

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

INFORMATION AND PRESS DEPARTMENT



32/34 Smolenskaya-Sennaya pl., 119200, Moscow G-200; tel.: (095) 244 4119, fax: 244 4112
e-mail: dip@mid.ru, web-address: www.mid.ru

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**Transcript of Remarks by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov
Following Meeting with Hamas Delegation, Moscow, March 3, 2006**

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Foreign Minister Lavrov: Talks took place today at the Russian Foreign Ministry with a delegation of the Hamas movement led by head of its politburo Khaled Mashaal, which won a majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council during recent democratic, open and fair elections. This movement is now forming in contact with PNA Head Mahmoud Abbas a new PNA government. The invitation to Moscow was made, as you know, by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, in order to start a concrete and substantive dialogue with the Hamas movement on the issues which are of key significance to the prospects of Palestinian-Israeli settlement, and more broadly, to the Middle East peace process.

We are satisfied with the talks. The Hamas delegation clearly declared that their chief aim is to secure peace in the region and prevent the situation from exploding, as also prevent the situation from ending in impasse.

An absolute immediate priority for Hamas, as this organization's leaders told us, is to solve the acute economic and social problems afflicting the Palestinian people. Poverty, destitution, socially unsolved tasks, unemployment, corruption - these are all on the agenda of a government which is now being formed and will exercise power in the Palestinian territories.

In response to a question put by us the Hamas people firmly declared that all of the assistance that will be sent to the PNA will arrive precisely in the PNA's accounts. Hamas won't use this aid for any other purposes. Besides, financial resources which will flow directly to Hamas, also will be used solely for economic and social needs in order to ensure the functioning of the territories, for support of the population, the solution of social problems and implementation of infrastructure projects. Again in response to our question, the Hamas movement said that it will be ready to ensure a complete transparency and accountability of the spending of all the external funds to arrive in the Palestinian territories. They are ready to create for this purpose an oversight mechanism involving countries of the region and generally a monitoring mechanism of an international character. I consider that this is a very important statement. We presume that this promise will be realized. It will help remove many questions as to how to further provide aid to the Palestinian people.

It is very important that the movement is aware of its responsibility, as the party which won

the parliamentary elections, for the maintenance of law and order in the Palestinian territories. It is especially gratifying that the Hamas leaders clearly declared their intention, and contacts have already begun to this effect, to cooperate most closely with PNA Head Mahmoud Abbas. We, of course, backed up this disposition.

We discussed the prospects for restarting the peace process. For understandable reasons an involuntary pause has now arisen in settlement. A government is being formed in Palestine; elections are due in Israel. But still, we expressly conveyed to the leadership of Hamas the coordinated position of the Quartet of international mediators on the necessity of fulfilling all the criteria that were formulated in the Quartet's statement at the end of January this year. It is, above all, the necessity of commitment to all the existing accords in the peace process, the necessity of recognizing the right of Israel to exist as a partner in negotiations, and the necessity of giving up armed methods of dealing with political issues.

The Hamas movement understands that in its new capacity, having acquired a new status, it bears responsibility to the Palestinians not only for ensuring life in the territories, but also for achieving a lasting settlement, of which an inalienable part must be the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian State that will live side by side with Israel and which must live in security and prosperity.

The Hamas leader said that Hamas would be ready to fulfill the accords that had previously been reached, including the Roadmap, including the Arab peace initiative envisaging recognition of Israel in exchange for the settlement of all the issues of termination of the occupation, and which were approved in the UN Security Council, providing that movement must be on both sides and that both sides, the Palestinians as well as the Israelis, must scrupulously fulfill the obligations assumed. This is an important statement. I won't give overly optimistic forecasts, but this is a step in the right direction. There is a long way to go to resume the peace process, to agree the parameters that would allow for return to the negotiation table, though, and we agreed to continue contacts with the Hamas leadership, as they settle down in Palestinian structures, as the newly constituted Palestinian parliament starts to work at full steam, as a Palestinian government is formed.

We, of course, will inform all our Quartet partners of the contacts held, and will inform major countries of the region. We have been working in the same direction in which discussions had been held in Arab countries with Hamas. We expect that all these our joint efforts will help reach the goals that the international mediators and the UN have set, and that in the foreseeable future we will be able to make the next step, and eventually, resume the so much needed talks for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement.

March 3, 2006