

What seemed unthinkable in the past is today reality. The signing of the peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization [PLO] is a truly historic development in the course of Middle East relations.

What we are seeing represents the triumph of trust over cynicism in this war-torn region. I congratulate the Israeli government and the leadership of the PLO for their keen understanding of what is best for their people. Their courageous actions have resulted in measures that have opened up prospects for hope and peace throughout the Middle East.

Canada's attendance at the ceremony, as one of only twelve countries invited at the foreign ministerial level, reflects the credentials we have earned over the past 45 years through our commitment to the Middle East and our having consistently kept the door open to all parties in the region.

We are also here because this breakthrough agreement is an outcome of the multilateral negotiations and the networking they facilitated, in which Canada played a substantial role as gavel of Working Group on Refugees.

Many of my predecessors, such as Lester Pearson and Joe Clark, strived tirelessly in the cause of Middle East peace. I am here to witness the fruition of their efforts as well.

Peacekeeping, balanced diplomacy in the region, and bilateral and multilateral assistance have been our trademarks in keeping the peace in the region, and they have worked. From this historic day, we must now shift our focus to efforts that will build and sustain the peace.

Our priority now is to support the new institutions and frameworks envisioned in this agreement on Palestinian autonomy. This will entail substantial and significant contributions within our means. Canada intends to be present.

Much needs to be done in the coming months, in the transition to autonomy, in the lead up to elections next year and in the longer term. Efforts must now focus on specific projects to make a difference in the lives of the people of Gaza and the West Bank, and to help create the infrastructure needed to empower the emerging Palestinian institutions.

Years of active Canadian presence in the Occupied Territories and two years of multilateral negotiations have taught us that we must assist the Palestinians to take their future into their own hands. As their new institutions emerge we need to discuss with them how best to do this in accordance with their own priorities.

To prepare for this, at my request, officials at CIDA [the Canadian International Development Agency] and External Affairs [External Affairs and International Trade Canada], along with