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UNITED NATIONS MEETING ON QUESTION OF PALESTINE OPENS IN NICOSIA

Secretary-General Says Leaders Must Bring Their People Back from Edge of Abyss

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

NICOSIA, 16 April -- The core problems of occupation, violence including terrorism, and economic distress must be solved before the conflict in the Middle East could come to an end, Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the opening session of the United Nations International Meeting in Support of Middle East Peace, in Nicosia today.

In a statement read out by the Deputy Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Karen Koning AbuZayd, the Secretary-General said that military action would not bring a solution. Both Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat were duty-bound to bring their people back from the edge of the abyss. The legitimate security concerns of Israel and the legitimate political aspirations of the Palestinians should be guaranteed, but guarantees could not be provided in the absence of third-party mechanisms on the ground.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Cyprus, Ioannis Kasoulides, said the most important lesson that could be drawn from the recent upsurge of violence was the impact of security concerns on the peace process, and the realization that without political negotiations offering the prospect of an end to the occupation and the creation of a viable, independent Palestinian State, the hopes for a secure Middle East were dim and distant.

He urged Israel to withdraw from the areas occupied by its troops earlier this month and to desist from extrajudicial executions, attacks on medical and humanitarian institutions and personnel and settlement activities. He expressed full sympathy to President Yasser Arafat, and called on Israel to lift the siege of the Palestinian Authority's headquarters in Ramallah. The solution of the Middle East problem would bring stability to the region, ensure normal relations and end the violence.

The Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Louis Papa Fall, said it was of paramount importance to address the issue of the intensifying attacks on the Palestinian Authority, its institutions and leadership. The international community should not allow this to happen and should stand up for the democratically elected and internationally

recognized Palestinian leadership. Expressing concern at the rapid disintegration of the Palestinian economy resulting from restrictive Israeli policies, he said only a normalization of the situation could bring about a long-term solution.

The Committee joined the world community's condemnation of the attacks on civilians, regardless of the provenance of such attacks, he said. The heart of the question of Palestine was the illegal occupation by Israel, the illegal settlement activity and other illegal actions of the occupying Power. The international community had a moral obligation to help the parties out of the present crisis and back to the negotiating table. The United Nations should maintain its permanent responsibility towards all aspects of the question of Palestine until it was resolved in accordance with international legitimacy, and until all the rights of the Palestinian people were fully realized.

The two-day meeting, convened by the Palestinian Rights Committee, will focus on promoting support for international efforts to contain the current crisis and restoring the political process. In three plenaries, panel experts will assess the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, review various initiatives of the United Nations system aimed at restoring the dialogue, and discuss the urgency of addressing the root causes of the conflict.

Nabil Shaath, Minister for Planning and International Cooperation, Palestinian Authority, said that yesterday on CNN, Ariel Sharon had defended his actions in Palestine, denying that Israel had ever occupied the territories. Instead, Israel had liberated its territories from the Arabs in 1948. When one spoke of ethnic cleansing, one should look at what the Israelis had done to Palestine. Mr. Sharon was the jury, judge and executioner, ordering summary executions despite Israel's lack of a death penalty.

The massacre at Jenin was a war crime, he declared, which the Israelis tried to cover up. Quiet diplomacy was useful, but sometimes it did not work. Sometimes one had to shout. Shouting would tell the Israeli people that Mr. Sharon did not have international acquiescence for his actions. There must be an international force of peacekeepers to provide protection, maintain a ceasefire and prevent reoccupation.

Statements were also made by representatives of the Organization of Islamic Conference and the League of Arab States.

Invited to the international meeting were eminent personalities, including high-level officials from the host Government and the Palestinian Authority and internationally renowned experts, including Israelis and Palestinians. Also invited were representatives of United Nations Members and observers, representatives of non-governmental and civil society organizations, as well as the media.

On 18 April, the Committee will also host a United Nations Non-Governmental Organization Meeting in Solidarity with the Palestinian People. That meeting will take up the role of civil society in time of crisis, and action by international civil society in support of the Palestinian people.

When the meeting convenes again this afternoon for plenary I, participants will hear presentation by experts on the occupied Palestinian territory since September 2000, including the security situation; the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention and the need for international protection of the Palestinian people; the impact of the conflict on the Palestinian Authority and its institutions; and the destruction of the Palestinian economy.

Opening Statements

IOANNIS KASOULIDES, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Cyprus, said Cyprus, as a neighbouring State with long bonds of friendship to the people of Palestine and Israel, was particularly pained by the seemingly never-ending cycle of violence that has tormented the two peoples over the years. The most important lesson that could be drawn from the recent upsurge of violence was the impact of security concerns on the peace process, and the realization that without political negotiations offering the prospect for an end to the occupation and the creation of a viable, independent Palestinian State, the prospect of a secure Middle East was dim and distant. Both parties must find the political courage to look for ways to achieve both aims. The international community should also stay engaged and find the appropriate means, as warranted by the situation and the behaviour of the parties, to put an end to the bloodshed and to return to the negotiating table.

He urged Israel to withdraw from the areas occupied by its troops earlier this month and to desist from extrajudicial executions, attacks on medical and humanitarian institutions and personnel and settlement activities. Israel should fully respect international humanitarian law and accept the dispatch of an international force with extended powers to reflect the new situation on the ground. He called for respect and the protection of all religious sites. Equally, his Government condemned any form of terrorism and urged an immediate end to that practice.

He expressed full sympathy to President Yasser Arafat, the legitimate leader and elected representative of the Palestinian people, with a vital role to play in the peace process. He called on Israel to lift the siege of the Palestinian Authority's headquarters in Ramallah and restore his freedom of movement. The solution of the Middle East conflict would bring stability to the region, ensure normal relations, and would put an end to the violence.

Secretary-General KOFI ANNAN said Middle East peace needed the support of the international community more urgently than ever. In a statement read out by his Special Representative, Deputy Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) KAREN KONING ABUZAYD, he said the past two weeks had seen the sharpest escalation of violence since the beginning of the current crisis. Dozens of Israelis had been killed by suicide bombs and hundreds of Palestinians had been killed in Israeli military operations in the West Bank. The latest Israeli operation in the Palestinian territory had greatly damaged the Palestinian Authority and its institutions, gravely weakening their capacity to provide basic services. Stating that international humanitarian principles and human rights standards had been widely flouted by Israeli forces, he said, "I am appalled by the humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza, and have demanded that Israel provide full access to humanitarian agencies and services."

Military action would not bring a solution, he said. The core problems of occupation, violence including terrorism, and economic distress remained and must be solved before the conflict could end. In March, the Arab Summit had endorsed a peace initiative charting a path for normal relations between Israel and the Arab world, in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from Arab territories occupied since June 1967 and the establishment of a Palestinian State with its capital in East Jerusalem. What was urgently needed was the political will for concrete and concerted action. Both Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat should exercise their leadership with an enhanced sense of responsibility and moral authority. They were duty-bound to bring their people back from the edge of the abyss.

Peace and security must be addressed in parallel, he said. The legitimate security concerns of Israel and the legitimate political aspirations of the

Palestinians should be guaranteed at the same time. However, guarantees could not be provided in the absence of third-party mechanisms on the ground. Such a mechanism could take the shape of international monitors of a ceasefire. No matter what form it took, it was essential to restoring mutual confidence and making progress on both the political and security fronts. The co-sponsors and other international parties should take coherent and forceful steps to restore the political process and assist the Israelis and Palestinians in reaching a fair and viable agreement.

PAPA LOUIS FALL, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said the large attendance at today's meeting illustrated the widespread concern over the situation in the Middle East, as the continuing crisis there affected the security not only of those directly involved, but also of the entire region and the world as a whole. It was important to address the issue of the intensifying attacks on the Palestinian Authority, its institutions and leadership. The life of Chairman Arafat, besieged in his Ramallah headquarters, has been in real danger. The international community should not allow this to happen and should stand up for the democratically elected and internationally recognized Palestinian leadership. The Committee was also concerned at the rapid disintegration of the Palestinian economy as a result of restrictive Israeli policies. While the Committee welcomed the economic support of donor States and organizations, only a normalization of the situation could bring about a long-term solution.

He said the Committee joined the world community's condemnation of attacks on civilians, regardless of the provenance of such attacks. In view of the rapidly disintegrating security situation, he supported the idea of a third-party presence in the occupied Palestinian territory. The heart of the question of Palestine was the illegal occupation by Israel, the illegal settlement activity and other illegal actions of the occupying Power.

Abysmal as the situation might have been, he said, there had been some positive developments: Security Council resolution 1397 (2002) of 12 March 2002 for the first time referred to a vision where two States, Israel and Palestine, lived side by side within secure and recognized borders; resolutions 1402 (2002) and 1403 (2002) called for the parties to reach a meaningful ceasefire and for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Palestinian cities; increased United States involvement towards achieving a ceasefire and paving the way for implementation of the Mitchell Committee recommendations; and the peace initiative by Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, which served as the basis for the Arab Peace Plan adopted in Beirut by the Arab League Summit. The promising dynamic created by those developments, however, was yet to be translated into tangible steps on the ground.

The international community had a moral obligation to help the parties out of the present crisis and back to the negotiating table in order to complete the historic journey they had embarked on in Madrid in 1991, he said. A great deal of work was required to bring about a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine. The United Nations should continue to maintain its permanent responsibility towards all aspects of the question of Palestine until it was resolved in a satisfactory manner in accordance with international legitimacy, and until all the rights of the Palestinian people were fully realized.

NABIL SHAATH, Minister for Planning and International Cooperation of the Palestinian Authority, said South Africa had solved its problems, Ireland was on its way, but Palestine still suffered. It was time to end the Israeli occupation. The systematic destruction of Palestinian institutions and infrastructure was devastating. The Israelis had destroyed the airport, a symbol of the almost existential need of Palestinians to fly without going through endless Israeli checks, and the harbour, along with Palestinian hopes for international trade.

After stealing the more advanced equipment, the Israelis had destroyed the statistics bureau, educational establishments and other institutions. The educational system had been destroyed. Destruction of the water system had nothing to do with security, but was meant to humiliate the Palestinian people and reflected Israeli greed to take over all the water, beyond the 82 per cent they had already confiscated.

He said the previous day Ariel Sharon had spent 38 minutes on CNN defending his actions, denying that Israel had occupied the territories. Instead, according to him, Israel had liberated its territories from the Arabs in 1948. There were 250,000 Palestinians in Israel today who had returned to their homes soon after being forced to flee in 1948, but by some peculiar form of logic, they were treated by the Israelis as " present absentees". If Jerusalemite Arabs did not pay real estate tax or medical fees, they lost their right of residence and were stripped of their identity cards. When one spoke of ethnic cleansing, one should look at what the Israelis had done to the Palestinians. Mr. Sharon did not want to withdraw. If he did not achieve his objectives, he would continue his actions. He was the jury, judge and executioner. Israel committed summary executions of Palestinians, despite the fact that it did not have the death penalty itself.

The massacre at Jenin was a war crime, he said. As in Sabra and Shatila, Sharon had said that reports of the massacre were a lie. The Israelis took six days to complete the massacre and six more days to clean up. Although one might accept that there were security concerns during the fighting, what was the reason for preventing people from going in during the six days of clean-up? Why did the Government seek a rabbinical position on whether it was acceptable to bury Palestinian bodies in Israel? Why did they take bodies away in refrigerated trucks?

He said quiet diplomacy was useful, but sometimes it did not work. Sometimes one had to shout. Fifty-nine per cent of Israelis said they would accept withdrawal and the Arab Peace Plan. Meanwhile, Sharon said he had the acquiescence of the world to continue his actions. Shouting would tell the Israeli people that he did not have international acquiescence. When United States Secretary of State Colin Powell met with President Arafat, he brought no assurance from the Israelis that they would withdraw. He went to Israel's northern border, but did not go to Bethlehem or to Jenin. Palestinians, however, still hoped that Mr. Powell would be able to do something to solve the situation.

There must be an international force of peacekeepers to provide protection and maintain a ceasefire. An international peacekeeping force was also important to stop reoccupation. Israel had destroyed every capability of the Palestinian police and security forces. They had done their best to decommission the members of these forces by disarming them and sending them back to their villages. Help was needed to rebuild a viable security apparatus if it was to control violence. There must be security for all. Palestinians would accept an international conference when Israel accepted the terms of reference of Security Council resolutions 1397 (2002), 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). It would not accept a conference on terms dictated by the Israelis, who wanted to choose who would represent the Palestinians.

Statements by Governments, Intergovernmental Organizations, UN System

— ABDELAZIZ ABOUGOSH, Assistant Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), speaking on behalf of the Secretary-General of the OIC, ABDELOUAHED BELKEZIZ, said the massacres perpetrated by the Israelis needed to be recorded to serve as vivid testimony to Israel's clear violation of human rights.

These criminal acts needed to be the concern of the Committee, not only through the convening of symposia, but by bringing them forward for international examination.

Institutionalized State terrorism must be exposed and condemned, he said. Extrajudicial killings, helicopters that targeted civilians, the killing of stone-throwing children, the destruction of residences over the heads of their owners, and the denial of medical help to the wounded were all part of the picture. The international community needed to ensure that States that condoned such acts be subjected to international sanctions to prevent their continuation. The real designs of Sharon to launch ethnic cleansing must be unmasked. There must be a multinational force on the ground.

He said the Committee must raise its voice in condemnation of Israel's heinous conduct. The Palestinian Authority had treated peace with Israel as fundamental to its existence, but Israel's arrogant defiance of international will did not augur well for the future. The situation in Palestine illustrated the frustration of the hopes of the people to realize their aspirations. He hoped the Committee would continue and intensify the objectives assigned to it by the General Assembly.

SAID KAMAL, Assistant Secretary General of the League of Arab States, said history was repeating itself. Palestinians were seeing the same massacres that had taken place in Deir Yassin. The current generation must understand that Israel had introduced terror into the region. Palestinians today were facing the most ferocious campaign of aggression. Houses were being destroyed over the heads of their owners and houses of worship were being desecrated. The Israelis did not hide their intentions to destroy any agreements entered into. Israeli practices and ideas were emptying the peace process of its contents and destroying the bases for agreement.

He said that Sharon had provided the impetus for the current intifada with his visit to the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque in September 2000. Subsequently, some areas under the Palestinian Authority had been reoccupied. Israeli actions had led to near paralysis of all aspects of life. The Israeli occupation authority, however, had failed to cause a collapse of morale. The secret weapon of the Palestinian people was its belief in justice. The battle of Jenin would remain to illustrate the barbaric practices of the Israeli army.

The Government of Sharon had rejected the peace initiative of the Arab Summit, preferring to use State terrorism to achieve its objectives, he said. The Palestinian leadership had cooperated with international efforts at bringing peace to the area, but the Israeli leadership had continued to reject such efforts. It had ignored recent Security Council resolutions calling for Israeli withdrawal, but peace could not come about without such a withdrawal.

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