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### **POLICIES OF ISRAELI OCCUPATION MAIN CAUSE OF HUMANITARIAN SUFFERING IN PALESTINIAN TERRITORY, ROME MEETING TOLD**

#### **Expert Panellists Say Israel's Restrictions on Movement Provoke 'Man-made' Protection Crisis for Palestinian People**

ROME, 27 February — The situations that triggered humanitarian strife in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — severe restrictions on movement and constraints on livelihoods — were man-made: the consequence of Israel's occupation, experts said today as the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People held its first plenary session.

"If allowed, the Palestinian people could effectively address their challenges themselves," said Ramesh Rajasingham, Head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, stressing that it was the restrictive policies, home demolitions and land confiscation carried out by Israel that led to staggering poverty and spiralling unemployment among Palestinians, and undermined their ability to be self-sustaining.

Joining the discussion on "the impact of the occupation on the socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Palestine" were Robert Turner, Director of Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA); Sergio Yahni, Co-Director of the Alternative Information Centre in Jerusalem; Amal Khreisheh, Director-General of the Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development; and discussant Natalino Ronzitti, an International Law Professor at the Libera Università degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli.

Mr. Rajasingham explained, with the help of a detailed PowerPoint presentation, that Israel's practice of reigning in Palestinian livelihoods — especially in areas viable for farming or fishing — and restrictions on movement of people and goods, as well as threats to life, liberty and personal security, created a "protection crisis". If those policies were revoked, the need for humanitarian assistance trailed off sharply, he said, because the people throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory were well-trained and highly educated and could generate solutions if given the opportunity.

Providing a stark example of the breadth of the problem, he cited the Gaza Strip's 35 per cent unemployment rate, and noted that over 80 per cent of the population received some form of international aid or relief assistance. One of the most urgent needs was access to clean water. Indeed, 90 per cent of water piped into Gaza was not safe to drink. He added that there were only four to five hours of dependable electricity every day, and as for protection, there was no real safe haven because of lack of development and overcrowding in the area.

Turning to the West Bank, he said that many of the problems in "Area C" could be traced to Israeli settlement policy and the ongoing construction of the separation wall. Many of the Palestinians living there lacked access to their livelihoods. For instance, if a Palestinian resident was cut off from his or her farmland, "they could become a vulnerable case for humanitarian assistance". That situation was exacerbated by an up-tick in settler violence and the lack of action to address such violence, which could also include destruction of Palestinian crops or infrastructure. He also noted that loss of traditional livelihoods often sparked population displacement.

With all that in mind, he called for lifting the land, sea and air blockade and urged maintaining the connection between Gaza and West bank. It was also vital to allow steady imports and exports — now restricted to international organizations, not local procurement — and to protect civilians from hostilities. He urged respect for basic rights, suspension of home demolitions, and unhindered access so that the Palestinian Authority could provide services or allow people to reach the services themselves.

Mr. Turner said that while there were many exciting or inspiring stories that could be told about the situation in Gaza, he was going to talk about what was really going on there. "And what's really going on in Gaza right now is history — crushing poverty," he said, adding, for example, that even with food assistance by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and World Food Programme (WFP), 44 per cent of the Gaza population was food insecure.

"We got here because of the blockade," he said, lamenting the "successive layers of restrictions" in place in the area since 2007. Echoing Mr. Rajasingham, he said that the severe restraints on the movement of people and goods had all but destroyed local productive capacity and labour markets. Such policies had also devastated the private sector, ensured the area's isolation from the rest of the world, and promoted its dependence on tunnel smuggling and external aid.

Unemployment was the major effect of that situation, he continued, noting that it was almost impossible for young Palestinians to access the labour market. Moreover, women faced disproportionately high jobless rates. What was worse was that there were fewer jobs for most educated people. For example, 85 per cent of women with a university degree in Gaza were unemployed unless they worked for UNRWA or the Government.

Redressing that dire situation would require political will and sustained investment in the Gazan economy, he said. Before wrapping up, he drew the Seminar's attention to the water situation in Gaza, which, he said "represents an existential threat to the people who live there". The main aquifer was dying, and by 2020, it would be completely unusable. "There is probably no solution," he said, explaining that water was being over-extracted at such a high rate that the aquifer would take decades to repair. However, massive investment and political will would be a start. Overall, the current situation in Gaza "is dire and the future situation looks much worse without rapid, concerted political change," he said.

Specifically on the situation of Palestinian women, Ms. Khreisheh said that they bore the brunt of the impact of the Israeli occupation. As the Occupied Palestinian Territory continued to experience negative growth rates, employment levels for women continued to drop. Indeed, even as women saw some gains in education — 50 per cent of women were enrolled in tertiary education in the area — that progress was not being translated into employment, as female participation in the labour market was estimated at about 15.2 per cent. Moreover, the unemployment rate for women with university degrees stood at 34 per cent.

In response to such conditions, The Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development had formed several women's cooperatives throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which aimed to build their capacities and bolster their empowerment, especially in marginalized areas. Her organization also sought to help those cooperatives access international markets, but that required positive political commitment from the Palestinian Authority and the donor community. Her organization, she said, continued to "cautiously challenge" gender-based stereotypes that kept women from the labour market or from achieving their potential by promoting civic dialogue on the matter and advocating women's civil rights in accordance with the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. She underscored that, along with patriarchal attitudes, the Israeli occupation had also contributed to gender inequalities in the

Occupied Palestinian Territory and altered traditional family structures and gender relations.

Providing the Israeli perspective on the impact of the occupation, Mr. Yahni said: "I have bad news. Any analysis of the situation should start with the understanding that Israel has no interest in solving the conflict". This was not a question of political will; it had to do with the fact that Israel's very social structure was based on colonial domination and occupation. Even if the Palestinians accepted Israel's conditions, Israeli authorities would not accept that their policy of conquest of Palestinian land was complete.

Taking a unique view of the settlement issue, he said that that policy was proceeding because it was largely a solution to Israel's problems: as the poorest Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nation with over 20 per cent unemployment, Israel's settlement construction enterprise provided socio-economic solutions. Indeed, colonization provided profits for construction and security companies, as well as housing and labour for Israel's poor and middle classes. Moreover, the conflict generated by colonization boosted Israel's police and military exports.

With stagnant growth and a restive population, Israel had had to make a choice: would it risk a war with the Arab world, or a civil war at home, he continued. Faced with that quandary, the Israeli authorities had decided to keep the conflict "simmering on a low flame", he said, recalling that the recent conflict in Gaza had left "not too many dead" on either side.

Neither was Israel moving towards a two-State solution, he said, adding that it merely wished to appease the major Powers. The recent Israeli elections would not generate any movement to that end either, as the goal had been to yet again stave off any real international intervention. That presented the international community with a quandary: would it impose sanctions on Israel? Would it react to constant human rights violations? Or would it sit on the side and watch human lives being sacrificed "as had been done years ago right around the corner from us in the Roman Colosseum?" he asked.

Briefly summing up the presentations, Mr. Ronzitti said there seemed to be a consensus about the two-State solution, as well as the fact that Jerusalem should emerge as the capital of a Palestinian State. At the same time, it was clear from the statements that bringing an end to the occupation was a major obstacle. From his experience, application of international law was vital to ensuring Israel stood by its legal obligations and that the human rights of the Palestinian people were promoted and protected.

As to repeated mentions of the General Assembly's decision to accord Palestine non-Member observer State status at the United Nations, he wondered if that was the beginning or the end of a process. What was clear was that the Security Council, which was supposed to transmit statehood requests to the Assembly, could veto any such measure. He noted that no speaker had mentioned the need to expand participation in conferences such as this, particularly as he did not see any members of the G-8 or G-20 groupings here. He also noted that no speaker had mentioned the weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, and he wondered if, in the wake of the Assembly's decision, Palestine would join any international treaties dealing with that or other issues.

In the ensuing discussion, one speaker said that the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was dramatic and the people living there "do not need our tears"; they needed concrete action. As that was the case, the international community and the United Nations must bring pressure to bear on Israel to end the occupation. The Powers that held sway with Israel must do more to drive both action and change, he said.

Having spent 17 hours trying to cross the Rafah border two days ago, a civil society speaker said that the situation in the Gaza Strip was "dire" and he was concerned that the situation of the Palestinian people was being governed by "three and a half" authorities: the Israeli Government, the Palestinian Authority, the de facto leadership in Gaza and the "half" participant—the international community—which was not shouldering its full responsibility.

Responding to some of the comments, Ms. Khreishah echoed the call made earlier in the day by the Palestinian Finance Minister to boycott settler products or push for sanctions against Israel. The time for action "is right now", she said.

The United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People will reconvene tomorrow at 10 a.m.

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