Check Against Delivery

Statement by

Ambassador David Roet
Permanent Representative

Sport for Development and Peace

United Nations, New York

20 October 2014
Mr. President,

On behalf of the State of Israel, I would like to thank the UN Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace, Mr. Wilfried Lemke, for his tireless work fostering dialogue and partnerships.

Israel believes that sport nurtures mutual understanding and coexistence and is therefore proud to co-sponsor today's resolution. There are countless examples of the way in which sport can foster peace and enable development.

From Costa Rica to Cameroon and from New York to New Delhi, sports are building bridges between people from different countries, cultures and communities.

Throughout the world, disputes and disagreements are being set aside and common ground is being found on dusty lots and inside grand stadiums. By playing together, people learn from one another, and in the process, foster greater understanding.

Mr. President,

In August, some 80 Israeli and Palestinian students arrived for their season's opening training session at the Peres Center for Peace football program.

Just a few days after the summer conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza ended, Israeli children and Palestinian children came together to play soccer.

The coach of the Palestinian squad, Ahmed al-Jericho, said (and I quote): "Our children think only of football, they love to play football – they don't care if it is with Jews or non-Jews. They are kids and all they care about is living together in peace."

Thousands of children from all backgrounds and religions overcome the barriers of language and culture through programs like the Peres Center's football program.

Former Israeli president Shimon Peres for whom the center is named said, "You will spread word of the games, of peace instead of confrontations. Everyone loves to play football, regardless of religion or nationality. You will carry the message of peace".

Nowhere is this more evident than on Israel's national sports teams where Jews, Arabs, Muslim and Christians all share the same uniform. They play together, win together, and lose together. That is the power of sport.

Mr. President,

The same power can be seen in Rwanda. The country is known as the land of a thousand hills and every hill seems to hold a thousand cyclists delivering food, firewood, and coffee.

Travel through the country and you will see that many of the bikes were fashioned out of simple planks of wood. Ten years ago, a charity called Project Rwanda, began providing thousands of new bikes to Rwandas. The organization also established an annual race that drew hundreds of people from different tribes to ride together.
A movement was born and 2007 saw the creation of the first Rwandan National Cycling Team composed of both Hutu and Tutsi riders. They have proven the power of sports to unite people and overcome ethnic and cultural differences.

Mr. President,

While sport should be immune to politics and immune to racism this has not always been the case.

During the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich which featured the slogan “the happy games”, Palestinian terrorists killed 11 Israeli athletes, coaches and referees. Under the interlocking rings of the Olympic banner, hostility took the place of international harmony.

The memory of that dreadful day is still fresh in my mind. As a young boy, sports were — to my mind — magical and the “happy games” were the highpoint that I had been anticipating for weeks. After the Munich massacre, sports and the Olympics were never the same in my mind.

I am sad to say that not enough has changed since then. Israeli athletes still have to contend with discrimination.

This year, our tennis players were excluded from a tournament in Dubai; athletes from Tunisia, Kuwait and Iran refused to participate in a fencing and judo tournaments with Israelis; and, one of our soccer teams was attacked by a mob that stormed the field of a friendship match in Austria.

For sports to be a tool that can better the world, we cannot ignore the racism and hate that sometimes erupts in arenas and stadiums. Whether it is racist chants, taunts, ugly gestures or the anti-Semitic ‘quenelle’ salute, there must be a zero tolerance policy towards racism.

There is no room for any sort of prejudice, politics or racism in sport.

It is our duty to protect and promote the fundamental values of teamwork, fairness and mutual respect. Let us work together to cultivate a culture that unites us rather than divides us.

Thank you, Mr. President.