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NICOSIA MEETING REVIEWS SITUATION IN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES SINCE SEPTEMBER 2000

Israeli Courts Cite Security Considerations As Reason for Human Rights Violations by Israeli Soldiers

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

NICOSIA, 16 April -- The violation of humanitarian law by Israel was continual, Hadas Ziv, Director of Projects for Physicians for Human Rights, told the second session of the International Meeting in Support of Middle East Peace this afternoon.

Describing a few examples of events where women had babies at checkpoints because Israeli authorities had delayed their passage, she said that when such cases were brought before the Israeli High Court, the Court said simply that Israeli soldiers had been given unequivocal instruction to show sensitivity in cases of emergency medical conditions. There was no attempt to ensure that soldiers observed the Geneva Convention and its regulations were not being implemented. The High Court had not taken any punitive action in 26 cases presented to it in which humanitarian law had been violated. If the current situation continued, Israel would eventually become the victim of its own power.

The High Contracting Parties of the Fourth Geneva Convention had asserted the applicability of the Convention to the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory on two occasions, the Minister for Planning and International Cooperation of the Palestinian Authority, Nabil Shaath, said. However, the Parties must act to pressure Israel to comply with the Convention. There was a range of possibilities available to every country that had relations with Israel to demonstrate that it could not get away with the violations of humanitarian law. That included freezing agreements, interrupting flight services and freezing technology cooperation.

Deputy Commissioner-General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, Karen Koning AbuZayd, said that because of the intifada, UNRWA had to provide assistance to almost 80 per cent of the Palestinian population. Most of that assistance was in the form of food, job generation, medical services and most important to Palestinians, education. For the first time, however, there had been a high failure rate in the subjects of Arabic and mathematics. The Agency had been attempting to help the children to overcome the stresses that were affecting their development.

While Israelis might have withdrawn from some places, the curfews remained in effect, preventing Palestinians from leaving their houses to get food or medical help. In response to letters citing violation of the Geneva Conventions, Israeli authorities had claimed security reasons.

Media Analyst for Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting Seth Ackerman said that because of the crucial role the United States played in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, American public opinion was potentially a decisive element in the conflict. Since most Americans received information about the Middle East from a few news outlets, the way they presented the conflict was important. The media, however, was selective in providing information, putting Israeli grievances on vivid display while maintaining a studious silence on the grievances of the Palestinians. Even National Public Radio was far more likely to report an Israeli death than that of a Palestinian.

He suggested that a change in American perception of the conflict might come if the attitudes of the elite towards Israel changed. That could happen only if the Israeli Government defied the United States by causing grave and irreversible damage to its strategic goals in the Middle East or globally. The shift in elite attitudes would effect media coverage of the conflict. Another path to change would be through the growth of popular mass movements in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Also today, the Chairman of the Committee for the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Papa Louis Fall (Senegal) expressed the Committee's dismay that three Palestinian speakers -- Kamal Al-Sharafy, Member of the Palestinian Council from Gaza; Gabi Baramki, President of the Palestinian Council for Justice and Peace from Ramallah; and Issam Younis, General Director of the Al-Mezan Centre for Human Rights from Gaza -- were not able to travel to Nicosia because of the general closure imposed by the occupying power.

Statements were also made by the representatives of Indonesia, Brazil, Ukraine, Qatar, Iran and Burkino Faso.

The two-day meeting, which is under the sponsorship of the Committee, will convene again tomorrow morning to hear panellists discuss international efforts at containing the crisis and resuming the peace dialogue. Topics scheduled for discussion include the role of the co-sponsors; initiatives of the European Union, regional parties and the non-aligned movement; and the permanent responsibility of the United Nations.

Presentation by Experts

HADAS ZIV, Director of Projects, Physicians for Human Rights, Tel Aviv, said historically Israel had violated the rights of the Palestinians ever since the occupation of 1967. Over the years there had been further restriction of movement, separating villages from central towns. While the troops might pull out of new areas they occupied, the closures had a tendency to become routine, contributing to the destruction of the civil infrastructure.

The violation of humanitarian law was continual, she said. In 1996, a woman pregnant with twins was delayed at a checkpoint. She delivered at the checkpoint. By the time she reached the hospital, both children were dead. When the Physicians for Human Rights had brought the case before the Israeli High Court, the Court ruled that the soldiers had been given unequivocal instruction to show sensitivity in cases of emergency medical conditions. Nevertheless, similar cases continued to occur. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society had joined in the appeal to the Israeli Courts but there was no attempt to make soldiers observe the Geneva Convention. The reality was that regulations were not being implemented. When the situation deteriorated only ambulances were allowed on the road but even they were delayed. Not one soldier had been brought to trial for causing the delays. The Courts stated that local needs had caused the delays and "for that we are sorry". At the checkpoint it was hard to see if someone was really ill or pretending to be sick.

She said that even UNRWA and Red Crescent ambulances, which had Israeli permission to travel, were shot at. In one case on 4 March, a doctor was burned alive. The Israelis at first said the ambulance was carrying explosives. They later said that it was probably the oxygen that caused the explosion. As a consequence, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) minimized its activities in the West Bank. Israeli policies were shameful, she said. Her organization had been unsuccessful in appealing to Israeli public opinion, and the High Court had not taken any punitive action in 26 cases where humanitarian law had been violated. If the current situation continued, Israel would eventually become the victim of its own power.

NABIL SHAATH, Minister for Planning and International Cooperation of the Palestinian Authority, said the Israeli closures had been the cause of the inability of the Palestinian economy to survive. Planning for the Gaza market meant planning for a population of 1 million people and on the West Bank for 1.5 million people. When the Israelis made economic plans they included both the Israeli and the Palestinian markets. Most Israeli products were protected, leaving the Palestinians as the hostage market. After the year 2000, the Israelis went overboard in enforcing the siege. The policy was to maintain separate societies within the Palestinian territory. Under Camp David, the West Bank would have been divided into four cantons, thus further separating Palestinian society.

In 1999 and 2000, despite all the restrictions, the Palestinian economy had managed to grow by four per cent. But by now, the Palestinian people had lost 50 per cent of its Gross National Product, he said. Sixty per cent of the people were below the poverty line and unemployment exceeded 65 per cent in Gaza. There was no airport or harbour, and Israel allowed a very limited number of trucks in from Egypt and Jordan daily, and subjected them to fierce searches. That meant that practically everything had to be imported from Israel and that import taxes were collected by Israel. Of those taxes, 30 per cent should go to Palestine but the Israelis used it to pay debts that they said were owed to Israelis. Palestinians were left without resources to pay for the running of their institutions.

He said there had been two meetings of the High Contracting Parties of the Geneva Conventions, which asserted the applicability of the Conventions to the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. What was needed, however, was for the High Contracting Parties to use a range of possibilities to put pressure on Israel to comply with the Geneva Conventions. There were means at the hands of every country to deal with Israel including the freezing of agreements, interruption of flight services and freezing technology cooperation. The purpose was to demonstrate to Israel that it could not get away with the violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention. His preference, however, was to move forward with peace, to allow Palestinians to freely choose to work with Israel for peace.

KAREN KONING ABUZAYD, Deputy Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), said that because of the intifada the UNRWA had to provide assistance to almost 80 per cent of the Palestinians. The assistance came primarily in the form of food but also what Palestinians wanted even more, job generation. The most important assistance that UNRWA offered to the Palestinians was education and medical services. For the first time, however, there had been a high failure rate in the subjects of Arabic and mathematics. The Agency had been trying to help the children overcome the stresses and traumas that affected their development. Israeli responses to UNRWA letters on the violations of the Geneva Convention claimed security considerations. Nevertheless, it was a question of collective punishment against civilians.

She said that while the Israelis might withdraw from some places, the curfews remained in effect in 23 towns. Palestinians could not leave their houses to get food or medical help. There were serious humanitarian concerns in many places. Many suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure were unable to get medicine. Where the Israelis had not destroyed the water pipes, they had shot out the water tanks. Very few people were allowed to move. The Agency could not use its Palestinian staff, as any male between the ages of 15 and 55 was vulnerable to Israeli arrest.

Gaza was often cut in two or three pieces to protect the settlements. Five thousand Israelis occupied 30 per cent of the strip, compared to 1.2 million Palestinians, out of which more than 800,000 refugees lived in the remaining area. Most of the staff was unable to get to work, so the Agency could not function. In the West Bank there were well over 150 checkpoints, including "flying checkpoints", which changed without warning.

The money spent by the donor community for the past 50 years to build up Palestinian infrastructure would have to be spent again, she said. Observers must be in the Palestinian territory to monitor and look for violations of international humanitarian law. Only then would one be able to say where the terror was coming from, who were the occupiers, who were the aggressors and who were the victims.

SETH ACKERMAN, Media Analyst with Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) in New York, said that because of the crucial role the United States Government played in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, United States public opinion was potentially a decisive element in the conflict. Since the vast majority of Americans get their information about the Middle East from a few large, established news outlets, the way those organizations presented the conflict was of paramount importance. The United States media informed the American public about the Middle East selectively. While Palestinian rock-throwers, suicide bombers and militiamen were in full view on American television screens night after night, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land was almost ethereal in its absence. At the same time, the words "occupation" and "occupied territories" have become almost taboo for American reporters. Since the beginning of the current intifada, approximately 90 per cent of American television reporting on the occupied territories failed to report that the territories were occupied.

He said that American news coverage put Israel's grievances on vivid display but maintained a studious silence on the grievances of the Palestinians.

Media outlets tended to focus more on the Israeli casualties than those of the Palestinians. A FAIR study conducted last year showed that even on the publicly financed National Public Radio (NPR), there was an 81 per cent likelihood that an Israeli death would be reported but only a 34 per cent likelihood that a Palestinian death would be. NPR reported on 20 per cent of Palestinian children who had been killed. By contrast, 89 per cent of the deaths of Israeli children was reported on. Israeli civilians were more likely to have their deaths reported than a member of the Israeli security forces. Palestinians, however, were far more likely to have their deaths reported if they were security personnel than if they were civilians.

One possible path that could lead to a change in the way Americans perceive the conflict would be a shift in the attitudes of the elite towards Israel, he said. That could happen only if the Israeli Government defied the United States by causing grave and irreversible damage to United States strategic goals in the Middle East or globally. The shift in elite attitudes would be transmitted in the media coverage of the conflict which would then affect public opinion. Another path would be the growth of popular mass movements in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Like the movement to end apartheid, a successful international solidarity movement could raise awareness of the plight of the Palestinians and effect a profound change in the attitudes of the United States public.

The representative of Indonesia said her Government condemned Israel's violation of international humanitarian law in Palestine. The recent Security Council resolutions must be implemented. It was urgent to dispatch an international force to ensure peace for the area. The ongoing military incursions accompanied by repression would not bring security. A lasting peace must be negotiated on the basis of the land-for-peace formula. Regrettably, the peace process had been met with procrastination and new conditions by Israel. Israel's continued acquisition of land for settlements furthered the dismantling of the peace process. For the Arab peace plan to succeed there must be total withdrawal from all Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. There must be an international observer force to protect people on both sides. The pain, suffering and killing of Palestinian people must cease. Though the path was daunting and the challenges were formidable, the international community must continue its support until Palestinian rights were achieved.

The representative of Brazil said his Government had always been attentive to the representation of the Palestinian people. Since 1998, Palestinian representation in Brazil was virtually on a par with the level of diplomatic missions. Brazil was following carefully the evolution of the situation in the Middle East. He urged the creation of an independent, economically viable Palestinian State. The Arab Summit on 28 March had taken an important step to bring about harmonious coexistence between the Israeli and Arab peoples. The deterioration in the region had reached unacceptable levels. The international community must act to stop the violence. There was no solution other than that established in international law. Combat against terrorism must be done within the rules of international law.

The representative of Ukraine said the resort to violence by the Palestinians and to military force by the Israelis would not achieve their aims. To stop the cycle of violence and hatred, there had to be a political process. Resolute and immediate action should be taken. The Security Council resolutions must be immediately implemented. Israel must lift its siege of Chairman Arafat and provide unlimited access for humanitarian organization to the territories. His country rejected any acts of violence to reach political goals, no matter who perpetrated them. He called on both parties to implement the Tenet work plan and to accept the recommendations of the Quartet. Ukraine was willing to make a practical contribution to finding a solution. It stood ready to participate in a monitoring mechanism. Moreover, it had offered its good offices to the parties and proposed a round table that would elaborate ways out of the current conflict. The Ukrainian proposal had received support from both parties and a number of international parties.

The representative of Qatar said Israel had proved that it was not interested in pursuing peace, but force would never bring about the security to which it aspired. Security and peace in the region would only become a reality if United Nations resolutions on the restoration of Palestinian rights were implemented. Israel's aggressions constituted terrorism against unarmed people and quick and effective action was urgent. The international community, especially the United States, the Russian Federation, the United Nations, and the European Union must shoulder their responsibility to halt the Israeli aggression. It must acquire protection for the unarmed Palestinian people and ensure security and stability in the Middle East.

The representative of Iran said Jenin was the scene of the latest Israeli Army massacre, illustrating that massacres were on the Israeli agenda. The Israeli machinery must be stopped and the dignity of every person must be respected. Israel trampled the basic principles of humanitarian law and defied the Declaration of Human Rights, challenging the entire international community. Only a punitive resolution that authorized sanctions and established a protective force to guarantee the protection of civilians would change the situation. The Committee should concentrate its work on the situation on the ground and on finding a way to stop the Israeli actions in the occupied Palestinian territory. For the sake of domestic policy, Israel was planting the seeds for the continuation of its actions in the West Bank and Gaza.

The representative of Burkina Faso said the international community must think of all possible solutions to the conflict. The parties must sit and talk. The international community must force Israel to withdraw from the territories. When Israel had given in, as it must, an international force was needed to maintain peace and to protect civilians and the Palestinian Authority. In the present stage, a buffer force must be dispatched. It was unavoidable in any strategy capable of promoting peace.

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