

**STATEMENT BY MR. V.K. NAMBIAR, PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE ON
AGENDA ITEM:37 'THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST' AT THE 58TH
SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON DECEMBER 2, 2003**

Mr. President,

It has been over three years since the current phase of unrest and violence in the Middle East began. Since then, almost 4000 Israelis and Palestinians have lost their lives in the raging conflict to which most have not been party. Many others have been wounded or have lost their livelihoods and economic sustenance. The volatile situation has greatly exacerbated tensions in the region and elsewhere, contributing to a general sense of insecurity worldwide.

India has advocated, along with the rest of the international community, the need for both the Israeli and Palestinian sides to eschew violence and work towards a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. We have pointed out that the longer the conflict endures and the more intractable positions become, the harder it would be for the sides to reach a just, comprehensive and lasting solution.

The promises of a new start to a peace initiative launched at the Sharm-el-Sheikh Summit in June 2003 were all too quickly extinguished by the actions of vested interests against any move towards peace in the Middle East. As a result, since last August, the situation has been characterised by a dangerous spiral of violence and retribution.

In a recent briefing to the Security Council, Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs Mr. Kieran Prendergast pointed out that the peace process could not be allowed to remain stalled as in "such a dangerous environment, continued inertia could be deadly". Indeed, the absence of any political dialogue or initiative by the international community to restore the two sides towards a political process has been a matter of considerable concern.

Fortunately, the relative calm in the region over the past month-and-a-half, as well as the prospects of a meeting between the Prime Ministers of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, have given rise to some optimism. The Secretary General, in his address on the International Day of Solidarity with Palestinians has referred to these positive indications as "tender shoots" that "must be nourished". However small the

opening, the international community must urge the parties to exploit it for the sake of their peoples and for posterity.

The recent adoption of Security Council resolution 1515 endorsing the "Quartet Performance-based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" is a step in the right direction. The Quartet must, with the backing of other concerned parties move quickly to capitalise on the positive dynamics created by this period of relative calm. We hope that it will be helped in this effort by the positive environment created by the election of the new Palestinian Prime Minister and the gathering momentum of public support for the resumption of a political process.

India supports the Quartet roadmap as the only viable process that can promote a peaceful solution of the conflict. We call upon the parties to fulfill their obligations under the Roadmap. The Palestinian Authority is required to give concrete content to its declared intent of establishing law and order, controlling violence and combating terrorism. Israel, on its part, should take immediate steps to build confidence by easing closures, removing settlement outposts, freezing settlement activity and halting the construction of the separation wall.

The Secretary General, in his report, has referred to the construction of this barrier on occupied Palestinian land as "a deeply counter-productive act". He has drawn attention to the fact that in places the wall deviates more than 7.5 kilometers, and in its planned route by up to 22 kilometers, from the "green line" to incorporate Israeli settlements while encircling Palestinian areas.

India has stated before in this Assembly that while we fully understand the legitimate right of all States to exercise self-defence, Israel's decision to construct such a wall in the occupied territories cannot be justified and must be reviewed. Not only would this cause "socio-economic harm" to the Palestinian people, but it is likely to "impair future negotiations". The construction of the wall must not become an attempt to pre-determine the outcome of any final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. It must not impact adversely on the principle of "land for peace" called for in Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.

While saying this, India strongly condemns all acts of terrorism and violence. There can be no justification whatsoever for terrorism. Where these terrorist attacks are directed against unarmed civilians, women and children, what the Secretary General has referred to as acts of "wanton and deliberate terrorism", they become all the more reprehensible and detract altogether from the cause they purport to serve.

Admittedly the situation is far from promising but we must not give in to despair or desperation. The need of the hour is for the international community to re-engage its attention upon the situation in the Middle East with the clear focus of implementing in the nearest future the vision of two States living side by side within secure and recognised borders as envisioned in resolution 1397.

Mr. President,

A comprehensive solution to the Middle East must necessarily include the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. Unfortunately, reports of the situation along the "Blue Line" are not very encouraging. The UN's last open briefing to the Security Council drew attention to the continuing tense situation marked by "events that raise serious concern". Each side has continued to violate the Blue Line, whether by air or land. UNIFIL has played a sterling role in separating the parties. However, a lasting solution can only be the result of a consciously undertaken political process. We hope the overall situation will allow such an initiative to be taken soon.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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