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## INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON PALESTINE DISCUSSES ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS, CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA IN PROMOTING RESPECT FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW

23 July 2009

The United Nations International Meeting on the Question of Palestine this morning held its third plenary, discussing the role of parliaments and civil society in advocating adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as the responsibility of the media.

Phyllis Starkey, Labour Member of the British Parliament, gave examples of what a British Member of the Parliament could do to influence the British's Government's policies with regard to the question of Palestine. One of the tools was to scrutinize Government actions, for example, on sales of arms from Britain to other countries; the arrest of individuals suspected of war crimes; and the labelling of goods imported from the Israeli settlements to prevent the misapplying of the appellation "Made in Israel".

Yizhar Be'er, Executive Director Keshev, the Center for the Protection of Democracy in Israel, spoke about the Israeli media coverage during war. He noted that the Israeli media quickly diffused information that they received from the Israel Defense Forces without analysis or criticism. In times of war, media had to go with the general opinion in order not to lose their readers. His organization was trying to demonstrate to Israeli media how less biased reporting was possible.

Phyllis Bennis, Co-Chair of the International Coordinating Network for Palestine and Director of the New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., said that Barack Obama had not made substantive changes to United States policy in the Middle East. However, the discourse had changed and that was absolutely crucial. One had to mobilize public opinion to demand the implementation of responsibility to protect in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Nasser Al Laham, Editor at the Ma'an News Agency Bethlehem, said that in the case of Gaza one could not talk about a classical war. Cheating was the first principle of this war: everybody was cheating everybody by using the media for their own means.

Gideon Levy, Columnist for *Ha'aretz* Tel Aviv, said that without the collaboration of the Israeli media the occupation would not have lasted for over 40 years now. There was virtually no State censorship; it was the Israeli media that decided what to tell and also what not to tell the Israelis. Palestinians had been dehumanised by the media. It was completely impossible for Israelis to think about Palestinians as of human beings like themselves. The Israeli media was constantly telling Israelis that it was not a moral issue whether to kill Palestinians or not.

In an exchange of views with panellist speakers underscored the lack of efficacy of the United Nations in dealing with the plight of the Palestinians, as evidenced by the lack of a strong United Nations resolution following the invasion in Gaza. Also raised in the discussion were the threat of being labelled an anti-Semite if one criticized Israel; and whether it might be best to cut off aid to the Palestinians, thereby forcing Israel to pay for its conduct or if a more comprehensive economic, social and cultural blockade – such as had been used against Apartheid South Africa – might be a non-violent way to bring pressure to bear on the Israelis. Panellists, in responses, underlined that the discourse was slowly changing and that it was no longer acceptable to support Israel's various actions. Action was not coming from the United Nations, it was coming from the people, from the outside, so that it became necessary for the Governments to do the right thing.

Speaking in the discussion were representatives of Egypt and the non-governmental organizations Third World Network and *Centre Europe-Tiers Monde/Union juive française pour la paix*.

When the International Meeting reconvenes this afternoon at 3 p.m. it will continue its discussion on the role of parliaments and civil society in advocating adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law, particularly the role of civil society organizations, before closing the two-day session.

### Statements

PHYLLIS STARKEY, Labour Member of the British Parliament, said that her interest in Palestine had started soon after her election, when she had travelled to the region as part of a parliamentary delegation. It was important for parliamentarians to visit the region, as it really gave an impression of the situation. What could a British Member of Parliament (MP) do, how could an MP influence the Government's policies? She noted that foreign policy issues did not necessarily have a high profile in Parliament, as there were many competing international issues and domestic issues dominated. But by questioning the Foreign Secretary in oral questions, provoking debates and pushing for urgent statements, MPs could keep the issue at the top of the agenda. There were multiple opportunities for MPs to lobby and influence ministers. Such activities could change policy. The very different response of the British Government to the invasion of Gaza compared with the response to the earlier invasion of Lebanon was an example of that.

Another tool was to scrutinize Government actions, said Ms. Starkey, through, for example, the control of sales of arms from Britain to other countries; the arrest of individuals suspected of war crimes; and the clear labelling of goods imported from the Israeli settlements to prevent the misapplying of the appellation "Made in Israel". She also noted that settlement properties were offered for sale in Britain at events targeting the Jewish community. It was debateable whether that was illegal, but MP pressure had resulted in the potential buyers now being warned that those properties had doubtful legal title. Also highlighted was the fact that the European Union-Israel Trade Agreement included a human rights clause. Most recently there had been calls for the agreement to be suspended until Israel cooperated with the United Nations Human Rights Council investigation under Judge Goldstone.

YIZHAR BE'ER, Executive Director Keshev, the Center for the Protection of Democracy in Israel, supported by a PowerPoint presentation, spoke about the Israeli media coverage during war. The Israeli media, as any other media around the world, had the natural instinct to become more patriotic in times of war. The news section in a newspaper was the most important part for readers and often led with very aggressive headlines. For example, the Israeli media quickly diffused information that they received of the Israel Defense Forces without analysis or criticism. When the only Israeli human rights organization that was active in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, called B'Tselem, had found material strongly contradicting the information diffused by the Israel Defense Forces and showed that targets described as legitimate military target were actually civilians, none of that information had been picked up by any Israeli media.

Mr. Be'er summed up the situation in saying that in times of war, media had to go with the general opinion in order not to lose their readers. The Center for the Protection of Democracy in Israel was trying to demonstrate to Israeli media how less biased reporting was possible.

PHYLLIS BENNIS, Co-Chair of the International Coordinating Network for Palestine and Director of the New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies in

Washington, D.C., said that Barack Obama had not made substantive changes to United States policy in the Middle East. However, the discourse had changed and that was absolutely crucial. There was an agreement that Governments had the first obligation to ensure the safety of their people. The problem arose as soon as they did not and that led to a clash between sovereignty and human rights. Then the concept of responsibility to protect came into play. But given the years of post-Cold War unilateral domination by the United States, and the decades of undemocratic power claimed by the five veto-wielding Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council, it was hardly a surprise that responsibility to protect was grounded in a profound double standard.

The usual, and quite logical, response to that double standard reality was to reject responsibility to protect as an inevitable tool of the powerful to be used only against the weak – in today's world, a tool of the powerful nations of the wealthy North against the global South. Ms. Bennis said that there were peoples facing the most serious violations and yet Governments were unwilling and unable to react. She suggested that the answer was to mobilize public opinion to demand the implementation of responsibility to protect in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That had to be taken up in a way that would not allow the Security Council to paralyse it. There were examples, including Chile, Pakistan, Guatemala and others, in which a global mobilization had taken place and countries had stood up against the United States and advocated to protect the peoples of those countries from human rights violations – although the countries calling for action could not do that alone.

NASSER AL LAHAM, Editor at the Ma'an News Agency Bethlehem, said that in the case of Gaza they could not talk about a classical war, the situation was fundamentally different from Iraq or Afghanistan. The enemy was invisible and all that mattered was the random fact in which square meter of the territory one was at a given time, not the fact whether one was Palestinian or Israeli, civilian or combatant. Cheating was the first principle of this war: everybody was cheating everybody by using the media for their own means. The Israel Defense Forces had surrounded the people of Gaza from all six directions – North, South, East, West, underground and the sky – firing blind weapons without caring where they would hit exactly. For those participating, the situation was like a computer war game. He added that many Israelis did not trust the United Nations and had only contempt for its efforts.

GIDEON LEVY, Columnist for Ha'aretz Tel Aviv, was surprised how much Israel had changed during the last years. The Palestinians and the Israelis did not meet each other anymore. The only Palestinians that young Israelis knew were the suicide bombers they saw on television. A while ago, people used to say that two Israelis shared three views and now three Israelis were forced to share one view – there was hardly any discussion anymore. The truth was that without the collaboration of the Israeli media the occupation would not have lasted for over 40 years now. There was virtually no State censorship; it was the Israeli media that decided what to tell and also what not to tell the Israelis. The problem was not that Israelis had no morality. The problem was that they did not consider that it applied to the Palestinians, because they had been dehumanised by the media. There were all sorts of ways it did that. One was that it was clear stories of Palestinians dying were considered a non-story. The death of a dog in a bombardment had made page one news on the same day that many Palestinians had been killed.

Every Israeli shared the responsibility for the occupation; it was not the project of some settlers, the secret service or the military. The demonization of the Palestinians and the whole Arab world was the means by which the media kept the occupation going. Various events in his private and professional life had shown him how it was completely impossible for Israelis to think about Palestinians as of human beings like themselves. Curiously, it was at the same time no contradiction to demonize the Palestinians' power and their mighty weapons – to keep Israelis afraid was to keep them united. The Israeli media was constantly telling Israelis that it was not a moral issue whether to kill Palestinians or not and it was very effectively protecting Israelis from criticism or any kind of controversial information.

Speakers during the discussion noted and raised questions on, among other things, the exact outlines of the right to protect versus the obligation of States to protect their citizens; the lack of efficacy of the United Nations in dealing with the plight of the Palestinians; and why some human rights being discounted in addressing the situation of the Palestinians, when they should be fighting for the full spectrum of rights. In particular, a speaker raised the issue of lack of a strong United Nations resolution following the invasion in Gaza, because in negotiations States had refused to come on board unless they deleted either the number of victims killed by Israelis or the number of Israelis killed in the text because it showed such a stark picture of disproportionate use of force. Something had to be done with the current balance of power in the United Nations, a speaker said, to address hypocrisy, and to make it a forum to protect the safety of civilians – all, not only some. Nothing good would come out of the United Nations at least where it stood today.

Responding to questions and comments, a panellist said, regarding the risk of being called an anti-Semite if one criticized Israel, that she was aware that she had to carefully choose her words whenever she spoke about the issue. On the international level, the charge of anti-Semitism was often simply used because it was true. Some actors, such as Iranian President Ahmadinejad, were very clearly anti-Semites. As to Europe's involvement in resolving the situation, the European taxpayer should be made aware that he was paying the price of the occupation. European dollars poured in for aid to the Palestinians for reconstruction and other projects were simply laid waste by Israel without any regard. But Europe could not simply cut off the aid and let the Israelis sort out the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories: first of all, Israel would not pick up the cost, and secondly, because they would not do so. Another panellist disagreed – holding that it was a non-violent way to bring pressure to bear on the Israelis by denying things to the Palestinians, similar to what had happened to South Africa where even banks had been involved. In addition to an economic boycott, they also had to think of academic and cultural boycott.

Concerning biased media, the panellists reiterated that that was a phenomenon that occurred all over the world as soon as a country was at war. Israel was not a unique case in that regard. But while it might not be really possible to eliminate that psychological phenomenon, they could educate the public to be discriminating users of the media and not simply believing everything that was printed was the truth. Turning to the responsibility to protect, a panellist said that the notion that Israelis and Palestinians should negotiate the end of the conflict was a dangerous notion. The perspective in the United Nations discourse should rather be that this was a situation of occupation where human rights violations occurred.

Panellists underlined that the discourse was slowly changing and that it was no longer acceptable to support Israel's various actions. Action was not coming from the United Nations, it was coming from the people, from the outside, so that it became necessary for the Governments to do the right thing. One panellist compared the occupation to a situation of a drug addict, one solution would be to give him more and more drugs and the other solution would be to bring the patient to an institution and cut off the drugs. The Israelis had better lives today than most people all over the world. They could both have this wonderful life and see themselves as victims at the same time. No one else could do that. One did not have to be a professor of international law to know that it was disproportionate to kill someone who had spat in your face. That was exactly what Israel had done in Gaza.

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