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UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL MEETING IN SUPPORT OF ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN

PEACE CONCLUDES WITH ADOPTION OF FINAL DOCUMENT

Participants Welcome Formation of Palestinian National Unity Government

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

ROME, 23 March – The United Nations International Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace was held at a time when the Mecca Agreement and the resulting National Unity Government had succeeded in moderating the internal Palestinian situation, raising hopes for the resumption of the long-stalled peace process, according to the final document, of which the Meeting took note as it concluded this evening.

Participants in the Meeting, held at the Rome headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization, welcomed the formation of a Palestinian Government of National Unity and expressed the hope that the development would allow the international community to restore much-needed economic and humanitarian assistance and help to move the peace process forward. They also expressed the view that the international community had an obligation to support the new Government without preconditions and to lift the aid restrictions imposed on it.

The participants emphasized that the decades-old conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians was increasingly becoming a key symbol of a perceived rift between the Western and Islamic societies, and stressed further that the lack of progress in Middle East peacemaking, and, most notably, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had exacerbated feelings of frustration and mutual mistrust that were fuelling extremism on a local, regional and world scale. They also felt that it was based on distorted interpretations of religious motives, aimed at transforming a political problem into a cultural and religious divide, and at disrupting the dialogue and interchanges across cultures and civilizations.

According to the final document, the participants also discussed in detail the important role played by national parliaments and inter-parliamentary organizations in promoting a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine, viewing the experience and political influence of lawmakers and their organizations as instrumental in informing public opinion and setting policy guidelines, as well as in strengthening international law, democratic processes and institution building.

The Meeting, convened by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, held three plenary sessions in which participants discussed the significance of peace in the Middle East for the advancement of the dialogue between cultures and civilizations; the role of parliaments in promoting dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians; and the urgency of restoring momentum to the peace process and forging a vision of a final settlement.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, said the Meeting was a European one aimed at determining the region's responsibility for advancing the peace process, which was not only the responsibility of the Palestinians and Israelis. The Europeans were friends of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. Jerusalem was not only for Palestinians or Israelis, but for everyone. Europeans were powerful, having written up the way in which countries should conduct themselves after the Second World War. Europeans also led the establishment of the Geneva Conventions, which was a very powerful human rights instrument.

The Israelis said they feared terrorism, while the Palestinians said they were humiliated and oppressed. They needed the Europeans as a viable third party who could say that, if the Palestinians fired a rocket to kill innocent civilians, they should be held to account, and, if the Israeli military killed innocent Palestinians, they also should be held to account.

Inviting the Europeans to be an honest broker, he said the Palestinians accepted without conditions the proposal of an international peace conference. An Arab League conference would be held in Riyadh in about a week's time and the parties should seize that opportunity to achieve peace, not just between the Israelis and the Palestinians, but between the Israelis and the Arabs as a whole.

PAUL BADJI (Senegal), Chairman of the Palestinian Rights Committee, said in his closing statement that, as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had not been settled in a comprehensive, just and lasting manner, there would be no peace. Furthermore, peace would be impossible without an end to the

occupation. The Meeting had reached a broad consensus on maintaining the permanent responsibility of the United Nations until the question of Palestine was resolved.

He also expressed the Committee's concern over the fate of Alan Johnston, a *BBC* journalist abducted in Gaza two weeks before, to whom several participants had referred during the Meeting, and hoped he would be released without impediment or harm to his person.

Plenary III

SERGIO SCARANTINO, head of the Italian delegation, said it had been rightly stressed that the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict was at the core of tensions in the Middle East. It had become a factor in difficulties that were often exploited by those with different agendas in mind. As a European and Mediterranean country, Italy had at heart an interest in seeing the realization of the goal of two States living side by side in peace and security.

Acknowledging that a negotiated peace would take courage, vision and a readiness to compromise, he said negotiations would present new challenges, but also new opportunities. The Mecca Agreement was a significant step representing a potential chance to be grasped by all important actors. Contrary to all previous scenarios, the apparent will of the Palestinians to achieve peace could not be challenged by anyone. In order to move forward in that direction, it would be necessary to look beyond the crisis-management and humanitarian mode and speed up the process with the aim of achieving final status.

YAIR HIRSCHFELD, Director-General, Economic Cooperation Foundation, Senior Lecturer in the History for the Middle East at the University of Haifa and Senior Fellow in Middle East Peace and Security at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, Houston, Texas, said that the anarchic conditions in Gaza after Israel's withdrawal had increased violence, including rocket attacks on its southern cities. The victory of Hamas in Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006 and the war against Hizbollah in the summer of 2006 had all weakened the centrist Olmert Government and destroyed the notion of unilateralism.

The undisputed goal of the Palestinian leadership and people was to end Israel's occupation, establish a State of Palestine, with its capital at al-Quds/Jerusalem and achieve a comprehensive and just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, he said. However, Hamas and Fatah, the two major Palestinian political movements, advocated two very different political statements, the latter being committed to a two-State solution and the former to the destruction of Israel. The power struggle between the two movements, the rule of anarchy and the rising poverty of the people had led eventually to violent confrontations, resulting in many casualties.

He said that, whereas the conclusion of an Israeli-Palestinian and even a wider Israeli-Arab peace would not create a stable Middle East, a continued and accelerated Israeli-Palestinian violent confrontation would be a disaster for all. Thus, the international community, led by the Quartet — the United States, European Union, Russian Federation and United Nations — would be an involved party, acting in self-interest. The United States Government, being recognized by all regional actors as the prime mover of any conflict-resolution initiative, was often tempted to act unilaterally. Parallel to that was the position of the European Union and the Russian Federation who tended to disagree with the United States and were tempted to act separately.

Suggesting that all Quartet members make an effort to act as one, he stressed the importance of maintaining unity of action and purpose, since, under present conflict conditions, no concerned party had the power and legitimacy to act without the united and structured support of the Quartet and the international community. A breaking apart of the Quartet would create disharmony and each actor would be neutralized by the other. It would be the task of the Quartet, the international community and probably also of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to create an effective security structure to permit progress towards a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian and the wider Israeli-Arab conflict, and create an effective shield against attempts by militant Islamic States and non-State actors to exploit the divide for their own purposes.

The new reality in the Middle East made the reconstruction of an Israeli-Palestinian and a wider Israeli-Arab peacebuilding process more difficult yet more necessary than ever, he stressed. On the other hand, past failures, broken trust and largely diverging narratives of what had caused the breakdown in negotiations impeded the necessary political dynamics for a positive breakthrough. On the other hand, the parties involved had today a better understanding of what was needed, and the fear of further deterioration and radicalization offered some positive motivation. As a rule, important historical change occurred when three conditions were in place: a leadership determined to achieve the envisaged change; the understanding of historical processes of trial and error, leading to a change in collective thinking embedded in an environment of adaptable political, social and economic conditions; and the necessary detailed working programmes. With some of those components appearing to be available and others not yet, much work remained ahead.

QAIS ABDEL-KAREEM, Member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, said there was a need for political will to start political negotiations without preconditions which had caused the peace process to lose momentum. There had been endless talk about the need to end humiliation, but that was a right, not a precondition. Palestinians did not want to spend the whole of their existence being given orders and instructions. The Palestinian Authority was held accountable for the slight deviation from international agreements and the same standard must also be applied to the Israeli side. The Palestinian Authority was fully authorized to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinian people.

He said Israeli security could be discussed around the negotiating table and the Palestinian people should not be required to give up territory for the sake of Israel's security or to accept the presence of military bases on the highest peaks of the West Bank. Why did Israel need such bases when it had a peace agreement with Jordan and when Iraq no longer presented a threat? It seemed like a ploy to maintain Israeli hegemony over the Palestinians. Palestinians subjected to oppression should not be required to forego their rights even before entering the negotiation room.

STAFFAN DE MISTURA, Director of the United Nations System Staff College in Turin, noted that there was little for him to say since the Secretary-General was currently in the Middle East. Over the last 50 years, the United Nations had been active in the region and was currently a member of the Quartet. In addition, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had been in the region for decades, providing services to more than 4 million people.

ZIAD ASALI, President of the American Task Force on Palestine in Washington, D.C., thanked UNRWA for having helped him through medical school and for having prepared him for his advocacy role on behalf of the Palestinian people.

He stressed that Middle East policy in the United States was a bipartisan issue, and those who thought that policy would change with the departure of the present administration were missing a crucial point. It was a real possibility that, in the absence of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it would metamorphose into a religious war pitting Muslims and Jews against each other and with Christians siding with the Jews.

He said the events of 1948 demonstrated that the Jewish people were in the region to stay, while the events of 1967 had ended the aspirations for a "Greater" Israel. There was no way for either side to leave and they were there to stay. The challenge was to find a two-State solution. Seventy per cent of people in the United States favoured it, as did similar proportions among Palestinians and Israelis. However, that had never translated into political

reality. It was imperative to translate that majority into a political programme.

The Road Map, though still existing on paper, was threatened by global political interests, he said. There could be no alliance against Iran and its proxies in the absence of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was possible to fashion a model for combining the Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative. While the Arab League had done little for the peace process, that did not mean it was incapable of doing anything. It was time to cross the religious, ethnic and racial barriers. It was no longer enough for each side to blame the other, which had been done repeatedly in the past. Now was the time for real-life politics, which were about power. The two-State solution should be adopted for the present and the near future.

LUISA MORGANTINI, Member of the European Parliament, said the new Palestinian Government should be recognized immediately by the entire international community because it was not only unity between Hamas and Fatah that mattered, but also that of millions of Palestinians who were squeezed in the middle. Since it was often said that Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity, Israel should seize the present opportunity or risk doing the same thing. While Hamas had not recognized the State of Israel, it had shown a change by recognizing the 1967 borders. It was respecting the truth and refraining from suicide attacks. It had entered the political movement and it would be a mistake on the part of the international community to fail to recognize the democratically elected Palestinian Government.

She said it was extremely important to show how many Palestinians and Israelis outside Government were working together, including those who had lost their children to Palestinian suicide attacks or Israeli military operations. Those were the people who were giving hope of the possibility to make peace. While Israelis may fear riding a bus, Palestinians too, especially the children, were scared of the soldiers they saw on their streets every day. The fear was reciprocal. One of the mistakes the international community had made was to take a hands-off approach to the conflict and the peace process. There was a need for peace and mutual recognition.

In the ensuing discussion, BERNARD SABELLA said he was disappointed with Palestinian and Israeli participants on both sides who said they were willing to make peace but were not listening to each other. Another point was that power relations were not a realistic assessment of the situation. It was not important, fair or decent to say the United States had a bipartisan position on defending Israel. Power on its own would not solve the problem.

He said Palestinians were happy with the actions of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other Arab countries, and pleaded with the Israelis to seize the opportunity provided by the formation of the National Unity Government and the forthcoming Arab League meeting in Riyadh.

CHAIM COHEN asked why only one State had been recognized when the United Nations had envisaged two in 1947. Who had made that decision and what must be done for the second to be considered for independence?

The representative of South Africa asked why the panellists had not referred to successful negotiated solutions that had taken place in Africa, including those in Namibia, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi. They were failing the Meeting, in a way, by neglecting to discuss those and other experiences from around the world.

He said preconditions were sometimes necessary in order to create conditions of equality. South African leaders had been in jail or in exile while the apartheid State demanded that the liberation movement renounce violence, and the parties had only come together when conditions of equality had been created, including the release of political prisoners. There were universal basic principles that cut across all successful negotiations.

Stressing that both sides must be prepared to pay the price for peace, he said that, in South Africa, the oppressed had allowed amnesty for those who had committed atrocities, no matter how unpalatable it had been for them to do so. Secondly, there was a need to give certain guarantees for those who had previously held power. In every conflict, the potential for resolution was always there and it was for the parties to explore.

The apartheid State had been forced to negotiate its way out of the injustice of its own system, he said, noting that in every conflict situation there were fears on both sides. While South Africans had feared being murdered, or driven out of the country in a racial war, neither of which had happened. The parties could only do themselves good if they went into negotiations with an open mind and without pre-empting the other side or setting prescriptions.

Another participant, while supporting the South African delegate, compared his contribution to that of an ex-smoker convincing a smoker to give up smoking and expressed the hope that, in his own Northern Ireland, a new Government could take office next week, led by a man who for years had refused to recognize the other party as a prospective partner.

He underscored the importance of recognizing human rights, including the protection of civilians. Nothing had been done in that regard for the suffering Palestinians and Israelis, while, in the case of last year's conflict in Lebanon, a protection force had been inserted after just 40 days of fighting.

ABDULLAH ABDULLAH stressed the importance of reciprocity, noting that the current Prime Minister of Israel had failed to follow through on his commitments while the Palestinian Authority President had done so.

Another participant said he was troubled by a panellist's projection of a religious war in which Christians would side with Jews. For the record, 70 per cent of Christian-majority societies were willing to make peace. While there was no Christian unanimity, there were mainline Christian groups that were committed to mediating, building and working for peace without taking one side or the other solely on the basis of religious affiliation.

Mr. HIRSCHFELD said the South African example showed the need for each side to take care of the political needs of the other in order to achieve a positive outcome. In order to make that possible, both sides must understand the common goals and the need to make the other side understand them as well.

Mr. ASALI said anyone who dismissed the idea that power had to do with a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did so at their own peril. The United States was a strategic ally for Israel rather than an honest broker and there was a need to understand the existence of that strategic partnership. There was also a need to have the Arab countries on board as they had been absent from the peace process for too long.

Ms. MORGANTINI said more than 40 years of occupation destroyed the morality of the occupier. It was a crime to kill innocent civilians, according to the Geneva Convention, whoever the perpetrator may be.

Mr. DE MISTURA said the end of the cold war and the ongoing resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict demonstrated the possibility to find solutions. The story of South Africa demonstrated that every case was unique and must be addressed according to its own characteristics.

He said this was the moment when everybody was asking for a revitalization of the peace process and indeed Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was currently travelling in the region.

Mr. BADJI (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said in response to Rabbi Cohen that the Committee's mandate was to conduct specific work on promoting the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, allowing them to exercise those rights, including self-determination and an independent State. That work was conducted by activities throughout the year, including meetings like the present one. The role of those meetings was substantially political, but also involved providing economic assistance.

At the end of the year, the Committee would draw up a report containing the decisions taken during the year and providing recommendations that the Committee would submit for adoption by the General Assembly. Governments, national parliaments and civil society played an important role and could all help to bring about change. In two months' time the Committee would be reaching out to a different audience at its meeting in South Africa. The Committee's work involved a lot of persuasive diplomacy as a means to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It might be frustrating at times because tangible results were not always forthcoming.

As the plenary session concluded, the Chairman called on the Rapporteur of the Committee to read out the final document, saying it provided the major thrust of the discussions. The detailed final report on the Meeting would be drafted by the Division for Palestine Rights in New York.

VICTOR CAMILLERI (Malta), Rapporteur, then read out the final document.

The Chairman then suggested that the Meeting simply take note of the final document, which would be published as a press release, until publication of the final report.

The Meeting then took note of the final document.

Mr. MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine, said that over the past five months the Committee had worked closely with the Italian delegation in New York to ensure the proper arrangements for the Meeting, the titles for the panels and even the names of the panellists. Hopefully more European countries would be willing to work with the Committee in order to advance the objective of peace between the Palestinians and Israelis many steps forward. The Meeting was a European one and its objective was to determine the region's responsibility for advancing the peace process, which was not only a task for the Palestinians and Israelis.

Was it fair that the chief religious Palestinian Muslim leader had to seek permission to pray in Jerusalem while former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon could walk at will on a holy Muslim site accompanied by 3,000 soldiers? he asked. What was the role of the Vatican, which had enormous moral power? Was it fair that the Palestinians alone were responsible for keeping Jerusalem open? Europeans were friends of both the Palestinians and the Israelis, and Jerusalem was not only for Palestinians or Israelis, but for everyone.

He said Europe was powerful, having written the way countries should conduct themselves following the Second World War, and having led the establishment of the Geneva Conventions, a very powerful human rights instrument. Would they allow it to be thrown onto the garbage heap of history? The Israelis said they feared terrorism, while the Palestinians said they were humiliated and oppressed. They both needed the Europeans as a viable third party who could say that, if the Palestinians fired a rocket to kill innocent civilians, they should be held to account, and, if the Israeli military killed innocent Palestinians, they should be held to account as well. The Europeans were invited to be an honest broker.

The Palestinians accepted without preconditions the European proposal to convene an international peace conference, he said. The Palestinians accepted such a mechanism and the Europeans could lobby for it and make it happen because 40 years of occupation was too much. They could go about it in any way they wished so that the two parties would not have to spend another 40 years of occupation. If the parties failed to capture the moment, the Palestinians were forgotten once more and nobody could guarantee that massive extremism would not be unleashed. An Arab League conference would be held in Riyadh in about a week and it was vital to seize that opportunity to achieve peace not just between the Israelis and Palestinians, but also between Israelis and the Arabs as a whole.

Chairman BADJI (Senegal) said that over two days participants had debated the relaunching of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As long as it had not been settled in a comprehensive, just and lasting manner, there would be no peace. Furthermore, peace would be impossible without an end to the occupation.

He said the Committee had highlighted the importance of close cooperation with national parliaments and inter-parliamentary organizations and would continue to involve them in its work. It would also continue to involve members of the Israeli Knesset and the Palestinian Legislative Council in its deliberations.

The Committee reaffirmed the importance of the Road Map, which should be more than a mere political document, he said. A broad consensus had been reached on maintaining the permanent responsibility of the United Nations until the question of Palestine was resolved. The Committee would continue to organize international meetings and conferences so as to create greater awareness of the question of Palestine.

He expressed the Committee's concern over the fate of Alan Johnston, the *BBC* journalist abducted in Gaza two weeks before, to whom several participants had referred during the Meeting, and the hope that he would soon be released without impediment or harm to his person.

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