

**Statement by Mr. Gokhool on the situation in the Middle East,
including the Palestinian question – 3 May 2002**

Let me first of all congratulate you, Sir, on assuming the presidency of the Security Council for this month. We wish you every success. I also seize this opportunity to commend the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation for the excellent manner in which he conducted the work of the Council last month.

I thank you, Sir, for organizing this public meeting to further discuss the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. Since our last public meeting, there have been a number of developments on the ground.

The month-long siege of Chairman Arafat's Ramallah headquarters has now been lifted and the leader of the Palestinian people can at last move freely. We see this as a very important development that should now ease the tension on the ground and pave the way for the resumption of a meaningful political process. My delegation wishes to acknowledge the various high-level diplomatic efforts of the past few days and commends the efforts undertaken by the United States and the United Kingdom that made the lifting of the Ramallah siege possible. At the same time, we deplore the fact that the appeal made by President Bush for an immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied Palestinian territories has not been heeded.

The lifting of the siege on Chairman Arafat and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Ramallah can by no account be an occasion for celebration. We have seen various media reports showing the high degree of devastation sustained by the Palestinian Authority over the past weeks. The infrastructure of Palestinian civilian life has been destroyed, as have many of the institutions set up by the Oslo Accords. It is no exaggeration to say that Palestinian society has been reduced to ruins. The international community should step up its efforts and solidly engage in the rebuilding of Palestinian society, so that normalcy can soon return to the lives of the Palestinian people.

Mauritius understands the security concerns of Israel, including its right to protect its people from terrorist attacks, but it should be clear to Israel and to all that self-defence is not a blank cheque. Responding to terrorism in no way frees Israel from its obligations under international law, nor does it justify any violation of human rights and humanitarian laws in the occupied Palestinian territories.

It is unacceptable that the siege of the Church of the Nativity has now entered its second month and that around 200 people are still caught in there. We also condemn once again the use of the Church as a sanctuary by militants. We call upon Israel to immediately lift the siege of the Church, which would prevent a real human tragedy in a site holy to the Christian faith. We also call upon the international community and world leaders to exercise all their influence on the Israeli authorities to put an end to this crisis.

Another area which continues to monopolize the attention of the international community is the situation in the Jenin refugee camp. After the outcry of the international community over the devastation and possible massacre perpetrated in Jenin, Secretary- General Kofi Annan, in all his wisdom, set up a factfinding team that would have produced an accurate report on the recent events in the Jenin refugee camp. The international community had full confidence in the distinguished personalities chosen by the Secretary- General to lead the fact-finding team.

The Security Council, through its resolution 1405 (2002), supported that important and bold initiative of the Secretary-General, which initially had the support of the Israeli authorities. Even the Foreign and Defence Ministers of Israel had assured the Secretary-General that Israel would cooperate fully with the team. Israel even stated that it had nothing to hide over what took place in Jenin. We were relieved that at last the international community would know the facts about Jenin and whether or not there were civilians massacred.

However, we are now faced with the situation in which the Secretary-General has disbanded the factfinding team because of the uncooperative attitude of Israel. We are all aware that, over the past 12 days, Israel has constantly created obstacles and raised concerns related to the composition of the team, the scope of its mandate and various other procedural matters. This Israeli challenge of the Secretary-General and rebuff to the Council is

unacceptable and should be condemned. Israel's behaviour is tantamount to intolerable arrogance and defiance of the international community. The uncooperative attitude of Israel and its non-compliance with various Security Council resolutions, including resolution 1405 (2002), put in peril the whole architecture of the United Nations. It is a further blow to the credibility of the Council. Each Member State should feel duty-bound and both legally and morally responsible to uphold the principles enshrined in the Charter of our Organization. Israel cannot be an exception.

Ever since the setting up of the fact-finding team, Israel has constantly shown obvious signs of noncooperation with it. The Council should have moved collectively and decisively to ensure the implementation of resolution 1405 (2002) by Israel. We should have adopted stronger language forcing Israel to accept the fact-finding team without conditions.

The disbanding of the fact-finding team today is or may be the price we have to pay for our reluctance and hesitation in the Council. Our inability to take appropriate and timely action has raised several questions about our role as the organ responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security. The questions are indeed legitimate. What we have seen over the past 12 days constitutes a dangerous precedent in the Council, which will surely be used by other countries in any similar situation, thereby weakening the credibility of the Security Council as well as the authority of the Secretary-General. It is the integrity of the international system which is imperilled by not having a level playing field and having double standards. We believe that the Arab Group was right in submitting its draft resolution for a vote yesterday in the early hours.

The lead figures of the "quartet" held an important meeting yesterday in Washington, and we welcome the announcement on the holding of a Middle East peace conference later this year. We urge all the parties to fully seize such a historic opportunity, which could eventually fulfil Israel's aspiration and great need to live within secure and recognized borders and give the Palestinian people their long-overdue homeland. We believe that the proposal presented by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah and endorsed by the Arab leaders constitutes an important basis for deliberation by the conference.

Finally, Mauritius welcomes the statement made by the Israel Minister of Defence requesting a resumption of the peace negotiations. We believe

that the success of the Middle East peace conference depends on numerous factors, and that one of them is full respect for the recently adopted Security Council resolutions. Israel should also immediately withdraw from the entire West Bank. It is important that as from now, all the parties, as well as the international community, start preparing the ground for the conference. Both Prime Minister Sharon and President Arafat have a heavy responsibility. They should stand ready to guide their people in this trying moment. History will not excuse them for any failure.