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The Crisis in the Middle East

Speech delivered by F W de Klerk to the University of Kansas.

The United States and the international community should act swiftly and firmly to defuse conflict situations wherever and whenever they arise. The current conflict in the Middle East is, unfortunately, a good example of both the challenge that the international community faces in this regard and of the risks that such conflict can hold for the entire world.

The spiralling violence between Israel and the Palestinians:

- threatens the stability of the entire Middle Eastern region;
- it has already begun to affect oil production and can easily lead to a major economic crisis; and
- the conflict is causing enormous strains in relations between Moslems throughout the world and the West – and in particular, the United States.

The passions that it has unleashed have created the environment in which fanatics – such as Osama bin Laden – can flourish. This fanaticism was in turn the direct cause of the tragic events of 11 September.

For all of these reasons the United States, as the pre-eminent world power, cannot afford to allow the conflict to spiral further out of control. Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, peace in the Middle East is too important to the key interests of whole international community to be left to the Israelis and the Palestinians.

The Israelis and the Palestinians are simply going to have to find some way of learning to live together.

Although the situation looks desperate, I do not believe that it is hopeless. It reminds me of the dreadful period that South Africa went through between 1984 and 1987. We also, were confronted by our own version of the intefada; we also resorted to draconian security measures to restore order; we also experienced growing international isolation and condemnation.

But we pulled back from the brink. We discovered that there was another way: that it was possible to solve our long-standing and bitter dispute through peaceful means. In the process, we learned the following lessons:

- We could not dictate with whom we would negotiate. Whether we liked it or not we had to sit eye-ball to eye-ball with people whom we for generations had regarded as terrorists and who regarded us as oppressors;
- We found that the negotiations had to be as inclusive as possible. For that reason we invited all parties with significant support to join the process;
- All sides had to take enormous risks;
- All sides had to make very painful compromises; and
- All sides had to accommodate the reasonable concerns and interests of others.

Finally we emerged with a new constitution that guarantees the individual and communal rights of all our people and which is enabling us to live together with one another in peace and co-operation. Our own challenge in South Africa will be to build on this foundation.

If we could solve our seemingly hopeless problems, the Israelis and the Palestinians should also be able to do so as well. The United States and the rest of the international community can play a major role:

- by urging the parties to cease all violent acts and to return to the negotiations; by insisting that both sides should make the real concessions that will be essential to reach a just and last peace;
- and by giving cast-iron guarantees that the agreement that the parties reach will be honoured by all.

The most eloquent response to the terror attacks of Bin Laden would be to achieve a settlement that would ensure the security of Israel, living in harmony with a viable Palestinian state.