Guterres: Israel will be more secure if Palestinians have a state

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The Palestinians need to unify if they hope to achieve a state, and Israel will enjoy greater security and prosperity when that state comes into existence, UN Secretary- General Antonio Guterres said to separate audiences on Wednesday.

Guterres, on the final day of his three-day visit here – his first as the UN head – crossed over to Gaza at the Erez crossing, where his convoy was met by protesting family members of prisoners in Israeli jails.

He then went to an UNRWA school in Beit Lahiya, where he issued an appeal for Palestinian unity, saying that the division between Ramallah and Gaza “only undermines the cause of the Palestinian people.”

Guterres said his dream is of a day when there would be two states – Israel and Palestine – in the Holy Land. To pursue that end, he said, he has appealed for “a credible political process, in order to address the problems that exist and to allow for the two-state solution to be implemented, removing the obstacles on the ground.”

At the same time, there needs to be a program of action to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians, he said. It is important to remove the closure on the Gaza Strip, and also important “to avoid the buildup of the ‘militantism’ that can undermine the confidence between the two peoples.”

Guterres, who said he was “deeply impressed by the suffering of the Gaza people in these tragic circumstances,” announced the “immediate release of $4 million” to support UN activities inside the Strip.

He declared that what he saw in Gaza was “one of the most dramatic humanitarian crises that I have seen in many years working as a humanitarian in the United Nations.”

Before going into the Gaza Strip, Guterres – who received a helicopter tour and security briefing of the border area – met residents in a bomb shelter in nearby Kibbutz Nahal Oz.

Oshrit Sabag told Guterres that “we see a huge amount of money that is used in order to build terrorist tunnels and rockets instead of reconstructing the Gaza Strip.” She added, “We think that the people on the other side of the border suffer from Hamas terrorism just as we do.”

And Tammy Halevy, a resident of the kibbutz since 1960, said that “over the years, we had a great relationship with the people of Gaza, but today every time a rocket falls in Israel, it is hurting both Israelis and the people of Gaza. So we ask you to help us bring peace.”

Later in the day, Jason Greenblatt, the US special representative for international negotiations, also visited Nahal Oz, as part of a tour of the South he took with the coordinator of government activities in the territories, Maj.-Gen. Yoav Mordechai.

Mordechai stressed that it costs an estimated $200,000 to build 1 kilometer of an attack tunnel, money that could go instead to building hospitals and improving the living conditions in the Gaza Strip. “But Hamas’s priorities are first the military branches’ interests and terrorism, and only then, as a low priority, supporting the civil population,” he said.

Greenblatt said, “I again call upon Hamas to return the IDF soldiers, Hadar Goldin and Oren Shaul, who were taken by Hamas, and I call on Hamas to release the Israeli civilians they are holding – Avera Mangistu, Hisham al-Sayed and Jumaa Abu Ghanima.”

Guterres went from the South to Beit Hatfutsot – The Museum of the Jewish People in north Tel Aviv, where he said Israel would enjoy greater security and prosperity when Palestinians are living as citizens in their own state.

“These lands are the ancestral homelands of two peoples who both have an undeniable historical and religious bond to it,” he said. “Both have a right to live on it as independent, free people as masters of their own fate.”

Anyone visiting Israel, he continued, will have no doubt that it has fulfilled the rights and national aspirations of the Jews. “It is now overdue that the Palestinians also fulfill their legitimate rights and national aspirations.”

The UN secretary-general said that he remains firm in his belief that a two-state solution is the “only way forward,” and that he has and will continue to express disagreement in the face of “unilateral measures and facts on the ground that have or could undermine that solution, including settlement activities, but also continued violence, terrorism and incitement.”

Guterres said he was impressed by the families he met in Nahal Oz who expressed a desire for “peace and reconciliation” instead of a “natural feeling of anger.” This, he said, was a “fantastic example of solidarity, humanity and tolerance.”

Guterres began his speech by condemning antisemitism and the fact that “so many communities where Jews once lived and survived for so many centuries no longer exist, because of countless waves of persecution and genocide.”

He said he was ashamed that his own country, Portugal, “is marred by this history.”

Guterres called the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal in the 16th century a “hideous crime that caused tremendous suffering.” In addition, he added, “it was also a colossally stupid act that deprived Portugal of much of the country’s dynamism, and led to long periods of cultural and economic stagnation.”

He noted that when he was Portugal’s prime minister in the 1990s, parliament revoked the expulsion edict of 1496. “This was an admittedly symbolic act, but the spirit of repentance was genuine,” he said.

Guterres said that many of the Jews driven from Portugal moved to the Netherlands and helped build that country into a 17th-century power, until that community – as well – was devastated by the Holocaust.

“As we see again and again, antisemitism tends to come back,” and today it remains “disturbingly widespread,” the UN chief said. He mentioned the chants in Charlottesville early this month of “The Jews will not replace us” as an example.

And, he added, when he talks about antisemitism he is including “calls for the destruction of Israel.”

Israel, he said, is a “member state of the United Nations and bears all the responsibilities and enjoys all the rights of all member states, and therefore must be treated as such.”