



General Assembly
GA/PAL/1151

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

BUREAU OF PALESTINIAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE 'DEEPLY TROUBLED' BY ISRAEL'S ANNOUNCEMENT

CONCERNING RELIGIOUS SITES IN OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

The following statement was issued on 24 February by the Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, in connection with the announcement by the Government of Israel concerning religious sites in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

The Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People expresses its serious concern about Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's declared intention to include the Tomb of the Patriarchs (Al-Haram Al-Ibrahimi) in Hebron (Al-Khalil) and Rachel's Tomb (Masjid Bilal or Qubbat Rakhil) in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank in a list of Israel's "National Heritage Infrastructures".

This announcement is a further proof of the Israeli Government's resolve to entrench its control over the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Laying official claims to religious and historical places throughout the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem and attempts by the Government of Israel purporting itself to be the sole custodian of those sites is yet another measure aimed at consolidating Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian lands. The planned "heritage trail" throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory and continuing excavations near the Al-Haram Al-Sharif compound in East Jerusalem are stark examples of this provocative and dangerous policy.

If instituted, this intended step by the Israeli Government may have far-reaching consequences. It is bound to increase tension on the ground, fuel extremism and foment violence along religious lines. It is important to remember that the sites in question are of great spiritual significance not only to the Jewish people, but also to Muslims and Christians. The announcement is likely to incense millions of believers not only in the region, but also around the world. By deliberately escalating the religious dimension of the conflict, such a decision would only further complicate the efforts to achieve a just, permanent and peaceful settlement.

The Bureau of the Committee is deeply troubled by Prime Minister Netanyahu's statement of 21 February 2010 and wishes to remind Israel, the occupying Power, of its obligations as a High Contracting Party to the Fourth Geneva Convention. At the same time, the Bureau wishes to draw the attention of Israel to the fact that at this crucial time when the international community is looking for ways of reviving the long-stalled political process, such provocative declarations are utterly unhelpful, harmful and dangerous. The Bureau calls on the Government of Israel to retract the announcement and refrain completely from any other actions that may undermine the chances of restarting the Israeli-Palestinian permanent status negotiations aimed at ending the occupation that began in 1967 and achieving the two-State solution.

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