Mr. President,

The problem in the Middle East is the problem created by the use of force and foreign military occupation. I wish to thank the Secretary General for his reports on agenda items 36 and 37.

2. May I, at the outset, reiterate our heartfelt condolences on the demise of President Yasser Arafat who symbolized the resistance of the Palestinian people against foreign occupation and their struggle for statehood in their homeland. Pakistan shares in the grief of Palestinian people. We share the conviction that the vision for which Yasser Arafat struggled for so long will be realized – sooner rather than later.

Mr. President,

3. The Palestinian people are standing at a fateful juncture in their national history. President Arafat’s demise has created a political void which we know they will fill quickly. The Palestinian people have responded maturely and sagaciously. They have taken the first firm steps in the political transition in accordance with their Basic Law. Pakistan welcomes the decision of the Palestinian National Authority to hold elections on 9 January, which will be helpful in putting the Palestinian political life back on track and in carrying forward the now-stalled peace process.

Mr. President,

4. The organization of elections under foreign occupation is not an easy task in Palestine as elsewhere. The elections will be held in the background of death and destruction caused by incessant incursions, attacks and targeted assassination of the Palestinian political figures by the occupying power. Such security threats to the Palestinian lives have been aggravated by the economic and humanitarian restrictions imposed by the occupation forces, continuing illegal settlement activities, and the construction of the Separation Wall by Israel. Organizing successful elections against this backdrop will be a daunting challenge for the Palestinian Authority.

5. It is the responsibility of the international community to closely monitor the response of the occupation forces to the Palestinian efforts to organize elections. No interference in the electoral process should be tolerated. Gestures of conciliation from Israel should be transformed into concrete action. The restrictions imposed in the occupied territories should be lifted to allow all the Palestinians including in East Jerusalem to participate in their national elections.

Mr. President,

6. If we want to see the incoming Palestinian political dispensation emerge as a credible partner in peace efforts, we will have to strengthen its capacity to deal with internal and external security, humanitarian and economic challenges. It should not be simultaneously attacked by the occupation forces and be exposed to demands to take actions against violence emanating from the occupied territories. It will need to be reassured by us of our commitment to peace on the basis of two state solution so that it could generate support for its initiatives among common Palestinian people. To this end, several actions are required:

First, Israel should immediately release all political prisoners enabling them to participate in the political process;
Second: it should suspend its settlement policies;

Third, the Palestinian territories in Gaza and the West Bank must be treated as a single territorial unit where in accordance with the Roadmap a Palestinian state will have to be established. In this context, the Gaza disengagement plan should be a first step towards full end to Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories;

Fourth, in coordination with the United Nations, Israel should take concrete steps to improve the humanitarian conditions in the occupied territories and respect international humanitarian law and;

Five, Israel should also respond to the calls of movement on the Syrian-Lebanese peace track.

7. These actions and affirmations are essential for a credible revival of the peace process. We trust that the Quartet will call for such actions and assurances from Israel.

Mr. President,

8. We must carefully consider the short and long term implications of continuation of conflict in the Middle East. As the President of Pakistan observed in the General Assembly "the tragedy of Palestine is an open wound inflicted on the psyche of every Muslim". We must not allow this wound to continue to fester. The vision of the two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security must be protected. A fair solution of the Palestinian issue is essential to restore amity across regions and cultures and avoid an iron curtain from descending between the Islamic world and those who blindly support Israel's illegal occupation and suppression of the Palestinian people.

I thank you Mr. President.