



UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL MEETING IN SUPPORT OF ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE

*Reviving the collective international engagement towards
a two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

OPENING SESSION

Keynote presentation by

Mr. Oscar Fernandez-Taranco
Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs
United Nations

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to address such a distinguished audience attending the United Nations International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace. I thank the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for organizing this timely event, and the Chinese authorities for hosting it.

We are at a historic moment for the Middle East, and potentially a turning point for the long-standing efforts to reach a negotiated two-State solution. We all agree that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is long overdue. It is the firm view of the United Nations secretariat that achieving the two-State solution is more urgent than ever in the increasingly unstable regional context, and that negotiations remain the only way towards that end. The status quo is not acceptable and cannot be continued – particularly at a time when the region is re-awakening to the people's legitimate aspirations to freedom, justice and dignity and undergoing profound transformations, but also grappling with deepening social and geopolitical divides and the dangerous consequences of the Syrian conflict. The occupation that started in 1967 is morally and politically unsustainable and it must end. The Palestinians have a legitimate right to the establishment of an independent, democratic and viable State of their own. Israel has the right to live in peace and security within internationally recognized and secure borders. We are deeply convinced that peace is in the best interest of Israelis and Palestinians alike. Failure to make substantial progress will mean the continuation of suffering, violence and instability. For Israel, only peace will bring lasting security and the normalization of relations with all Arab States, as envisaged in the Arab Peace Initiative. For Palestinians, only a negotiated agreement will bring the end of occupation and a solution to final status issues of borders, refugees, Jerusalem, settlements, water and security.

To reach these common goals, the UN welcomes the determined re-engagement of the United States. In March, President Obama visited the region, underlining that peace is necessary, just and possible. We are encouraged by the many visits by Secretary of State John Kerry that have followed. Since the collapse of the attempted renewed negotiations in October 2010, it is the first time we have a real opportunity for a serious effort to reach a final status agreement. This requires enormous political will and courage from each side, as well as a meaningful framework and a timeframe, and it requires creating a conducive environment on the ground. In addition to the assistance by the United States to engage the parties, providing such a credible diplomatic horizon needs the concerted action and support of the international community and key regional stakeholders. We, as the international community, bear a unique responsibility to help the parties in moving forward. The United Nations will support any credible initiative for a renewed peace effort.

While US engagement is central, we are convinced of the need of broader engagement of regional and international partners towards engendering real and lasting peace. We are very appreciative in this regard of China's efforts in support of the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. We also welcome the positive signals sent by the League of Arab States reaffirming the Arab Peace initiative with a promise for regional stability that can certainly become an important part of current peace efforts. This must be encouraged. We hope that the Israeli Government will respond positively.

Substantive progress is urgently needed, but patience and caution are necessary as well. Rushing the parties back to the table without having the necessary framework in place and buy-in from both sides would be counter-productive. The risk and price of failure are too high. Many would agree that what is at stake is the fate and viability of the two-State solution and of the Middle East peace process as it has been envisaged since the 1991 Madrid conference and the 1993 Declaration of Principles, now almost twenty year old. The odds are not favourable. The gap has been widening between the parties, while mistrust and skepticism are at an all time high. Peacemaking in such conditions is daunting, and some would observe, with very persuasive arguments, that the time is not right and the situation not ripe, or that it is already too late. It may be true that it is a last chance, but as the United Nations, we continue to believe that we have no other choice than keep trying.

For a very simple reason: it would be a mistake to think that the current situation can be sustained or simply managed. It is not static but steadily eroding, and at risk of brutally deteriorating at any time. Palestinians are faced with the continued reality of military occupation, illegal settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and closure in Gaza. Israelis continue to live in the fear of indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza and have understandable and legitimate security concerns in a complex and difficult regional context.

Tensions have been mounting in the West Bank over the past months in particular on the two critical issues of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and the continued expansion of settlements. Official Israeli data has shown a 176 per cent increase in Israeli settlements during the first quarter of 2013 as compared to the same period last year, all of which is illegal under international law. Such expansion puts in jeopardy the viability and territorial contiguity of a Palestinian State, and undermines the prospects for renewed negotiations.

There were also troubling tensions around the sensitive issue of Jerusalem, including restrictions of access to holy sites. The Secretary-General reiterated the importance of respect for the religious freedom of all, and for worshippers of all faiths to have access to their shrines. The Secretary-General has reacted strongly to the announcement of settlement in the E1 area, calling on Israel to rescind this plan which if constructed would represent an almost fatal blow to remaining chances of securing a two-State solution. These developments once again underscored the importance and urgency of a final status agreement. It remains the view of the UN that Jerusalem – a final status issue– should emerge through negotiations as the capital of two states, living side-by-side in peace and security, with arrangements for the holy sites that are acceptable to all.

In the absence of a final status agreement, the financial and political viability of Palestinian institutions and of the Palestinian State remains at stake. It is a source of social tensions in the West Bank, which has witnessed a series of strikes of civil servants, in particular in the education sector. We welcome the generosity of the international community, which has provided vital financial support. We appreciate Japan's initiative to host a ministerial level conference in Tokyo earlier this year for East Asian cooperation on Palestinian development. Continued high level of assistance will remain indispensable in the months ahead to keep afloat the new Palestinian government headed by Mr. Rami Hamdallah, recently appointed by President Abbas. We look forward to working with him. But he faces a daunting task, much like his predecessor, in dealing with the state of the Palestinian economy and finances. We call on donors, especially those that have not yet made significant contributions, to accelerate the provision of timely and predictable assistance to stabilize the finances of the Palestinian Authority. We also call on donors to continue support to UNRWA for their indispensable assistance to the vulnerable Palestine refugees at this critical moment in the region.

The recent initiative "Breaking the Impasse" led by Israeli and Palestinian business men along with Secretary Kerry's announcement of a large scale initiative intended to spur economic growth through private investment for the West Bank and Gaza are hopeful signals. However, sustained growth and private investment won't be forthcoming and the accomplishments of the Palestinian State-building programme and donor funding will be difficult to maintain in the absence of progress on the political track. We cannot afford to jeopardize the considerable investments made in these achievements by the international community and more importantly, the Palestinians.

Difficulties and uncertainties are no less pressing in Gaza, where improving the living conditions of the Palestinian population and ensuring calm remains a core priority of the United Nations, and key to sustain any prospect of lasting peace. After an initial period of three months of near complete calm, the ceasefire reached last November has shown worrying signs of fragility in the last three months, with repeated rockets fired into Israel from Gaza. Palestinian civilians were injured by Israeli forces in the buffer zone over the same period. Kerem Shalom, the only functioning crossing for goods from Israel into Gaza has periodically been closed in response to rockets. From 21 March to 21 May, the fishing limit was brought back to three nautical miles. These setbacks stand as a reminder of the importance of the parties' commitment to a full implementation of the ceasefire. The United Nations continues to support Egyptian efforts in this regard, and to call for progress in addressing all underlying issues of conflict, in line with resolution 1860. Gaza borders should be fully opened for the legitimate movement of persons and goods. Israel's legitimate security concerns must also be recognized and properly dealt with, especially on the issue of arms smuggling and rocket fire.

In our view, progress on Palestinian reconciliation within the framework of the PLO commitments and under the leadership of President Abbas, is an essential step for achieving the two-State solution and finding a durable peace. It is also critical for enhancing the Palestinian economy's viability. We will continue to be supportive of the Egyptian Government's efforts to promote Palestinian reconciliation on this basis. The peace process and reconciliation don't have to be an either/or proposition; efforts should be made on both fronts, in line with the provisions of resolution 1860. We are also supportive of the prospects of elections which are central to

continuing state-building efforts in a manner that would anchor the democratic nature and foundations of the Palestinian State.

Let me conclude. The coming weeks will be critical and difficult. It is our hope that, with the decisive momentum of the United States and the support of the international community, the parties will demonstrate the necessary vision and political courage to overcome decades of mistrust and conflict, and engage in meaningful negotiations to achieve the two-State solution. None of the steps to achieve this goal are easy, but I cannot stress enough the risks of missing the current window of opportunity.

Please accept my best wishes for a successful meeting.
