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## **DESK STUDY ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES**

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### **Introduction**

The Middle East is a meeting point of many escalating environmental threats. This is particularly the case in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Long-term environmental degradation has occurred over the decades spanning several conflicts. In an already densely populated area, there are additional problems of scarcity of water resources and land, rapid population growth, long-lasting refugee situation, climate change, desertification and land degradation.

The years of conflict have presented huge challenges to the Palestinians efforts to manage in a sound manner the environment and natural resources. To obtain a comprehensive picture of the alarming environmental situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, long-term environmental challenges were addressed in this

Desk Study, in parallel with the additional environmental risks and damage created by the on-going conflict.

The aim of this desk study was to outline the state of the environment and identify major areas of environmental damage requiring urgent attention. It was based on a review of available, relevant studies and interviews with officials and experts. It lists priorities and proposes recommendations to solve environmental problems. The Desk Study addresses environmental issues identified as the most vital for the environment in the region

The geographical scope of the Occupied Palestinian Territories is addressed in several resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council. The main emphasis of this UNEP Desk Study has been on the areas where there are acute environmental problems.

Following the visit of the Executive Director, Dr. Klaus Töpfer, to the region in July 2002, a preparatory UNEP expert mission to Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel took place from 15-22 August 2002. Immediately after the mission, on 23 August 2002, UNEP convened a one-day advisory meeting on the desk study in Geneva, to exchange information and collect views on the topic.

The Desk Study team visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel between 1 and 11 October 2002. Meetings took place with officials from the Palestinian Authority, including His Excellency Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority, and from the Government of Israel, as well as with representatives from United Nations organizations, NGOs, municipalities and academic institutions. The mission aimed at obtaining additional relevant studies, and undertaking technical discussions and interviews with officials and experts. In addition, site visits relevant to the Desk Study were organized.

The eight-member Desk Study team included in-house experts, as well as experts contracted from UNEP's collaborating centres and other international environmental institutes. The experts covered the following topics: water quantity, water/soil quality; wastewater; solid waste, hazardous waste; environmental administration; land use and biodiversity. In addition, other UNEP specialists contributed to the analysis of satellite images and cartography work in the report. Important background information has been included in the Annexes, which are an integral part of the report.

By sometimes splitting up into five different groups, the team was able to visit many sites, ranging from solid waste dumps and wastewater treatment plants, to rangeland rehabilitation projects and sites where there has damage to environmental infrastructure caused by the conflict. The team stayed in Jerusalem (Al Quds) and in Gaza, and was also able to visit Bethlehem, the Emek Hefer area, Halhoul, Hebron (Al Khalil) and surroundings, Jenin, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv.

Several challenges were encountered in preparing this Desk Study. Firstly, the time factor. Due to the deteriorating situation in the region during the spring of year 2002, work could only begin in earnest 5 months ago. Secondly, the quantity and quality of the printed material and studies made

available for this Desk Study. Even if over 500 printed documents were reviewed, the Desk Study team learned that in some cases precise environmental data is still lacking or was not available for UNEP. Therefore where relevant information was not available or if the information received from the two parties was contradictory, with the objective of proposing remedial measures to improve the environmental situation, the desk study recommends that field studies be conducted, as referred to in the Governing Council decision.

Thirdly, the very tense atmosphere prevailing in the region had repercussions on all activities in society. In the region, there are political and other sensitivities associated with certain topics and language. Even in the context of a scientific environmental report, some expressions are interpreted in a political rather than in a technical way. Important political issues are still pending the outcome of the permanent status negotiations. The Oslo I Accord, or the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, dated 13 September 1993, states in Article V.3. "It is understood that these negotiations shall cover remaining issues, including: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations and cooperation with other neighbours, and other issues of common interest." No statement in this report should be construed as a position by UNEP on, or prejudicing, any issue that is subject to these permanent status negotiations.

There are already some examples of bilateral and regional cooperation in which Israel is involved. The Desk Study found that broadening and strengthening this type of cooperation could help to protect the environment.

It goes without saying that UNEP recommends intensified participation of the Palestinian Authority not only in all regional environmental cooperation, but also in all relevant Multinational Environmental Agreements (MEAs). The international community should do its utmost to give the Palestinian Authority full access to these processes. A first step would be to remove all administrative obstacles, thus ensuring the successful participation of Palestinians in these meetings.

This Desk Study raises serious concerns on both the degradation of water quality in many areas, as well as the issue of unsustainable over-pumping of water from aquifers. In environmental terms, there are many inter-linkages between water quality and water quantity. According to the Oslo II Accord, issues related to water rights will be negotiated in the permanent status negotiations. Any statements on the water issues in this Desk Study should not be seen as taking any position on these permanent status negotiations.

On the one hand, there are problems directly linked to the conflict, and on the other hand, there is environmental deterioration that has occurred over the longer-term. The conflict-related issues include land clearing, obstacles such as curfews and closures to the transport of waste, difficulties in obtaining spare parts for environmental facilities and collateral damage to environmental infrastructure caused by military action. The longer-term environmental degradation is evident in the pollution of groundwater resources, the lack of proper waste management, shortcomings in environmental administration and legislation. These two types of environmental degradation were found in all previous post-conflict environmental assessments carried out by UNEP.

Shortly after the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, a joint declaration was issued by the Palestinian and Israeli authorities for keeping the water infrastructure out of the cycle of violence. This Desk Study has found cause for alarm in relation to the quality of the drinking water and quantity extracted, as well as the contamination of the aquifers from wastewater, landfills and hazardous waste. On the basis of this, the study fully supports the efforts to keep water and environmental issues out of the conflict, and to preserve these resources for present and future generations.

To do so, increased level of co-operation between the parties is needed. The model of the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC), which continued to meet throughout the conflict, should be extended to other joint environmental bodies. Nevertheless, many long-term environmental solutions cannot become reality without a peace process for the region. In that process the environment could be seen as a bridge-building element, building the confidence between the two parties seeking a new ground for cooperation. This study points out many reasons why the environment should be among the first issues to be dealt with by the conflicting parties.

This Desk Study could not have been prepared without the full cooperation and support both from the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel, who have shared their information and provided their comments to the first draft of the study. However, all the conclusions and recommendations are made by UNEP, based on the work of the UNEP Desk Study team. The study was prepared in response to the request by the Governing Council to the Executive Director in Cartagena to prepare a desk study outlining the state of environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and to identify major areas of environmental damage requiring urgent attention. All UN organizations in the region, including United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have been fully supportive during this study. Embassies and government offices from several countries have been sharing with UNEP their project documents and experiences from the region. Nongovernmental organizations, Palestinian, Israeli and international alike, have also shared their materials and recommendations. Representatives of municipalities and academic institutions provided very useful inputs.

The spirit and the enthusiasm among all experts, scientists and environmental activists of the region towards our work and environmental challenges in general, lead me to believe that environmental cooperation could play a key role in the process towards a lasting peace.

Pekka Haavisto  
Chairman  
UNEP Desk Study on the Environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories  
Geneva, 20 January 2003

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