Conference, as well as the full return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza.

I continue to strongly believe that conditions in Gaza pose a severe threat to long-term peace and security in the region.

Palestinians must also demonstrate commitment to addressing the divisions among Palestinians themselves.

I strongly urge the Palestinian factions to advance genuine Palestinian unity on the basis of democracy and the PLO principles.

Reconciliation is critical in order to reunite the West Bank and Gaza under a single legitimate Palestinian authority.

Healing Palestinian divisions is also critical so that Palestinians can instead focus their energies on establishing a stable state as part of a negotiated two-state solution.

Genuine unity will also improve the Palestinian Government's ability to meet pressing economic problems, which are adding to the frustration and anger driving Palestinian violence.

The international community also has a responsibility – not least by responding generously to UNRWA's recent emergency appeal of over \$400 million to support vulnerable Palestinians.

And as we continue to uphold the right of Palestinians to self-determination, let us be equally firm that incitement has no place, and that questioning the right of Israel to exist cannot be tolerated.

In an already tense regional environment, it is imperative to promote and consolidate stability wherever possible.

In Lebanon, I urge all political leaders to work with Prime Minister Tammam Salam and to intensify efforts to resolve the presidential crisis.

The Syria Donors Conference on 4 February in London will be an important opportunity to mobilize support. This must include meeting neighbouring countries huge humanitarian, infrastructure and stabilization needs in light of the refugee crisis. We are all aware of the strains on Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

I welcome the resumption of calm along the Blue Line and in UNIFIL's area of operations following the serious incidents of 20 December and 4 January.

All parties have a responsibility to uphold the cessation of hostilities and to ensure full respect for Security Council resolution 1701.

On the Golan, it remains critical that parties to the Disengagement Agreement maintain liaison with UNDOF. They must refrain from actions that could escalate the situation across the ceasefire line.

Some may say the current volatility across the region makes it too risky to seek peace. I say the greater peril is not seeking a solution to the Palestinian question.

Some say the two sides are entrenched in their respective positions. I say that we must not succumb to passivity, resignation or hopelessness that a comprehensive resolution of the conflict is not achievable.

A lasting agreement will require difficult compromises by both the Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Yes -- but what are the alternatives?

The continuing deadly wave of terror attacks and killings?

The possible financial collapse of the Palestinian Government?

Ever greater isolation of the Israeli Government?

A further deterioration of humanitarian conditions in Gaza and the agonizing build-up to another terrible war?

A hollowing of the moral foundation of both Israeli and Palestinian societies alike, a creeping moral blindness that ignores the suffering – and indeed the humanity -- of one's neighbour?

More unilateral acts by each side, intentionally designed to pre-empt negotiations and provoke the other side?

The parties must act – and act now -- to prevent the two-state solution from slipping away forever.

[Upholding] and implementing this vision – two states living side-by-side in peace and security - offers the only means by which Israel could retain both its Jewish majority and democratic status.

As the wider Middle East continues to be gripped by a relentless wave of extremist terror, Israelis and Palestinians have an opportunity to restore hope to a region torn apart by intolerance and cruelty. I urge them to accept this historic challenge in the mutual interest of peace.

The support of regional partners in this pursuit is essential. The Arab Peace Initiative provides a valuable basis for broader support.

And finally, the whole international community must be ever more committed to actively help Palestinians and Israelis to rebuild trust and achieve an enduring peace before it is too late.

Thank you. Muchas gracias.