

The Elders welcome Palestinian reconciliation

4 May 2011

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Elders applaud today's signing of an agreement between the rival Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas. The agreement, brokered by Egypt, unites the Palestinian leadership after a split of four years and paves the way for the formation of a national unity government and full elections in 2012.

The Elders believe that Palestinian political and geographical unity is an essential step on the path to statehood and lasting peace with Israel – and urge regional neighbours and the international community, especially the United States, Israel and the European Union, to give the unity government, once it is formed, their full support.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of The Elders said: “We encourage everyone to accept this development in a positive spirit. Much hard work remains to be done to translate the agreement into reality on the ground and I urge the leaders of both Fatah and Hamas to work cooperatively to present a united front in the interests of freedom for all Palestinians.”

Lakhdar Brahimi, former Algerian Foreign Minister said: “Egypt deserves credit for brokering the agreement, and for announcing the opening of its border with Gaza. Now all the broken links – human, economic and political – between Gaza and the West Bank need to be reconnected. Israel should follow Egypt's lead and lift all remaining barriers to the movement of people and legitimate goods between the two parts of the Palestinian Territory, as well as with the outside world.”

Former US President Jimmy Carter said: “If the Israeli Government is serious about making peace with the Palestinians it should welcome this important development. So should the United States. It is completely unacceptable that Israel is withholding border taxes and customs duties it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority as a punitive measure. These funds belong to the Palestinians and represent some 70 per cent of the PA's revenues. They are essential for the government to operate effectively.”

Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General said: “Now that there is Palestinian unity, there is a realistic possibility for genuine and meaningful negotiations between Palestine and Israel. Palestinian unity was said to be a prerequisite for any sustainable Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Palestinian reconciliation cannot now be used as yet another roadblock on the path to peace.”

Dr Gro Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway at the time of the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, said: "This agreement offers the international community an opportunity to work in earnest with Israel and the Palestinians to press for a genuine two-state solution. I urge the Israeli government to embrace this development rather than reject it."

The Elders urge the Palestinian Authority, under the leadership of a new unity government, to continue the institution-building programme of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. The international community should support this process.

The Quartet – the European Union, Russian Federation, United Nations and United States – should work closely with the Israeli Government and the united Palestinian leadership to restart talks urgently, ensuring that they are based on international law and respect for human rights.

The Elders also call on Fatah and Hamas to each release the political prisoners they hold, and create an enabling environment on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza that will allow election campaigning to take place without any hindrance. The Palestinian security services must remain neutral and not interfere in politics.

ABOUT THE ELDERS

The Elders is an independent group of global leaders brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007, who work together for peace and human rights.

The Elders are Martti Ahtisaari, Kofi Annan, Ela Bhatt, Lakhdar Brahimi, Gro Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Jimmy Carter, Graça Machel, Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu (Chair). Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi are honorary Elders.

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