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High Representative for Disarmament Affairs**

**Fourth Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone
Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Monday, 13 November 2023, 10:00 AM, Trusteeship Council Chamber

Your Excellency, Ambassador Dennis Francis, President of the General Assembly,

Mister President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to address this Conference on behalf of Secretary-General António Guterres.

Allow me to start by extending my warm congratulations to you, Ambassador Taher El-Sonni, on your endorsement as the President of the fourth session of the Conference. I assure you and the Members to the Conference of the full support of my Office for your endeavor to steer this session towards a successful outcome.

I would also like to express deep appreciation to Lebanon for its able leadership of the third session.

Situation in the Middle East

Today, I came to this Opening Session of the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction with a heavy heart, anguish, pain and sorrow that I had never felt in my more than 30 years of UN career. As you might be aware, we just observed a minute of silence to

mourn and honor 101 UNRWA colleagues who lost their lives in Gaza in service of others.

Last year, in my statement before this Conference, I spoke of the increasing geopolitical tensions and conflicts in the world, and the strain these put on multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation regimes, as well as on other important areas of the work of the United Nations.

A year on, we are witnessing a crisis of humanity unfolding in front of our eyes in Gaza. The geopolitical and security situation has worsened and relations among major powers have further strained, and the world is facing two wars and several internal conflicts.

For over a month now, we have witnessed a spiraling escalation of hostilities in Gaza that has led to a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. We are also witnessing the growing risk of a dangerous expansion of the conflict in the West Bank and well as the wider region.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly condemned the abhorrent acts of terror perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October and continuously called for the immediate, unconditional, and safe release of hostages held in Gaza. I echo his unequivocal words.

In Gaza, as ground operations by the Israel Defense Forces intensify, the relentless Israeli bombardment continues hitting civilians, hospitals, refugee camps, mosques, churches, and UN facilities – including shelters.

The Secretary-General is, and I am, deeply concerned about clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing in the ongoing conflict. Let me repeat the clear, unequivocal position of the United Nations that no party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law. Even wars have rules.

Let me also join the Secretary-General's call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to allow for life-saving aid to reach those who urgently and desperately need it.

He has urged the international community to act now to find a way out of this agonizing and unbearable dead-end of destruction and to any further human suffering and loss of civilian lives. Cool heads and diplomatic efforts must prevail. No effort should be spared to help pave the way to peace, to a two-State solution with Israelis and Palestinians living in peace and security. There is an enduring and urgent need to address the root causes of the conflict, including through a broader peace and security architecture in the region, of which a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear and other Weapons of Mass Destruction should be an important part.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Against the backdrop of this crisis, the decision by Members to the Conference to continue the important work of the Conference has demonstrated your collective will to use dialogue and diplomacy in seeking common security and regional peace, and in line with the vision of the Secretary-General in his *New Agenda for Peace*.

Any threat to use nuclear weapons is inadmissible. This further illustrates the urgency and imperative to achieve the objective of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

Since its inception five years ago, the Conference has kept its momentum and achieved encouraging outcomes at successive sessions. Members to the Conference have reaffirmed their commitment to an open and inclusive process, have engaged constructively in dialogues and substantive deliberations on many key aspects related to the establishment of the Middle East zone. Such dialogues and exchanges have contributed to building confidence and to reducing distrust among the participating

States. I would like to congratulate each of the past Presidents for their leadership and diplomatic skills in steering the process.

The fourth session under the Presidency of Libya will continue to address some of the key issues of the future Middle East zone treaty, including verification and peaceful uses as agreed among Members to the Conference. The importance of effective verification cannot be understated, as it ensures compliance and fosters trust among the parties to a future zone. Promoting peaceful uses is another key pillar of a future zone, as it allows parties to the zone to benefit from peaceful uses and technical cooperation for social and economic development and serves as a key incentive for States to join the future zone.

I understand that this session will also explore means to enhance the working method of the Conference, with a view to increasing the effectiveness of the working committee. I wish you success in your effort.

We recognize that the path towards the establishment of a Middle East zone through the elaboration of a legally binding treaty will not be smooth sailing. The incremental approach that this Conference has adopted is working well in preparing States for initiating future negotiation of a zone treaty. I reiterate the call for the full participation of all States in the region and urge the international community to provide their strong support to this process. The achievement of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction will significantly contribute, not only to global disarmament and non-proliferation process, but also to peace and security of the Middle East and beyond.

I wish you success in your deliberations and I thank you very much for your attention.

