

The Foreign Secretary's statement to the House of Commons on the situation in Gaza

12 Jan 2009

With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I will make a statement on the appalling situation in Gaza. As the House will know, the fighting continues, but the bald statistics of the rising death toll do justice neither to the scale of the suffering nor to the ramifications of the conflict.

I said at the United Nations last Tuesday that the crisis was an indictment of the international community's collective failure, over years and decades rather than just months, to bring about the two-state solution that offers the only prospect of lasting peace in the Middle East. However, there are more proximate causes of the current conflict.

The Gaza truce of June to December 2008 was less than a ceasefire. More than 300 rockets were fired into Israel, 18 Palestinians were killed in Israeli military incursions into Gaza, the humanitarian situation in Gaza went from bad to worse as the Israeli Government restricted the supply of goods, fuel and aid to Gaza, and the political negotiations for a viable Palestinian state proceeded too slowly.

However, the immediate trigger for Israeli military action on 27 December was the end of the truce. Hamas refused to extend the lull and instead fired almost 300 rockets into Israel between 19 and 27 December. Those rockets, and the hundreds fired since, were a cruel choice by Hamas to target Israeli civilians and to reject again the fragile peace negotiations that had been taking place between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government since the Annapolis conference in late 2007.

Whatever the trigger, however, the immediate consequence of the Israeli military action over the past fortnight is very clear indeed: more than 800 dead, many of them civilians and apparently more than 250 of them children—the most terrible statistic of all—and thousands injured. It is the horror of war on top of months of deprivation.

The Quartet envoy, Tony Blair, went so far as to call the situation in Gaza "hell". The shortages of food, fuel and medicine are acute. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency had to suspend its activities, which have fortunately been restarted. The Swedish Foreign Minister told me yesterday that a church-run medical centre had been bombed. The scale of the suffering that is already evident, before the full entry of journalists and other personnel, is immense.

Today, I met a group of leading independent non-governmental organisations that are active in delivering humanitarian aid in Gaza. Every day, those NGOs have to decide whether it is safe for staff to work there. Tragically, several have been killed or injured. The concerns of those NGOs bear reporting to the

House. Sixty trucks a day are currently entering Gaza—less than one sixth of the 400 deemed the minimum necessary. The current three-hour daily pause in fighting, although better than nothing, is deeply flawed in its practical effect. The blockages on people leaving Gaza for medical attention are profound.

Extremely serious allegations about the conduct of both sides during the conflict have been made by the International Committee of the Red Cross and others, and they must be properly investigated.

Since the beginning of Israeli military action in Gaza, both the Prime Minister and I have called publicly and privately for an immediate ceasefire. On the first day of the conflict, the UN Security Council, with the support of the British Government, called for an “immediate halt to the fighting”. The EU presidency also called for “an immediate end to hostilities” and described the use of force as “disproportionate”. The British Government support that view.

The emergency meeting of EU Foreign Ministers called, with my support, on 30 December for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, urgent humanitarian steps, including opening crossings, and action on the illegal traffic in arms and their components into Gaza.

On 3 January, we said that the escalation of the conflict to include a ground offensive would cause alarm and dismay—as well as more death and destruction.

Those issues were at the heart of three days of negotiations last week at the United Nations. Our priority was for a loud, clear and unified message to come from the Security Council. That was significantly achieved in resolution 1860, introduced in Britain’s name, and the product of intensive unified work by Secretary Rice, French Foreign Minister Kouchner and myself, working to find common ground with the Arab League delegation led by His Royal Highness Prince Saud of Saudi Arabia.

Security Council resolution 1860 is clear in its call for an “immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire” leading to full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. It also denounces all acts of terrorism. It summarises well the British Government’s agenda of action in the search for a ceasefire and sets out authoritatively what the international community expects to be implemented. The Prime Minister and I have been working on that over the weekend and will continue to focus on it this week.

First, relief is needed for the desperate humanitarian situation in Gaza. Emergency aid is essential, and Britain has added \$10 million to its aid contribution since the conflict began. We will continue to support the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent and other international agencies, which have the infrastructure and expertise to lead the humanitarian response in Gaza. But international aid agencies need the

wholehearted support of the Israeli Government, and I urge the Israeli Government to provide it. However, in truth only a ceasefire and opening the crossings on the basis of the 2005 Israel-Palestinian Authority agreement can deliver sustained progress.

Secondly, there need to be security improvements—above all a curb on the trafficking of illegal arms into Gaza. Those armaments are the source of fear for hundreds of thousands of Israelis, some of whom I talked to in Sderot in November. They are also a threat to any prospect of Palestinian reconciliation, designed as they are to entrench the power of Hamas in Gaza in defiance of President Abbas's call for "One Authority, one source of security". I spoke twice yesterday to Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit on the issue, and commend Egyptian efforts to develop further action on that front, and urge that the direct talks between Egypt and Israel are brought to a conclusion as soon as possible.

Finally, there is a political imperative to re-establish the unity of the Palestinian people under the leadership of the PA. I continue to be convinced that the division of Palestinian political authority needs to be addressed. Egypt and the Arab League continue to mediate between Fatah, Hamas, and the other Palestinian factions. The aim must be a strong Palestinian Authority, speaking for all Palestinians, committed to the two-state end and peaceful means upheld by the vast majority of Palestinians.

The United Nations resolution is clear, but so was the response. The passage of the resolution on Thursday night, New York time, was followed within hours by its rejection by both sides to the conflict.

The resolution calls on all states in the region to support peace efforts. The Prime Minister and I have been in close touch with the Israeli Government since the onset of the crisis. The Israeli Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister argued strongly against any UN resolution. Their argument is that there can be no equivalence between a democratic state and a terrorist organisation.

There is and can be no equivalence. Hamas has shown itself over a number of years ready to be murderous in word and deed. Its motif is "resistance" and its method includes terrorism. Israel is, meanwhile, a thriving, democratic state with an independent judiciary.

However, one consequence of the distinction between a democratic Government and a terrorist organisation is that democratic Governments are held to significantly higher standards, notably by their own people. That is one reason why we supported resolution 1860 - to uphold the standards on which Israel and the rest of us depend. As a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, Israel's best defence is to show leadership in finding a political solution to the crisis and comply with the standards of international humanitarian law.

A week before the onset of a new American presidency, immediate issues of life and death need to be addressed. We are working with Egypt, the US, European partners, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon and Syria, all of which are playing a role in talking to various of the parties. The UN Secretary-General is in the region today. The focus of all our efforts is to implement the resolution.

Over the past 40 years in the Middle East, the immediate has become the long term. Short-term conflict has become long-term division. So while the current hostilities require urgent attention and action, so too do the medium and long term, and war cannot address that.

The Government stand four-square behind UN Security Council resolutions 1850 and 1860, which call for renewed and urgent efforts by the parties and the international community to achieve a comprehensive peace. Security and justice for a Palestinian state depend on a political settlement that defends its existence and cherishes its rights.

Our vision must be of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace, with secure and recognised borders. As that vision comes under threat, it bears repeating. The Arab peace initiative, which offers Israel recognition by, and normalisation of relations with, the 22 Arab League states, and to which Israel's leaders had started at the end of last year to respond favourably, provides the right regional comprehensive vision for progress.

However, at a time of war on the current scale, those words can seem worthless. It is the war that pushes them out of reach; and that is one further reason why the current war needs to be brought to an end, before further loss of life renders the vision unattainable, as those committed to necessary compromise are marginalised.

Mr. Speaker, I hope that you will let me conclude on the following point. Peace benefits Israelis and Palestinians; war kills both. They are destined to live next door to each other. They can do so either as combatants or as neighbours. We are committed to help them do the latter. That is what Israelis need and what Palestinians need; it is also what we need, before it is too late.

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