

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon press conference

Beirut, Lebanon, 17 January 2009 –

SG: Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I begin my press conference, I would like to issue a statement.

Today, another United Nations school was hit by Israeli Defense Forces.

I condemn in the strongest terms this outrageous attack which is the third time this has happened.

The top Israeli leaders had apologized and had given me their assurances just two days ago while I was visiting Israel that UN premises would be fully respected.

I strongly demand a thorough investigation into these incidents, and the punishment of those who are responsible for these appalling acts.

Thank you very much for being with me this evening and thank you for covering all day long my activities in Lebanon. This is the sixth stop for me on my tour of the Middle East. Before coming to Beirut, as you know, I visited Cairo, Amman, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Ramallah and Ankara. Tomorrow I move to Damascus, Syria, and then to Sharm el Sheikh to attend a summit meeting to be convened by President Mubarak of Egypt on the Gaza situation. From there, tomorrow afternoon, I will visit Kuwait to attend the Arab Economic Summit meeting.

I am very pleased to be in Lebanon today. As you know, I met this morning with President [Michel] Sleiman, Prime Minister [Fuad] Siniora and with the Speaker of the Parliament, Nabih Berri. I had the unique honour to address the Parliament of Lebanon.

Our exchanges were frank and touched on the regional situation, the situation in Gaza and also, of course, the developments in Lebanon. I then had the honour to address the Lebanese Parliament and to meet many of Lebanon's distinguished parliamentarians. Finally, this afternoon I travelled to south Lebanon for a field visit to UNIFIL.

It pains me, however, that this visit is taking place while a full-scale war is still raging in Gaza.

My heart is heavy and my thoughts at this very moment are with the victims of that conflict.

I have been calling for a stop in the fighting in Gaza as an immediate first step.

The goal of my mission is to step up the pace of our joint diplomatic efforts to achieve this immediate ceasefire, to urge implementation of Security Council Resolution 1860,

and to ensure that urgent humanitarian assistance be provided, without restriction, to those in desperate need.

There is no time to lose. With every passing hour, more people are killed, more houses destroyed, more people displaced. The number of casualties is just unbearable, and unacceptable.

More than a thousand Gazans have died in less than three weeks. More than five thousand have been wounded. There are reports of very high numbers of women and children amongst the dead.

Again, I strongly urge the Israeli government and leadership to declare a unilateral ceasefire immediately, to stop the fighting now.

Diplomatic efforts are intense, the situation is rapidly evolving and I hope that there will be a breakthrough soon, which will finally bring an end to the suffering.

The leaders I met today are highly aware of the risk that Lebanon might be dragged into a new conflict with Israel. I am encouraged by the explicit condemnation by the Government of Lebanon, of the incidents of rockets being fired from south Lebanon into Israel and the retaliatory action from Israel against Lebanon. I believe the Lebanese army has been carrying out outstanding work in south Lebanon, with support from UNIFIL. This has ensured a great period of stability in the South.

I have also impressed these same messages upon my interlocutors in Israel. In particular, I raised with them the need to stop the continuous violations of Lebanese sovereignty through over flights. I also reiterated my call for Israel to provide to Lebanon the strike data of the cluster bombs they dropped on Lebanon during the 2006 war.

The domestic situation in Lebanon also figured prominently in my meetings today. I took the opportunity to applaud the progress made by the Lebanese since the Doha Agreement of last May. I encourage all of the Lebanese to continue moving in that direction in tackling the challenges that lie ahead in the coming months.

Chief amongst these challenges is the next parliamentary elections, to be held on June 7th.

My discussions with the Lebanese officials also dealt with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which is due to start its operations on the first of March.

I am aware of the great expectations on the Tribunal but it is important that the Lebanese, and the international community, take into account that this is a judicial process conducted according to the highest standards of international justice and that the outcome and timing of this process cannot be predetermined.

I end these remarks by thanking the Lebanese people and their Government for their hospitality during my stay in their beautiful country.

Let me stop here and take your questions.

Q: (Arabic) Mr. Secretary-General you have talked about concerns regarding the firing of rockets from south Lebanon. From your discussions with Lebanese officials, are you reassured about what they told you that sufficient measures should be taken to prevent Lebanon from being subjected to another war and in order not to open a front from south Lebanon. Are you satisfied with what you heard from Lebanese officials in that regard?

SG: Certainly this is a source of great concern. The rocket firing into north of Israel and also retaliatory rockets coming from Israel that can destabilize the situation. The stability, though calm, in that part is still very fragile. I raised this issue also in Israel and in Lebanon and I was briefed by Force Commander Gen. Graziano while visiting UNIFIL this afternoon. While this can still happen. I condemn it in the strongest possible terms again. It was in the middle of the Gaza situation, I was so much surprised that I again urged that they should demonstrate maximum restraint to keep this stability and peace in Lebanon. And I appreciate and commend the role of the Lebanese armed forces and UNIFIL who have acted swiftly and decisively when this incident happened.

Q: Mr. Ban I work for the Independent newspaper in London. Given the fact that the United Nations is holding a Special Tribunal into the murder of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, what are the chances of a UN tribunal into possible war crimes in Gaza?

SG: This Special Tribunal for Lebanon is going to be launched officially and was agreed by a Security Council Resolution. The question you have just asked is not an issue which can be determined by me. But I strongly believe that any person responsible for this should be accountable.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General you just underlined the role played by the UN after the war in 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel, do you think the UN should or could play a similar role in Gaza to solidify a ceasefire?

SG: Wherever it is necessary I will spare no efforts and no time to play such a role. Now UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces have been playing an important role in implementing the Security Council Resolution 1701. I only hope that peace and stability which has been established with a lot of difficult process will be kept intact and further dialogue should be made to further solidify the peace.

Q: (Arabic) What will you carry with you tomorrow to the Sharm El Sheikh Summit besides Resolution 1860 which Israel has not committed to and particularly since many are counting on your efforts as an international organization?

SG: I believe that the leaders attending the summit meeting in Sharm El Sheikh tomorrow will discuss all the issues on this situation in Gaza starting from how to bring to an immediate stop of this fighting, then thereafter how we can provide humanitarian assistance with eventually a medium [and] long-term reconstruction of the Gazan society devastated by this crisis. Then we can discuss about the way forward on this Middle East peace process. I am sure that we will be able to discuss all the issues pertaining to this situation.

Q: Resolution 1701 has been continuously breached by Israel on a daily basis since 2006. Now how committed is Israel to respecting any UN resolution and especially the resolution 1860 and especially since during your visit to Tel Aviv another UN facility had been targeted. How effective is Israel's apology to the people who are dying?

SG: The Security Council Resolution is a binding one. All the Member States of the United Nations have [an] obligation to fully comply with Security Council resolutions. The Security Council Resolution 1701 is a very important one for peace and stability in Lebanon. As I have stated in my opening statement I have raised this issue during my visit to Israel. In fact I had been discussing this issue on many occasions whenever I had the opportunity of meeting with a senior Israeli government official. Some have been addressed but there are still many more to be done. This resolution should be implemented in close cooperation and full participation and efforts by Israel, Lebanon and Syria and other relevant countries. And I will try my best to discuss this issue to ensure first of all expedite the full implementation of 1701. On the second part of your question I have already issued a statement at the beginning of this press conference. I will regard it as my answer.

Q: Taking the fact that Israel is thinking of announcing a unilateral ceasefire, having said that, the troops will stay there for a while and they have the option to come back to Gaza depending on the situation. After the unilateral ceasefire is declared, what more do you think Israel has to do?

SG: I am not quite sure whether they will declare a unilateral ceasefire. I hope they will. I understand that they are going to meet in a cabinet meeting this evening. This unilateral declaration of ceasefire should be also accompanied by a timetable of Israeli troop withdrawal. And at the same time that should have the corresponding response from Hamas militants. The fighting by both sides must stop. That is the first and foremost, the most important act to do, then we can discuss all other matters, most urgently the humanitarian issues and reconstruction issues.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, how are you taking your complaint about today's attack on the school personally to the Israelis - have you telephoned them, talked to them? What was their response? And also following up on the question about war crimes - that Mr. Ging asked for investigating into possible war crimes – will you go so far as to echo that, the use of the language does indeed open the door to look at that possibility.

SG: As I was visiting UNIFIL and I returned very late, therefore my statement came first. I wanted to make a telephone call protesting myself in person to the leadership of Israel, but I was not able to do that. I came first, and tried my best, in another way, protesting again. On the second issue, as I said this is not an issue that the Secretary-General can determine at this time. I think legal and political considerations should be taken by appropriate agencies.

Q: Will you call Israel now after this press conference?

SG: I will try.

Thank you very much.
