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London SW1A 2AH

From The Minister of State

22 January 2009

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The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Tessa,

Thank you for your letter of 18 December to the Foreign Secretary about Israel and Palestine. I am replying as the Minister responsible for our relations with the Middle East.

In light of the announcement made over the weekend I wanted to give you an update on the situation and the progress made.

Ceasefire

We welcome the ceasefire in Gaza. Since the beginning of the current conflict, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary argued for an urgent, immediate and sustainable ceasefire. The Foreign Secretary was at the centre of the negotiations that led to the Security Council passing of UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1860 on 8 January.

In UNSCR 1860, the Security Council:

- Calls for an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire, leading to the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza;
- Calls for unimpeded provision and distribution of humanitarian supplies, welcomes the opening of humanitarian corridors and seeks greater international support for humanitarian relief and economic development;
- Condemns all violence and hostilities against civilians and acts of terrorism;
- Calls for action to prevent illicit trafficking in arms, and to ensure sustained re-opening of the Gaza crossings on the basis of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access;
- Encourages steps toward intra-Palestinian reconciliation; and
- Urges renewed and urgent efforts to reinvigorate the MEPP

The ceasefire is still fragile. For it to succeed and last, the focus must now be immediate access for humanitarian aid and on reconstruction, including removing unexploded ordnance, as well as preventing the smuggling of arms into Gaza and reopening the Gaza crossings.

The voice of the international community was loud and unequivocal in calling for an immediate, permanent and fully respected ceasefire. It is now imperative that Hamas prevent further rocket attacks against Israeli civilians.



We now need to see the UN and the other aid agencies allowed immediate access into the Gaza strip and a guarantee of their safety so they may do their vital work unhindered. The UK government will do all it can to secure peace and build a political process worthy of the needs of Israelis and Palestinians.

The EU

In December 2008, the European Council Declaration reaffirmed the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) as a top priority for the EU in 2009. The UK government is of the view that the EU should continue to put its collective weight behind efforts with international partners to achieve our shared priorities. The EU has an important role to play in the MEPP and the government will continue to work with the Czech Presidency and other EU partners to ensure the EU does all it can both practically and politically to drive the process forward.

Humanitarian needs

The humanitarian situation in Gaza was already severe before the current crisis began. The recent fighting significantly disrupted the distribution of humanitarian goods. The Prime Minister has announced a rapid and significant up-scaling of the UK's contribution to the international aid effort. We have made an additional pledge of up to £20 million to help meet needs in Gaza, bringing the total UK response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza to nearly £27 million since the conflict started. This will help address urgent humanitarian needs, such as food and fuel. This is in addition to ongoing commitments. In 2008, the UK provided over £75million of assistance for the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The Peace Process

There is no question that the current events in Gaza have required urgent attention and action. In the long term, however, the basis for stability in the Middle East must be a comprehensive, just, and lasting resolution to the peace process, based on a two-state solution involving a secure Israel alongside a viable Palestinian state, as foreseen by UNSCR 1850 and the Arab Peace Initiative. This will remain a high priority for the government and we shall encourage the new US Administration to pursue the peace process with vigour. Events in Gaza were a tragic reminder of the importance of progress on the peace process.

Yours sincerely

BILL RAMMELL