

STATEMENT BY MS. CHOKILA IYER, FOREIGN SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS ON AGENDA ITEM 41 : QUESTION OF PALESTINE AT THE PLENARY OF THE 56TH
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Mr. President,

Today we solemnly commemorate the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. The Government and people of India once again reaffirm their solidarity with the people of Palestine, who have struggled bravely over the past five decades to attain their inalienable rights.

India's bonds of friendship with the Palestinian people have been strengthened and reinvigorated with the passage of time. Since the time of Mahatma Gandhi, India's support for the Palestinian cause has been strong and unwavering. Starting with our vote against partition of Palestine, through India's recognition of the PLO in 1974 as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and our recognition of the state of Palestine in 1988, to the opening of our Representative Office to the Palestinian National Authority in 1996, India has consistently stood by the Palestinian people. India has actively supported peace initiatives in the Middle East. India is committed to a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the region based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and the principle of 'Land for Peace'. We support the inalienable and legitimate right of the Palestinian people to a homeland as well as the right of all States of the region, including Israel and Palestine, to exist peacefully within secure and internationally recognised boundaries.

We remain convinced that under President Arafat's leadership, the Palestinian people stand on the threshold of a new era wherein their national aspirations, for which they have struggled so long, can be realised. We remain vitally interested in peace, development and stability in the region and are ready to assist in whatever way we can.

When the Madrid Conference was convened and the Oslo Process initiated, India shared the optimism of the international community that the time frame, the road maps and the mutual obligations of the Israelis and Palestinians would be respected and there would be moves towards final status talks to settle complicated issues such as Jerusalem, refugees and borders. However, the Camp David and the Taba talks did not lead to the culmination of the Oslo Accords and indeed many of the interim obligations remain unfulfilled. The resulting frustration of the Palestinian people has found expression in the intifada.

Mr. President,

The tragic cycle of violence that has engulfed the Middle East region since September last year has been damaging to peace and stability. It is a source of deep concern to all of us. This violence has led to a most regrettable loss of hundreds of lives and has injured thousands. It has derailed the Middle East Peace Process and severely dented the trust and confidence between the parties, without which there cannot be forward movement on negotiated agreements about interim

and final status issues. The longer the violence continues, the greater the danger that extremist and radical tendencies will be strengthened. In turn such a development is detrimental to a peaceful resolution. That is why it is essential to exercise utmost restraint, to eschew violence and counter-violence, and to shun all kind of acts that could destabilise the peace process.

An important issue that has vitiated the atmosphere has been the establishment and expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. The rapid growth and expansion of settlements, and the establishment of new ones, since the signing of the Oslo accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, undermines mutual confidence as also the credibility of the peace process. We trust that Israel will respect the overwhelming sentiment of the international community for a freeze on all settlement activity.

We believe that the Mitchell Report and the Tenet Plan are means to enable the transition from the current situation of intifada-related strife to the negotiating table, where the modalities of ending the Israeli occupation and final status issues must be resolved. Moreover, the implementation of the Mitchell Report should not be impeded by unrealistic conditions. India supports the G-8 statement on international monitoring.

India has engaged itself continuously with the leaders of the region in a bid to encourage moves towards peace. We were honoured to host a visit this year by President Arafat.

Mr. President,

The plight of Palestinian refugees living in the camps scattered in the West Asian region is distressing and both sides need to address this issue as part of the final status negotiations, with the active encouragement and support of the international community. India stands ready to assist the Palestinian people in their hour of need.

There is a general recognition that, together with political support for the peace process, there is a need to focus on the multi-faceted tasks of nation building. The fledgling Palestine National Authority requires generous assistance, particularly in the fields of health, education and creation of employment. Infrastructural development is an area of critical importance. The challenges confronting the people of Palestine are also challenges for the international community and merit its urgent attention and support.

An unfortunate accompaniment of this current phase of violence is the severe impoverishment of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Such human impoverishment, in such a short span, negates years of sustained assistance of the international community to help build the human resource potential of the Palestinian people and the economic infrastructure in the Palestinian Authority areas. This aspect needs to be addressed on an urgent basis. India joins the international community's call for an immediate easing of restrictions on the Palestinians. Funds that are due to the Palestinian Authority should be made available.

Mr. President,

India remains ready to engage with the Palestinian National Authority and the Palestinian people in their reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Two Indian-aided projects in the Gaza Strip – the Jawaharlal Nehru Library at Al Azhar University and the Mahatma Gandhi Library-cum-Student Activity Centre at the Palestine Technical College in Deir Al Balah –

have been completed. India has sent medical supplies for use of hospitals in West Bank and Gaza. Very soon a consignment of hospital equipment will be shipped to Gaza. The Indian Government has a substantial on-going programme for human resources development for the Palestinian National Authority. We are ready to do more.

While it is incumbent on all of us to work together to advance the peace process in West Asia, ultimately it is the parties themselves that have to shoulder the major responsibility for achieving a permanent and lasting solution. A spirit of accommodation and political will must imbue the negotiation process. They must harness all their energies to achieve a just and comprehensive peace.