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Statement

by

H.E. Mr. Nirupam Sen
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations

on

Agenda Item 15: Question of Palestine

and

Agenda Item 14: The situation in the Middle East

at the

60th Session of the
UN General Assembly

New York

November 29, 2005

Mr. President,

India has warmly welcomed the agreement concluded between Israel and the Palestinian Authority on the Rafah border crossing for travel between Gaza and the West Bank, and for building a sea port in the Gaza Strip. We believe that this was a significant development that would go a long way towards improving the lives and economy of the Palestinian people living in the Gaza Strip. There also seems to be a need for a floating dock or some other such arrangement, which can be operationalised quickly, because the belief that there is no guaranteed border outlet seems to be holding back foreign investors. The opening of the Rafah border last Saturday, which enabled 1,548 Palestinians to cross into Egypt without being subject to Israeli checks for the first time, has raised hopes for further progress in efforts to revitalize the Middle East Peace Process.

There have also been other signs generating optimism this year. The election of President Mahmoud Abbas in January 2005 demonstrated the commitment of the Palestinian people to democracy. In September, Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, marking Israel's first withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory since 1967. This landmark event has set an important precedent for the eventual realization of a two-State solution. India had welcomed the withdrawal as a positive development and the beginning of a process that we hoped would take forward the negotiations in accordance with the Roadmap and the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. Elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, scheduled for January 2006, will provide further incentive for the Palestinians to fully engage in the democratic process.

Mr. President,

With a renewed sense of optimism also comes the hard reckoning of reality. In his report [A/60/539] dated November 7, 2005 on the

agenda items under consideration, the Secretary General draws attention to the fact that the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people in 2004 has remained grave. About half of the Palestinian population lived below the official poverty line of \$2.10 per day, compared to just 22 percent in 2000. Furthermore, 16 percent of Palestinians (approximately 560,000 people) were in deep poverty. Unemployment increased more than threefold since 2000, reaching a figure of 238,000 unemployed in 2004, largely as a result of internal and external roadblocks in and to the occupied Palestinian territory. Palestinians continued to face problems reaching their places of work, schools and hospitals, and standards of health and education continued to deteriorate. In some parts of the territory, Palestinians' needs for additional humanitarian assistance rose sharply as a consequence.

The Secretary General has also expressed concern over Israel's continued settlement expansion and unilateral construction of the wall in the West Bank. He has pointed out that lack of action on removing illegal settlement outposts erected since 2001 has severely undermined trust in Israel's intentions and that government-sponsored settlement activity has a negative impact on the territorial contiguity of Palestinian territory and thus remains a source of serious concern. According to the Roadmap, Israel has an obligation to freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth, and immediately dismantle outposts erected illegally since March 2001. The Secretary General has also stated that Israel's unilateral construction of the wall on Palestinian land continues and that along with continued Israeli settlement activity, it constitutes a key challenge to the fulfilment of the Roadmap's goal of a two-State solution.

At this critical stage, it becomes all the more important for the international community to take steps to see smooth implementation of Palestinian trade and transit access both within its territories and with the outside world. It is equally important for Israel to stop settlement activity, lift curfews and ease restrictions on the movement of persons and goods and thereby significantly improve the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories. Israel's actions should not result in prejudging final status issues or threaten longer-term prospects for peace by making the creation of a viable and contiguous Palestinian State much more difficult.

The problem is that settlement activity leads to cantonisation and changes patterns of transportation and access. The wall's encroachment on Palestinian land and interests create great hardships for the Palestinian people affected by its construction and exacerbates the situation by placing populations, agricultural land and a part of the West Bank aquifer beyond their reach. Moreover, continued construction of the wall on Palestinian land threatens to prejudice the eventual outcome of the final status negotiations between the parties. We therefore reiterate our call to Israel to abide by its legal obligations as set forth in the 9 July 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and resolution ES-10/15 of the General Assembly.

On its part, the Palestinian Authority has to also shoulder its responsibility by undertaking action on the ground to halt violence. As the Secretary General has pointed out, the Palestinian Authority must push ahead with efforts to reform the Palestinian security services. Decisive action in this regard should help to restore law and order.

Mr. President,

India has, over the years, assisted the Palestinian Authority through development projects and human resources development. Indian assistance projects in the Palestinian Authority include construction and establishment of the Jawaharlal Nehru Library at the Al Azhar University in Gaza City and the Mahatma Gandhi Library-cum-Student Activity Centre at the Palestinian Technical College at Deir Al Balah in the Gaza Strip.

During the visit of President Abbas to India in May 2005, the Prime Minister of India announced a grant of US \$ 15 million to Palestine for developmental projects. This was an addition to a grant announced earlier this year. These grants will, inter alia, fund hospitals and Information Technology Centres in Gaza and Ramallah, an Indian Chair in Al Quds University and a school in Abu Dis.

We wish to also recall the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, who passed away on 11 November 2004. For nearly four decades, he represented the national aspirations of the Palestinian people. On this occasion, we wish to pay homage to his memory and recall his everlasting contribution to the Palestinian cause.

Mr. President,

We would urge both Palestinians and Israelis to make optimal use of the opportunities represented in this new beginning. The ceasefire concluded at the Sharm el Sheikh Summit in February 2005 has broadly survived, resulting in a noticeable improvement in the security situation marked by a decrease in the number of deaths since then. Renewed and redoubled efforts are necessary for the peace process to move forward in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions, the "Quartet" Roadmap and international law. The international community must press for renewed action in parallel by both parties on their obligations under the Roadmap, which provides both Israel and the Palestinians the best opportunity to move beyond the conflict and towards peace, security and prosperity. The international community must also continue to assist the parties in simultaneously addressing economic, humanitarian, security and political issues.

We hope that a negotiated solution to end this conflict will be found quickly. The vision of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side with Israel in secure and recognised borders remains as valid, and perhaps more attainable now, than at any other time. India urges the parties concerned and the international community to press for a just and comprehensive resolution of the conflict and the broader achievement of peace, security and stability for the entire region within the earliest possible time-frame, based on Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 1397 and 1515.

Mr. President,

India has advocated a comprehensive solution to the situation in the Middle East, as the logical next step in the resolution of the wider Israeli-Arab conflict on the regional level as envisaged in the Saudi Arabian peace initiative. The principle of "land for peace" holds equally valid in addressing the other tracks of the Middle East conflict. We sincerely hope the comprehensive political process can be revived at the earliest.

Thank you, Mr. President.
