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UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON QUESTION OF PALESTINE OPENS IN MALTA

Speakers Call for Progress on Ground, Stronger International Engagement

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

MALTA, 3 June -- To overcome the formidable obstacles to peace that persisted in the Middle East despite the current diplomatic momentum, progress by the parties on the ground and continued international engagement was crucial, speakers agreed as the United Nations International Meeting on the Question of Palestine opened this morning.

"Both sides must seize the current window of opportunity to push the peace process forward, especially by acting on their obligations under the Road Map," United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said in a message delivered by Max Gaylard, Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, to the meeting which was convened by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and runs through tomorrow afternoon under the theme "Advancing the peace process -- Challenges facing the parties".

Equally important was the role the international community must play, according to Tayseer Quba'a, Deputy Speaker of the Palestine National Council, who represented President Mahmoud Abbas and spoke of the promise of the recent Paris Donor's Conference and the Annapolis Peace Conference of last November, which he said subsequently sparked the first direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians in "seven bitter years".

"Those who attended Annapolis and Paris -- groups representative of the entire international community -- did not attend the meetings as a photo opportunity, but rather because they are, as the Security Council and the General Assembly are, close partners in the peace process and true helpers in the effort to bring this process to a successful conclusion and they must play their rightful roles", he said.

Opening the meeting this morning, Paul Badji of Senegal, Chairman of the Committee, thanked the Government of Malta for hosting the session. He noted that during its stay in Malta, the Committee's delegation to the Meeting had met with the President and Foreign Minister of the country and discussed how both were contributing to efforts aimed at resolving the Middle East conflict. Through this international meeting, the Committee wanted to rouse the entire international community to help bring about the conditions conducive to final status negotiations.

In his formal statement, he cited the principal obstacles that needed to be overcome to get to those negotiations -- the continued construction of Israeli settlements and the separation barrier, restrictions on movement in the occupied West Bank, violence and humanitarian suffering in Gaza, the plight of refugees, the status of Jerusalem and differences among Palestinians.

He reiterated the Committee's position that Israel, as the occupying Power, was obligated under the Fourth Geneva Convention to protect civilians under its occupation and responsible for providing basic services and ensuring the overall welfare of the population.

Welcoming participants as the representative of the host country, Tonio Borg, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malta, emphasized his country's role as an advocate of peace in the Middle East through its unique associations and its central location between Europe and the critical region under discussion. Following those opening statements, representatives of Governments and intergovernmental organizations spoke.

Opening Statements

TONIO BORG, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malta, said that his country's strategic relevance in the central Mediterranean had led it to pursue a comprehensive and proactive foreign policy in the wider region. "There can be no security and stability in Europe unless there is security and stability in the Mediterranean," he said.

Since joining the European Union in 2004, he said, Malta had consistently demonstrated its enhanced geopolitical clout by promoting the two-State solution it had long supported, and had insisted that the Union must spearhead the Middle East peace initiative, adopting an intensified, "avant-garde" approach together with the United States. By contributing to the creation of an atmosphere conducive to peace through bilateral and multilateral channels, the country was seeking to facilitate the task of implementing the Quartet's Road Map.

"The State of Israel is rightly recognized by all", he said. "The State of Palestine needs to come into being at the earliest opportunity". To get to that point, he said that the European Union must influence regional dynamics more systematically than in recent years. Strategic thinking was not enough in itself, though, to make a difference on the ground and the devotion of increased resources was required. In addition, influence must be brought to bear on the parties and, in that context, he stressed the importance of Israel halting the expansion of settlements, saying it was "setting the clocks backward".

Better management of security challenges also required a greater degree of global cooperation than ever before, he said, and that meant making room for the new powerhouses that included Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and the Gulf States. At this crucial time, he pledged that Malta would play its part in a more decisive diplomacy on the part of the

international community, which he hoped would sow the seeds of a permanent peace settlement in the Holy Land.

MAX GAYLARD, Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, on behalf of Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon, said that the parameters agreed to in Annapolis were clear -- an end to the occupation that began in 1967, an end to conflict, and the establishment of a sovereign, viable and independent Palestinian State living side by side in peace with a secure Israel. He urged President Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert to continue with their welcome negotiations undeterred by any obstacles, and "to see this effort through".

The meetings and pledges must now be translated into real results, he continued. He welcomed actions that had already been taken, noting that the Palestinian Authority had acted to improve its security capabilities and to implement fiscal reform, while Israel had agreed to remove some obstacles that hindered Palestinian movement in the West Bank, consenting also to thousands of worker entry permits.

He added, however, that much more needed to be done, saying that continued settlement activity and barrier building must cease at once. On the Palestinian side, efforts to improve performance on security and the rule of law should continue, hopefully with support from donors at next month's conference in Berlin. There was a particularly urgent need to develop a better strategy for Gaza, where 1.5 million people endured punishing humanitarian conditions.

Israeli military operations only aggravated this situation, he said, resulting in unacceptable casualties among Palestinian civilians. He called rocket attacks by militants against Israeli civilians and crossing points "equally unacceptable and deeply irresponsible". "I reiterate my call for the cessation of all such condemnable acts of violence and for all parties to comply with international humanitarian law," he said, stressing that measures of collective punishment should cease immediately.

He commended Egypt for its efforts towards calm in the Gaza Strip, adding that the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank was essential for a Palestinian State. He furthermore welcomed the reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative and urged strong Arab support for the Palestinian Authority's efforts, finally pledging to do everything possible to bring about a comprehensive, just and lasting peace.

PAUL BADJI (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that his Committee fully supported the objective of two States, Israel and Palestine, living peacefully side by side, and had welcomed the Arab Peace Initiative, the Road Map of the Middle East diplomatic Quartet, the holding of the Annapolis Conference and the current political process.

The principal obstacles hindering that process, he said, included the presence of settlements and outposts in the occupied West Bank along with infrastructure serving the needs of settlers, all of which was illegal under international law and which isolated the West Bank from East Jerusalem. A prerequisite for lasting peace in the region was a negotiated solution on the status of Jerusalem that took into account the political concerns of both sides and that protected the interests of all concerned religions.

Another obstacle, he said, was the separation wall that cut deep into the West Bank, which could also prejudice the outcome of permanent status negotiations. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) had already judged the wall illegal and the United Nations had created a registry for the damage it caused. He maintained, however, that the international community could still challenge the presence of the wall more vigorously.

In addition, he said that movement restrictions rendered impossible sustainable economic activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, adding that a durable solution to the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict could only be achieved within the recognition of the undiminished right of return of Palestine refugees as emphasized by participants in the Committee's recent conference in Paris on the topic.

In regard to Gaza, the creation of a climate conducive to the advancement of negotiations required, he said, a complete cessation of acts of violence, including routine military raids that targeted rocket-launching operations, and an end to the humanitarian crisis caused by closures. The Committee unequivocally condemned the killing of innocent civilians on both sides, but it was unacceptable for the entire population of the Gaza strip to endure collective punishment for the actions of a few militant groups.

He said the Committee also firmly believed that the unity of the Palestinian people was an essential condition for achieving a viable solution to the question of Palestine. For that reason, he called on them, their leadership and the leaders of all factions to support President Mahmoud Abbas, his Government and all democratically-elected Palestinian institutions, and to resolve differences through peaceful means. He also called for the restoration of the pre-June 2007 situation in Gaza and for the preservation of the unity and integrity of Palestinian territory.

TAYSEER QUBA'A, Deputy Speaker of the Palestine National Council, said that recent months had witnessed both positive and negative developments that would determine the course of the future in the Middle East. A central factor in the re-launch of bilateral negotiations after a bitter seven-year freeze was the international community's support in the political, humanitarian, moral and other arenas. Among the principals in that effort, he noted the Quartet members -- the United States, Russian Federation, European Union and the United Nations -- as well as the League of Arab States, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Describing the positive accomplishments of the Annapolis and Paris Conferences, he expressed hope that the United States, both in its national capacity and as a member of the Quartet, "will continue to use its good offices to promote the advancement of bilateral negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides on final status issues and to help the parties in overcoming the obstacles that will inevitably arise during negotiations on core, sensitive issues -- the refugees, settlements, Jerusalem security and water".

He expressed regret, though, that the reality on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was not nearly as positive, saying that there had been little progress in the negotiations because of continued, illegal Israeli practices, including death and destruction wreaked on the civilian population by military assaults and unlawful colonization in the West Bank through settlement expansion, which was clearly a violation of international law and all international agreements.

In Gaza, which had been declared a "hostile entity", he said Israel continued its collective punishment through a crippling siege via closure of all border crossings, obstructing all movement of people and goods, and also via the reduction of fuel and electrical supplies. In that regard, he reiterated the readiness of the Palestinian Authority to operate the Palestinian side of all Gaza crossings in order to ease the suffering of the civilian population.

The situation in the West Bank, while not as grave, also remained of great concern due to severe restrictions on the movement of persons and goods via hundreds of checkpoints and roadblocks, he said. In addition, while a few hundred prisoners had been released, daily arrests kept the number of Palestinians in detention centres at nearly 11,000, including hundreds of women and children.

Those were all serious issues that must be dealt with if the situation was to change on the ground and at the negotiating table, he said, stressing that there was now a historic opportunity to advance the peace process. In that effort, the international community must play its rightful role to uphold international law and to implement relevant United Nations resolutions. "Now is the time for real action on the part of all concerned parties in the collective drive aimed at the attainment of the just, lasting and comprehensive peace that will be realized with an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian and Arab lands it occupied in 1967, the establishment of the independent State of Palestine with its capital, and the achievement of a just solution to the Palestine refugee question," he said.

Representatives' Statements

ANGEL DALMAU FERNANDEZ (Cuba), on behalf of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement, said the lukewarm hope for advancement in the peace process, following the Annapolis Conference and the Donors Conference in Paris, had quickly waned as a result of the continued deterioration of the situation on the ground, particularly in the Gaza Strip, due to the illegal measures taken by Israel against Palestinian civilians. To overcome those factors, the Non-Aligned Movement had repeatedly urged the Quartet to continue to work actively with both parties to carry forward direct negotiations and encourage immediate steps on the ground. He hoped that those negotiations would create an independent Palestinian State on all the territory occupied since 1967, with Jerusalem as its capital. In addition, he called on Israel to immediately cease its aggression, withdraw its troops from Gaza, abide by its obligations under the Geneva Convention and stop the illegal construction of the separation wall, as well as other unilateral actions that exacerbated resentment and mistrust. The Security Council must also act to fulfil its responsibilities to protect the civilian population in Gaza. The Non-Aligned Movement, he pledged, would continue to contribute to the achievement of a just and lasting peace based on all relevant United Nations resolutions and other internationally-recognized agreements.

SAMR BAKR DIAB, Assistant Secretary-General for Palestinian Affairs of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), said that the Palestinians were still suffering in the Gaza Strip because of Israeli restrictions. At the same time, Israel continued its incursions, restrictions, assassinations and other aggressions in the West Bank. He urged that country to stop those practices, as well as the expansion of settlements and the building of the separation wall, so that the State of Palestine could be created, ending the suffering of the Palestinian people and restoring their right of self-determination. He supported the Committee's efforts towards helping that come about.

DATO ZULKFLI YAACOB, High Commissioner of Malaysia to Malta, said it was time to take a clear look at the situation in the Middle East. Despite the recent diplomatic events, it was clear that Israel regularly engaged in provocation to prevent a final settlement of the question. A stronger international focus on negotiations to achieve a settlement was needed, as well as humanitarian aid to Gazans. The Committee should exercise its influence on the Security Council to make sure that Israel changed its practices. In addition, Palestinians must unite in order to be able to establish their sovereign State.

MOHAMADALI GANZOUL, Ambassador of Tunisia to Malta, emphasized the moral need to support an agreement towards the establishment of the Palestinian State by the deadline of the end of this year. The situation on the ground, however, had been allowed to deteriorate; there had been a multiplication of control barriers and other obstacles set up by Israel to prevent the reunification of families. Settlement must also cease and prisoners must be released. He called upon all influential parties to redouble their efforts to set out on the road to peace. It was time for the Palestinian people, who had suffered so much, to gain their own State.

GEORGE VELLA, Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean's Ad Hoc Committee on the Middle East, said Malta had long held the rapporteurship of the Palestinian Rights Committee and remained deeply engaged in the question. He had promoted inter-parliamentary dialogue to move the issue forward. He described the inception and the work of his Committee on the Middle East, the approach of which would be innovative, through interchange with people from the area and experts on specific issues. It was determined that this Committee would not take sides, apportion blame, or engage in empty talk, but would be an action-oriented catalyst for a solution of the problems. He stressed that the organization could help mediate, but it was up to the parties themselves to compromise and come through on their commitments.

Mr. QUBA'A, Deputy Speaker of the Palestine National Council, speaking as Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, said that it was the intention of the Parliamentary Assembly to reaffirm the key role of its members in addressing their common interests and create an era of peace, security and prosperity for all. A key objective was for the State of Israel and Palestinians to reach a just and lasting peace. The organization hoped to build trust between the parties for that purpose, and stressed that it had great concern over the humanitarian situation in Gaza, in particular.

ALFRED RAMBEL SOSON (Madagascar) said the Middle East situation was the most complex and burning issue of the day, but the various agreements and resolutions of the Security Council and General Assembly had not produced any positive effects. There had been some positive developments such as the recognition of Israel by other parties and the hope created by the Road Map, but the suffering continued. He said that the establishment of settlements and the building of the separation wall violated international law, although he recognized the right of Israel to defend itself. International law should be inviolable. The diplomatic developments of recent months was encouraging, however, and it was now up to the two protagonists of the Middle East to create the conditions to live together in harmony.

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