

Speech by His Excellency President Michel Sleiman 63rd Session of the UN General Assembly

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Mr. President,

I begin by congratulating you on your election as President of the 63rd session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, representing Nicaragua and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean with whom Lebanon maintains the best political and human relations, thanks in particular to the presence of millions of Lebanese and people from Lebanese descent in that hospitable area.

I would also like to thank the outgoing President, Ambassador Srgjan Kerim, for his efforts and good management of the work of the previous session.

I especially thank His Excellency the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for his valuable report on the activities of the Organization for this year, and for his keenness on attaching a high priority to the issues of Lebanon within the overall mandate entrusted to him.

Through its follow-up of the situation in Lebanon, the United Nations has contributed in laying the foundations, guidelines and binding principles for addressing the crises and challenges that have been confronting Lebanon's stability and prosperity for decades. On this occasion, I cannot but express my appreciation for the role of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) within the peacekeeping operations, and I pay tribute to the sacrifices it has made. I also commend the Secretary-General for the tribute he made in his last report to the close cooperation between UNIFIL and the Lebanese Army in implementing the delicate and important mandate of that Force. In this regard, I would like to stress Lebanon's keenness on providing security and safety to those troops in the face of terrorist attacks.

Mr. President,

Lebanon is the cradle of an old and ancient civilization. Its peace-loving and courageous people set sail from their peaceful shores towards the European continent, carrying with them elements of an advanced alphabet, and spreading in the Mediterranean realm and whatever horizons they were able to open, the spirit of communication, dialogue, and free exchange.

Lebanon is also a country that believes in the values of humanity and civilization. It represents the oldest parliamentary democracy in the Middle East. Its constitution that goes back to 1926 embraces freedom of opinion, freedom of belief, and justice and rejects confessionism and intolerance. In its endeavor to put this democracy into practice, our nation experienced a distinctive alternation of power through the organization of periodic municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections despite all the crises, aggressions and wars that hindered for some time the capacity of its central authority and the normal functioning of its institutions. Today, our country is preparing for new parliamentary elections in the spring of 2009.

As a founding member of the United Nations, Lebanon participated, through Dr. Charles Malik, one of its most prominent representatives, in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since the middle of the last century, my country has become a cultural, medical, educational, tourist and banking hub for the Middle East and a forum for free opinion.

The young Lebanese nation that emerged in 1943, however, suffered from the aftermath of the catastrophe that befell Palestine in 1948. It has received on its narrow territory hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. Since the late sixties, it has been subject to two large scale Israeli invasions, and a series of Israeli devastating attacks that wreaked havoc in terms of lives, property and infrastructure. The records kept by this Organization bear witness to their brutality. We recall the two massacres of Qana that were perpetrated against innocent children, women and elderly, as well as the aggression of July 2006 in which thousands were killed and wounded, tens of thousands displaced, and bridges and civilian facilities destroyed in different parts of the country. The Israeli bombardment of the Jiyeh power plant and its fuel storage tanks caused an environmental catastrophe resulting from an oil slick along the Lebanese coastline. The scale of that catastrophe prompted the General Assembly of the United Nations to request Israel to assume responsibility for immediate and adequate compensation to Lebanon for the damage and pollution it caused. The government of Lebanon will continue to seek, at the international level, to force Israel to pay due compensation for the full damage it caused through its repeated aggressions against Lebanon.

Mr. President,

The United Nations has not hesitated to shoulder its responsibilities and fulfill the demands of Lebanon in the face of those attacks. The Organization issued a series of resolutions in support of its independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, notably resolution 425, which called for an immediate and unconditional Israeli withdrawal from all Lebanese territory, and resolution 1701 which "calls upon the Government of Israel to withdraw all of its forces from southern Lebanon." Lebanon reiterates its commitment to the full content of that resolution.

However, the intransigence of Israel and its failure to comply with the will of the United Nations Security Council, and its persistence in maintaining its occupation, practices, and aggressions pushed Lebanon to adopt, in conjunction with diplomacy, other legitimate options. In 2000, and thanks to its people, army, and resistance, Lebanon was able to force Israel to withdraw from most of the Lebanese territory that it occupied. This year, successful efforts were made, with the help of the United Nations, to complete the liberation of the Lebanese prisoners and detainees from Israeli prisons and detention centers.

Mr. President,

Despite these achievements and its continued commitment to the resolutions of the international legitimacy, Lebanon still faces a host of urgent risks and challenges, notably the following:

The international community should compel Israel to fully implement resolution 1701 and stop its serious threats to launch a new war against Lebanon. Such threats are acts of aggression that adversely affect the Lebanese state, its public facilities and infrastructure. They also adversely affect all components of the civil society and have severe impact on the national economy.

The recovery or liberation of the remaining occupied Lebanese territory in Shebaa Farms, the hills of Kfarshuba, and the northern part of the village of Al-Ghajar, and upholding our right to our waters in the face of Israeli ambitions.

Forcing Israel to stop its extensive air breaches of Lebanon's sovereignty. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations confirmed in its most recent briefing to the Security Council their provocative nature and high frequency.

Obtaining all the maps of landmines and sites of cluster bombs planted and left behind by Israel on Lebanese soil. Their presence constitutes a direct threat to the civilian population, especially children, and deprives the farmers and workers of cultivating their land. The States concerned are therefore called upon to meet their pledges to provide the necessary sources of funding to complete the demining program and get rid of those deadly bombs.

Confronting terrorism in all its forms and maintaining internal peace. The Lebanese Army and the Internal Security Forces have been subject to brutal attacks by terrorist groups in recent years. They were forced to confront them and make dear and huge sacrifices to defend the dignity of Lebanese, their security and stability. In their efforts to combat Israeli terrorist operations, the Lebanese security services managed to arrest the head of an Israeli network that carried out operations of espionage and assassinations on Lebanese soil.

Developing a comprehensive national strategy to protect and defend Lebanon that would be agreed upon in the dialogue which I convened on the 16th of September, pursuant to the provisions of the Doha Agreement. This dialogue is based first and foremost on the genuine desire to promote national entente and reconciliation and the extension of the authority of the Lebanese State over all its territory.

On this occasion, Lebanon reiterates its commitment to the tribunal of international character established under Security Council resolution 1757 to investigate the crime of assassination of martyr Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his companions. Lebanon is cooperating with the relevant organs of the United Nations to bring the truth to light and achieve the process of justice away from politicization.

Mr. President,

Following up closely the developments of the situation in the Middle East, and in view of its commitment to Arab causes, especially the just cause of Palestine, and of the direct implications such developments have on its security and stability, Lebanon reiterates its commitment to the process of achieving just and comprehensive peace in the region and to the Arab peace initiative that was unanimously adopted by the Arab leaders at the 2002 Beirut Summit. Having said that, Lebanon stresses the need for Israel to withdraw from all Arab territories that are still under occupation. Lebanon also stresses the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to establish their independent state on their national territory, with Jerusalem as its capital.

In this context, Lebanon calls also on the international community to assume its full responsibilities to provide the necessary financial resources to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) that is in charge of providing humanitarian and livelihood relief to the Palestinian refugees, along with the work done by the Lebanese state in this area, pending a just and final solution to their cause, in accordance with the

resolutions of international legitimacy.

From this rostrum, Lebanon, however, cannot but draw the attention of the international community once again to its absolute rejection of any form of resettlement of the Palestinian refugees on its territory, for the following main reasons:

The resettlement of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon runs counter to their humanitarian and legal right to return to their homeland and homes, which is a right reaffirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the relevant United Nations resolutions.

It is difficult for a small country like Lebanon, with limited resources and whose population does not exceed four million people, to provide a decent livelihood for more than 400 thousand Palestinian refugees on its territory, at a time when large segments of the Lebanese people are emigrating in search of livelihood.

Rejection of resettlement is explicitly stipulated by the Lebanese constitution, provided for by the Taif Agreement which has been recognized and enshrined by the resolutions of the United Nations and constitutes a key element of the consensus in Lebanon.

Mr. President,

While the issues of Lebanon and the Middle East are at the center of attention of the United Nations, the agenda of our General Assembly is full of items and political, economic, social and environmental topics that are still looking for integrated solutions or adequate sources of funding for their implementation.

In this context, Lebanon interacts in a special way with the needs and aspirations of the African continent, for it belongs with many of its States to the group of French-speaking countries. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have been living on its generous soil for over a century, working hard, and making a living while contributing to its growth and development in very difficult conditions. In this context, we would like to express our support for the outcome document issued yesterday by the High-level Meeting on Africa's Development Needs.

In this regard, a larger international effort should be made to finance programs that combat poverty, disease, and illiteracy, as a means to preserve human dignity and prevent further armed conflicts.

We hope in this regard that a more effective project for solidarity in facing natural disasters would be quickly and efficiently finalized in view of the increasing risk resulting from climate change, global warming, environment degradation and the spread of wild fires in forests and green spaces.

Mr. President,

Deeply rooted in history and having contributed, with the rise of nationalist movements, in shaping the Arab renaissance at the political, cultural, intellectual and social levels, and being a founding member of the League of Arab States, Lebanon is keen on preserving Arab solidarity and the joint Arab action and on establishing the best of relations with its Arab brethren. In this context, on 13 August of this year, I paid an official visit to Syria. During that visit, principles and mechanisms have been agreed upon and documented in the joint statement issued on that occasion, including the agreement on the establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries, follow-up on the cases of missing persons, and border demarcation and control, on the basis of coordination, consultation and ensuring the common interest. While those issues are bilateral issues, they constitute, however, topics of interest to the United Nations and are being followed-up in periodic reports prepared by the Secretary-General.

Lebanon plays a leading role at the Arab level and pays equal attention to the activities and mechanisms of action of the United Nations and the specialized international organizations. More than sixty years ago, and following a ravaging war, a group of nations decided to shape a better future for their children and for the world by renewing the idea of cooperation and unity among nations in this Organization in a bid to maintain international peace and security and pursue global social and economic interdependence, with a view to contributing to the protection of human rights in all its forms. While mankind has been able to avoid global new wars, the growing regional conflicts, the emergence of international terrorism as a phenomenon that transcends country borders, the uncertainties marring the globalized economy, and the emergence of the global food crisis, threaten further low-intensity wars that might break out in more than one region or more than one area.

Therefore, Lebanon stresses the need to reassess and reactivate the role of the United Nations as a stabilizing, central, and active component in the global system. It stresses also the imperative need to reform the Organization so that it would be in line with the new international reality. This includes reforming the United Nations Security Council with a view to increasing democracy in its work, representation, and ability to implement its decisions.

Mr. President,

Since 1974, Lebanon has sought to become a major regional center for the United Nations. It had embarked on taking steps towards that end, in coordination with the Secretariat of the United Nations, before the events of 1975 took place. My country, however, has made significant strides in this area since designating Beirut as headquarters of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and other bodies of the United Nations.

In this regard, Lebanon is pleased to announce that it has submitted its candidacy for an Asia-allocated non-permanent seat on the Security Council, for the period 2010 - 2011. As a democratic country endowed with a spirit of coexistence and dialogue, and representative of the Arab Group that endorsed this nomination, which has been also endorsed by the Asian Group, my country pledges to bring serious and sincere contribution to the Council. We hope this nomination would gain endorsement and support from all friendly countries. The last time Lebanon occupied such high-level post goes back to 1953-1954.

Mr. President,

The philosophy of the Lebanese entity has been based on dialogue, reconciliation and coexistence from the day its citizens agreed on the document of National Covenant in 1943, and subsequently on the document of National Reconciliation approved in Taif in 1989, which has been repeatedly stressed by the 2008 Doha Agreement.

In the face of the worsening international conflicts that herald a potential clash of civilizations, Lebanon might well represent an international need and a real laboratory for dialogue of cultures and religions.

In his two letters of 1989 and 1997, His Holiness late Pope John Paul II considered Lebanon "more than a country; it's a message; a model of freedom and pluralism in the East and West and a space for dialogue and coexistence among different cultures and religions."

With eighteen different sects coexisting on its soil, and having successfully preserved its democratic system and fundamental freedoms in spite of all challenges, Lebanon aspires today to become an international center for the management of dialogue of civilizations and cultures, hoping that the forces of good in the world would prevail, and that the peace process in the region would bring a just and comprehensive solution to all aspects of the conflict in the Middle East as soon as possible.

I thank you, Mr. President.