

**Middle East conflict -
Lebanon. UN press releases:
Middle East conflict - L...**

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Press Release

Press conference by Sir Leslie Munro, President of the General Assembly, held at UN Headquarters

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NOTE TO CORRESPONDENTS

PRESS CONFERENCE BY SIR LESLIE MUNRO, PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY,
HELD AT HEADQUARTERS ON FRIDAY, 22 AUGUST 1958

Sir Leslie MUNRO: Ladies and gentlemen, before you proceed to question me, I am going to read out to you a statement which I have here, and which will be distributed at the end of the meeting.

My most outstanding impression of the emergency session is its success in providing a forum in which the Arab States were able to reach the beginnings of a modus vivendi. The Assembly has often been criticized as an unwieldy body. But it has the supreme advantage, on a compulsive occasion, of bringing together Foreign Ministers of key areas and, on this occasion, the President of the United States. It affords Foreign Ministers opportunities behind the scenes and, with the help of the officers of the Organization, of meeting and of harmonizing their objectives. This certainly proved true in the events which led to the Arab resolution. I earnestly hope that this resolution will be translated into action and that we do not lose the momentum created by the meeting of the emergency Assembly.

For the most part -- in fact with remarkably few exceptions -- the Assembly's debates at this third emergency special session were conducted, in consonance with my original appeal, on a very high level and with commendably little recourse to recrimination or invective. President Eisenhower's address and his constructive proposals set the pattern for much of the debate. The Organization and its Member Governments can take pride in the fact that the session was marked by such seriousness of purpose and moderation of approach. There was every understanding of the seriousness of the security situation in the Middle East and the precariousness of the balance of peace in that critical area.

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The debate was far-reaching, and most delegations addressed themselves not merely to the immediate issue arising out of the presence of Anglo-American forces in Lebanon and Jordan but to the complex of economic and social problems facing the Arab States, as well as the problems ensuing from relations between the Arab States and the non-Arab members of the Middle East community.

As I see it, the resolution unanimously adopted by the Assembly -- and that unanimity is of great significance in itself -- has as one of its main achievements the introduction of United Nations processes, particularly through the Secretary-General, in the adjustment of relations among the Arab States immediately concerned. It is in the field of negotiation and political détente that the Organization and its Secretary-General have a unique contribution to make.

The Soviet draft resolution did not ignore this aspect although it concentrated on a demand for an immediate withdrawal of foreign forces. The Norwegian draft -- we are all greatly indebted to Mr. Engen -- properly gave a much greater emphasis to the role assumed by the United Nations. There were, of course, as we know, a great many other suggestions made informally and a large number of draft resolutions prepared. A significant aspect of this Assembly is that so many delegations attempted initiatives in drafting resolutions and seeking a basis for an acceptable settlement.

This background should not be overlooked in viewing the Arab initiative which produced final unanimity. In fact, the whole process of United Nations consideration, in the Security Council as well as in the Assembly, emphasizes the ability of the Organization to encourage reconciliation and the abatement of differences. The United Nations, in circumstances of this kind, retains the capacity to bring about results unobtainable in smaller groupings (e.g. the Arab League), while at the same time recognizing the part which groupings of this kind can play. But the solution which is now to be sought in efforts of the Secretary-General is a United Nations solution, one in which not merely the countries immediately concerned are involved, not merely the Great Powers, but all countries, great and small, Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern.

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It is my hope, as I said to the Assembly yesterday, that deeds will flow from the resolution which will help to make more effective in the Middle East the principles of the United Nations Charter. The future lies not in words but in deeds. What is to be sought most earnestly is a détente among the independent Arab countries most intimately involved in the present dispute. The greatest need in the area is an end to incitement to violent change and to the kind of provocation which has so sharpened tension in the last few months and weeks. I would not speculate in detail as to the form of the United Nations representation to be established in the area until the Secretary-General has been able to explore the possibilities more fully with the Governments concerned.

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Finally, this was not, as was written elsewhere in the course of the debate, a "lost adventure." All mankind and all of us in the United Nations are engaged on an adventure -- one for the good of mankind. In this latest adventure we have all advanced in agreement. The responsibility for the fulfilment of that agreement lies primarily with the Member Governments in the Middle East, assisted by the Great Powers and under the harmonizing influence of the United Nations and its officers.

Ladies and gentlemen, I shall endeavour to answer your questions.

Mr. Alexander GABRIEL (Transradio News Agency): Sir Leslie, I should like to ask you, if it is permissible and if you are in a position to answer this question, to what extent has the Secretary-General real, genuine initiative to point out decisive situations beyond the rather vague mandate that is given to him in the Assembly's resolution?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: He will confer with Governments and I think he is authorized, after conversations, to make such suggestions as he may have in mind for the purpose of perpetuating or at least ensuring peace and tranquillity in the area.

Mr. William CATIS (Associated Press): From your conversations with representatives in the Assembly, was it your impression that the Norwegian resolution had enough votes to pass?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: Yes, I think so.

Mr. William FRYE (Christian Science Monitor): Are you available for appointment as Commissioner to Lebanon or to Jordan or both?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I am glad you asked me that question, Mr. Frye, because I understand that my name has been mentioned. Now I want to make this perfectly clear, that no suggestion has been made to me about it by anybody -- none whatever -- and I do want to correct any impression that this proposal has been made to me or that it has my authority. It has none whatever. This is a matter exclusively for the Secretary-General, and there has been no discussion between him and me about it.

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Mr. William FRYE (Christian Science Monitor): Are you indicating that you would prefer not to accept such an appointment?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: No, I am not indicating that. What I am saying is that if ever I am asked to discharge a task for the United Nations, then of course I would give it the most serious consideration. But it is most proper for me to emphasize, with all the strength at my command, that I am not responsible for this suggestion nor has any suggestion been made to me.

Mrs. Kay Rainey GRAY (Greenwich Time): Sir Leslie, do you think that the momentum gathered by this emergency session is sufficient to have an item, an Arab-Israeli item, on the next General Assembly agenda?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I cannot answer you specifically on that. There will be a report by the Secretary-General to the Assembly, as you know, and I think that you have to see the nature of that report before I could possibly answer that question for you and, as you know, an item can be put down later in the Assembly with the consent of the General Committee, with the recommendation of the General Committee or by the decision of the General Assembly itself. I feel that when you ask me that question it is really most important to wait and see what the Secretary-General says.

Miss Pauline FREDERICK (National Broadcasting Company): Mr. President, how do you account for the sudden Arab unity after so much disunity?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I ascribe it very much, as I have said in this statement, to the harmonizing influence of the Assembly itself. I think that the earnestness of all Members of the Assembly to reach a unanimous resolution undoubtedly had an impact upon the Arab representatives. I also think that they felt, as sincere men, that it was in their best interests to achieve unanimity. We have done it before here, you know.

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Mr. Alexander GABRIEL (Transradio News Agency): Sir Leslie, on the eve of the Assembly you rather strongly projected yourself as the proponent of a permanent United Nations police force. Do you feel that this Assembly has given much impetus to this idea? My own impression is that it was treated rather like an orphan child, with some hesitation on the part of the would-be parents as to whether it should be adopted at all.

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Sir Leslie MUNRO: No, I think it has been given an impetus. I think the fact that it received a very great measure of approval by the President of the United States was significant. I think that it was given strong approval by the External Affairs Minister of Canada, it was given approval by the representative of Pakistan, and there were numerous other delegations which approved of the idea. I do not attach any particular significance to its being dropped from the resolution, because I think there are ample means for its being brought before the next Assembly, in particular, of course, by the report which will come from the Secretary-General. I am well aware that there are one or two delegations that were not in favour of it, and of course this is a difficult matter, I appreciate that. But while it is true that one or two poured cold water, I would say that there were very powerful voices, including those of the President of the United States, the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, and the External Affairs Minister of Canada, not to mention others, who gave it warm approval.

Mr. Otto LEICHTER (German Press Agency): Sir, In the light of the obviously increased self-confidence of the United Nations and other recent developments, what is your estimate of the possibility of a revival of disarmament discussions in the thirteenth session of the General Assembly?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I am sure disarmament will again be discussed. I think that the best augury for some more favourable atmosphere there is probably this meeting at Geneva over the question of the detection of tests, and that is a small beginning. I think that in this vital matter we shall have to proceed piecemeal. I would feel that a beginning can be made more particularly in respect of the question of cessation of tests and the detection of them.

Miss Anita EHRMAN (Hearst Newspapers, Inc.): Sir Leslie, do you have any comment on the United States announcement that they will suspend tests?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I am sorry to tell you that I did not know that. Was that made today?

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Miss EHRMAN: For a year.

Sir Leslie MUNRO: This afternoon -- I see. Well, I think it is an event of great significance, and of course that is I suppose a cliché; but it obviously is, and I think it will have widespread influence upon the intentions of other Governments. I do not care to say anything further than that.

Miss Anne WEILL (Agence France-Presse): Sir Leslie, in view of the unanimous vote yesterday and of the commitments to the resolution by interested parties, are you confident that the question will not come up as a crisis again in the General Assembly regular session?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I have considerable confidence that as a result of this agreement reached yesterday we should have some sort of détente in the Middle East and that there will be no crisis confronting us in the next session. But I am not a prophet and much depends upon the negotiations in the next few weeks and upon the progress achieved by the Secretary-General when he goes to that area.

Mr. Robert PRESTON (Scripps-Howard): Would you explain to me what you mean by a "détente"?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I have really explained it in this statement and if you will bear with me I will mention it again. I said that the greatest need in this area is an end to incitement of violent change and to the kind of provocation which has so sharpened tension in the last few months and weeks.

Mr. Robert PRESTON: You mean that that is what you mean?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: That is what I mean. It really is.

Mr. Louis FOY (Paris Presse): What are your personal plans after 16 September?

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The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Frankly, I want a little time to think, and after bearing some high offices, I think about three at the same time, I am entitled to a little reflection.

Mr. FOY: Do you plan to write a book?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I might even consider that, although writing books is a lot more difficult -- Mr. Frye might even enlighten me on this -- than is thought before you set out on them.

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Mr. Alexander GABRIEL (Transradio): Sir Leslie, I would like to go back a little bit to the United Nations police force on which you have written and spoken at considerable length. I wonder whether you have not seen a new factor enter into the picture in the course of the apprehensions expressed by many delegates during the debate that such a force could become the instrument of suppressing peoples who are rightly acting against Governments who have arrogated unconstitutional and unpopular powers to themselves. I am sure that you have from the higher rostrum on which you sat heard this many times, and I would appreciate your own personal view on that subject as it affects the future of this army.

Sir Leslie MUNRO: First of all, I should like to mention here, and it is a great pleasure for me to do so, how much I was helped by reading Mr. Frye's book on this subject. Now, the other thing that I wanted to say was that I have listened, of course, to those arguments, but I could not envisage a United Nations peace force, as Mr. Smith of Canada prefers to call it -- if you will notice, he prefers to call it "peace force" -- I could not envisage its being used to help the continuance in office of a Government because it could only be used, I would think, in situations which were likely to produce a threat to the peace or which actually did threaten the peace. And it could not be used in an internal situation. I have also said before, and I want to re-emphasize it, that I think the mere existence of such a force, if it was known, for example, that contingents could be called upon at a moment's notice by the Assembly or immediately by the Assembly or the Security Council, would be a deterrent. The great difficulty about the force is the celerity, the quickness with which it could be used. It could only be used, I would imagine, on the authority of the Security Council or of the Assembly, and that is not quickly obtained. But it certainly would not be obtained in the circumstances you mentioned.

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Mr. Max BEER (Neue Zurcher Zeitung): Mr. President, may I come back to the subject of détente?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: Yes.

Mr. Max BEER (Neue Zurcher Zeitung): If I understand you rightly, you answered one of my colleagues that you mean détente in the Middle East among the Arab States. Have you also the feeling that the outcome of this Assembly is a certain détente as far as the Big Powers are concerned?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: This Assembly was directing itself to the situation in the Middle East, but it would also envisage the hopeful agreement among the Great Powers in respect to the Middle East.

Mr. Otto LEICHTER (German Press Agency): Sir Leslie, in view of your experiences in this Organization, which were not confined to your presidency, would you say that recent events again have shown a veering away from the Security Council to either the General Assembly or the Secretary-General and, in view of yesterday's decision, how would you judge this general development in the United Nations?

Sir Leslie MUNRO: I would think that our last emergency session is very strong evidence -- it is a re-emphasis -- of the increasing influence of the Assembly and a re-emphasis on the powers of the Secretary-General, upon the confidence in his initiative and a great fortification for him.

Mr. Bruce W. MUNN (United Press): Mr. President, this is not a question. This is a speech. I would like to speak for the correspondents and say that we appreciate everything that you have done in presiding both over the regular session of the Assembly and the special session. We acknowledge the great attributes you have brought in your own person to the job, as I am sure the other statesmen in this Assembly do also. But what we would like to acknowledge more than that is your great co-operation with us and to express to you every good wish for the future and thank you very much, Sir.

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Sir Leslie MUNRO: I would like just briefly to reply to that, Mr. Munn, because I, as a former journalist, have enjoyed with you all the most happy of relations. It will be a source of great regret to me when I leave this place and, in particular, it will be a source of regret to me that I will no longer in this place have communion with you; and I thank you for your invariable courtesy to me and for the reliability of such things as you have cared to say about me. I am most grateful to you all. Thank you very much.

The meeting ended at 4 p.m.