



Security Council

Sixtieth year

Provisional

5149th meeting

Thursday, 24 March 2005, 10.25 a.m.

New York

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Sardenberg	(Brazil)
<i>Members:</i>	Algeria	Mr. Baali
	Argentina	Mr. Mayoral
	Benin	Mr. Zinsou
	China	Mr. Cheng Jingye
	Denmark	Mr. Faaborg-Andersen
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Greece	Mr. Vassilakis
	Japan	Mr. Kitaoka
	Philippines	Mr. Baja
	Romania	Mr. Dumitru
	Russian Federation	Mr. Denisov
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Emyr Jones Parry
	United Republic of Tanzania	Mr. Mahiga
	United States of America	Mrs. Patterson

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations. At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, on whom I now call.

Mr. Prendergast: I would like to use the opportunity afforded me by this month's briefing to focus on the Secretary-General's visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory from 13 to 16 March.

The primary reason for the visit was the invitation extended to him by the Government of Israel to attend the inauguration of the new Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem. The Secretary-General was among a large delegation of presidents, prime ministers and other senior Government officials from around the world. In his remarks at the opening ceremony, when he spoke on behalf of the international guests, he emphasized the duty of the United Nations to commemorate the Holocaust and said,

"The United Nations has a sacred responsibility to combat hatred and intolerance. A United Nations that fails to be at the forefront of the fight against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism denies its history and undermines its future".

The Secretary-General used the occasion of his visit to hold meetings with a range of Israeli and Palestinian leaders, including Prime Minister Sharon and President Abbas. The visit confirmed his belief

that Palestinians and Israelis have taken the first steps along the road towards a full resumption of the peace process. He came away with feelings of cautious hope and optimism, but also with the sense that setbacks and delays are inevitable. The Secretary-General is strongly of the view that active support and encouragement from the Quartet and the international community are more essential now than ever.

Israelis and Palestinians told the Secretary-General much about the progress and the setbacks of recent weeks and about the remaining steps to be taken and the wider requirements for resuming peace negotiations.

The Government of Israel emphasized that its overriding concern was for the Palestinian Authority to move from words to action and to take steps to bring to justice those who organize and perpetrate terrorist acts. Israeli leaders expressed their fear that a ceasefire and the outcome of the 15 March Cairo meeting alone would not be enough, and might even make it more difficult for the Palestinian Authority to dismantle terrorist capabilities and infrastructure. They noted that such a dismantlement is a Palestinian obligation under the road map.

Leaders of the Palestinian Authority stressed equally strongly the urgent need to ease the daily suffering of their people. They expressed frustration over Israel's refusal to ease closures significantly or to release large numbers of prisoners, particularly those who carry weight and significance among Palestinians, and over the delays in the full implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh commitments. Without such confidence-building steps, they said, they would be unable to consolidate popular support for the peace process. The Secretary-General's Palestinian interlocutors were also much concerned by what they described as continuing unilateral acts by Israel. I shall have more to say on that later.

The respective presentations by the parties impressed on the Secretary-General the immediate and urgent need to rebuild trust and restore confidence. He urged the parties to engage in direct dialogue and negotiations. Peace processes, he warned, could not afford stagnation.

The Secretary-General told his Palestinian interlocutors that the United Nations remained committed to supporting the Palestinian Authority in its current efforts on security, reform and elections.

They discussed the positive outcomes of the London conference and the decision to review donor structures in order to improve reform-monitoring and assistance-coordination arrangements, to transfer more responsibility to the Palestinian Authority and to enhance the overall effectiveness of the assistance effort. Palestinian leaders asked the Secretary-General to convey the need for their international partners to disburse as soon as possible the aid they have so generously pledged, as Palestinians continue to confront a difficult fiscal and economic situation.

The Israeli disengagement plan was the subject of much discussion. The Secretary-General was left with a strong impression of Prime Minister Sharon's determination to proceed with the plan, even in the face of serious domestic opposition. The Secretariat continues to welcome and support the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank. That should be used to help revitalize the peace process. The Secretary-General told the parties how important it was that all aspects of the withdrawal be fully coordinated. Without sufficient preparation and cooperation, there could be problems. The Secretary-General reiterated our position — and the position of the Quartet — that withdrawal was not an end in itself but an important step in a broader process and should be consistent with the road map and its goals.

Domestically, as Prime Minister Sharon told the Secretary-General, the Israeli Government faces a moment of truth this month. Mr. Sharon explained that the parliamentary vote for the 2005 budget was scheduled to take place in the coming week. If the Knesset did not approve the budget before the end of the month, the Government would fall and new elections would follow automatically. That would jeopardize the timely implementation of Israel's withdrawal initiative, which continues to enjoy the support of more than 60 per cent of the Israeli public.

President Abbas assured us that the Palestinian Authority would cooperate fully in preparations for the withdrawal. A major donor investment would be needed to ensure the economic viability of the Gaza Strip. However, Palestinian leaders described the widespread fear among Palestinians that the withdrawal might become "Gaza first and Gaza last" and fears about unilateral acts such as substantial new settlement expansion and barrier construction.

I would like to stress here the concern of the United Nations over Israel's failure thus far to dismantle settlement outposts and freeze settlement expansion. The Government's recent report on outposts by former Chief State Prosecutor Talia Sasson found that various ministries, as well as the Israel Defence Forces and the World Zionist Organization, had supported construction of unauthorized outposts. The Cabinet approved the report on 13 March, including the core recommendation that the Government "take into its hands responsibility for what is happening in the outposts in the territories and not sit on the sidelines watching as the settlers do whatever they want, without anyone stopping them".

Yet this week there have also been unofficial reports of a Government decision to approve the building of at least 3,500 new settlement housing units this year, linking the major Israeli settlement of Maaleh Adumim to Jerusalem. The road map states clearly that Israel should dismantle outposts and freeze settlement activity, and the Quartet's position is that neither party should undertake actions that threaten to prejudice final status talks. We believe that a halt to such actions is needed now to preserve hope of a viable future for the Palestinian people.

Our concerns over Israel's settlement policy cannot be separated from the issue of the barrier. The recently approved route still incorporates a significant percentage of Palestinian land and has a negative impact on the livelihoods of many Palestinians. Israel states that the barrier is a temporary structure to meet security needs. However, no one could observe its scope and its route without being concerned over possible implications for the contiguity of the future Palestinian State. We reiterate our regular call on Israel to abide by its legal obligations as set forth in the 9 July 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and General Assembly resolution ES-10/15 and to find alternative ways to address its legitimate security concerns.

During the reporting period, implementation of the commitments made at the 8 February Sharm al-Sheikh summit continued, but not as quickly as the initial steps reported in last month's briefing. It was only on 16 March that outstanding issues related to the handover of Jericho — the first of five West Bank cities and their environs to be transferred to Palestinian control — were fully resolved. Tulkarem was handed over on 21 March after similar delays. Negotiations on

the transfer of Bethlehem, Qalqiliya and Ramallah are under way, but difficulties remain. The transfer of three other major urban centres in the West Bank — Nablus, Jenin and Hebron — has been left by the parties for discussion at a later date.

Meanwhile, the joint Israeli-Palestinian ministerial committee on Palestinian prisoners did not reach the hoped-for agreement on the release of an additional 400 Palestinian prisoners. Similarly, only 16 out of 60 Palestinian deportees have been allowed to return to Bethlehem so far. I would like to reiterate the Quartet's position and urge the full implementation by both parties of the mutual commitments made at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit.

The single most significant outcome of the Sharm el-Sheikh summit was the announcement by Prime Minister Sharon and President Abbas of a halt to violence and military operations. That important goal will be difficult to achieve, especially with militant extremists whose agenda is to derail the peace process. The 25 February suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, which left five Israelis dead and which injured more than 50, was a tragic reminder of the fragility of the process. The Secretary-General condemned that attack and called on the Palestinian Authority to take action against all those organizing and perpetrating terror and violence.

In my last briefing to the Council, I spoke about the situation in Lebanon in the aftermath of the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri and 19 others on 14 February. Lebanon has since been beset by political uncertainty. On 28 February, the Government of Prime Minister Omar Karami resigned. Ten days later, President Lahoud asked Mr. Karami to form a new government. Mr. Karami has not yet been able to meet his goal of forming a government of national unity with the opposition.

Lebanese have been publicly expressing their political views in frequent demonstrations in the central district of Beirut in support of both the Government and the opposition. For example, on 8 March, a large rally in support of Syria, organized principally by Hizbullah, took place in Beirut. An equally large — if not larger — demonstration staged by the opposition was held in Beirut on 14 March. We are pleased to note that, to date, all such demonstrations have occurred in a calm and orderly manner without major incidents.

In contrast to the peaceful conduct of the demonstrations, two bombings earlier this week, in Beirut and in Jounieh, left three dead and approximately 19 injured. In a statement issued on Wednesday, 23 March, after the second bombing, the Secretary-General called on the Government of Lebanon to bring to justice those responsible and to prevent the situation from deteriorating. He urged all concerned parties to do their utmost to safeguard Lebanon's stability and national unity. He believes strongly that the Lebanese people should be allowed to decide the future of their country peacefully and democratically.

Let me also mention that later today the Secretary-General will forward to the Council the report of the Mission of Inquiry into the 14 February assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri.

With regard to the situation in southern Lebanon, the past two months have been relatively calm along the Blue Line. Regrettably, Israeli air violations of the Blue Line have continued to occur, albeit with somewhat reduced frequency. On 17 March, there was a sudden increase in the number of overflights when nine air violations, involving 10 jets, were recorded and were reported to have covered wide areas of southern Lebanon.

As the Council knows, the Secretary-General travelled this week to Algiers to attend the Arab Summit. He welcomes the decision taken there by the Arab leaders to relaunch the Arab peace initiative. Arab involvement in the peace process is essential. A lasting solution to the conflict will have to address the regional tracks.

There are many obstacles and challenges. But the deadlock has been broken. At the 1 March London conference and at the Quartet meeting held at the margins of the conference, the international community clearly manifested its will to re-engage and actively assist Israelis and Palestinians. Our focus, as the Secretary-General has repeatedly emphasized to both Israelis and Palestinians, should not be limited to the immediate next steps. We need to prepare ourselves for the disengagement, with all its practical implications, but also for the day after. This is a task not just for the parties, but also for the international community. It goes without saying that the continuation of the current process remains primarily the responsibility of the parties. But we, the international community, should

stand ready to assist them along the stony path from violence and terror, bloodshed and suffering, towards a better life in peace and security. And in so doing, we should not — we must not — forget our final destination: a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, an end of the 1967 occupation, and two States — Israel and a sovereign, viable, contiguous and democratic Palestine — living side by side.

The President: I thank Mr. Prendergast for his comprehensive briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.45 a.m.