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### UNITED NATIONS AFRICAN MEETING ON PALESTINIAN RIGHTS

### OPENS IN PRETORIA WITH CALLS TO RELAUNCH PEACE TALKS

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

PRETORIA, 9 May – As the United Nations African meeting on the question of Palestine opened here today, Paul Badji, Chairman of the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that the meeting was being held amid broad international and regional efforts to relaunch the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Describing the grim and worsening conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, he stressed that it was absolutely essential that concrete negotiations be taken up in earnest. Indeed, the wider Middle East region would not know peace unless the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians was ended. Only a two-State solution, including the return of all Palestinian lands and refugees, would lead to a fair and sustainable solution.

With the fortieth anniversary of the tragic Palestinian-Israeli conflict just a month away, it was more important than ever for the international community to help both sides seize the opportunity offered by recent efforts to jump-start the long-stalled peace talks and make concrete strides towards a just, viable two-State solution, a senior South African official told the gathering.

"South Africa firmly believes in the Palestinian peoples' inalienable right to self-determination and the fact that there was no military solution to the conflict," said Essop Pahad, Minister in the Office of President Thabo Mbeki, opening the two-day Meeting, which aims to bolster African solidarity with the Palestinian people, as well as build on recent international and regional momentum to bring the Israeli and Palestinian sides back to the negotiating table.

Mr. Pahad urged the international community to give unconditional recognition to and engage in dialogue with the newly established Palestinian Unity Government, support the 2002 Arab peace Initiative – recently reaffirmed by Arab leaders in Riyadh – lift all restrictions on that Government, and take appropriate action to address the dire humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people. The situation on the ground demanded inspired and creative leadership on the part of Palestinian and Israeli leadership, as well as the sustained commitment of the international community, particularly those with strategic or other interests in the region or ties to regional players.

He said that his Government hoped that this Meeting would, among other things, demonstrate African and United Nations alignment on the creation of a viable Palestinian State, based on the two-State solution, at the earliest possible moment. South Africa also hoped the meeting would create more awareness among Africans and others in the international community, of the seriousness of the conflict and its global implications. The Meeting should also demonstrate and create greater sub-Saharan involvement in the global dialogue, at a time when support appeared to be declining, with some African nations no longer supporting the rights of the Palestinian people at the United Nations.

In his message to the opening of the Meeting, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that he had been encouraged by recent international and regional efforts to get the long-stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks back on track, and outlined a series of steps the parties themselves could take to "demonstrate a true commitment to peace". He called on Palestinians to cease rocket attacks at Israel and other indiscriminate violence against civilians. They should also work towards the immediate release of the abducted BBC journalist, Alan Johnston, and of the Israeli soldier being held captive. The Secretary-General also encouraged Israel to cease settlement activity and the construction of the wall, to ease Palestinian movement and release Palestinian revenues, show progress on the release of Palestinian prisoners, and ensure that its military operations did not endanger civilians.

The statement was delivered by Tuliameni Kalomoh, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs who said the United Nations would continue to actively support international efforts aimed at bringing an end to the occupation, and achieving a two-State solution. "A viable and independent Palestine and a safe and secure Israel would not only be a blessing for the two peoples, but would also help promote peace and stability in the wider region," he said.

"Too much time has passed and it is long overdue: the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian land must be brought to an end and the Palestinian people must have their freedom," declared Samih Al-Abed, Minister of Public Works of the Palestinian Authority. He added that the international community must redouble its efforts at this critical time to promote the realization of the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

There was a window of opportunity, he said, noting that multiple efforts were being exerted by several parties, including the League of Arab States, the new Palestinian National Unity Government, and the members of the Quartet, aimed at reviving the peace process. "Yet, while everyone else talks of peace, Israel continues its colonization campaign aimed at sustaining its 40 years of occupation of the Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, continues its military assaults on the Palestinian civilian population, and continues its collective punishment of the Palestinian people as a whole," he said, stressing that such actions totally contradicted peace efforts and exacerbated the situation, inflamed tensions and undermined the potential for dialogue and negotiation.

Recent developments, however, provided an historic opportunity, which should be seized and not lost like so many before it. "We must build upon the momentum and push forward peace efforts in a serious and coordinated manner, with the resolve necessary to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably arise towards the ultimate achievement of a peaceful and just final settlement," he said. "So, if there is a partner for peace on the Israeli side to come and negotiate without conditions, we are ready to negotiate to bring an end to this tragedy and to make peace," he added.

Mr. Badji, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, stressed that the momentum in the peace process was being threatened by the grave security and humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. Israel continued, almost daily, to carry out its military activities in the West Bank, including targeted assassinations, demolitions, closures and curfews. The past few weeks had seen an intensification of those activities, all of which deepened the Palestinian people's despair and often triggered retaliation. "Indiscriminately targeting civilians, whether by Israeli aircrafts, tanks or artillery or by Palestinian rocket fire is a violation of international law and has to be stopped," he said.

Meanwhile, the economic and social conditions in the Occupied Territory were grim, with most Palestinians living in poverty. The Committee had welcomed the formation of the new Palestinian Cabinet, and hoped it would allow the international community to restore much-needed economic and humanitarian assistance. Finally, he said that the longest military occupation in modern history would mark its fortieth year next month on 9 June. South Africa's example was proof that peace and reconciliation were the fruits of a vision, determination and serious compromises by both parties to a conflict. "We call upon Israel and the Palestinian leadership to take the necessary decision to resume a meaningful peace process and determine its final outcome."

The Meeting, convened under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, will be divided into three plenary sessions. Plenary I, to be held later today, will focus on the situation on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. Plenary II, to be held tomorrow morning, will consider international efforts aimed at achieving a viable Israeli-Palestinian peace; and tomorrow afternoon, Plenary III will focus on African solidarity with the Palestinian peoples' aspirations for independence and statehood.

A highlight of this week's events will be the United Nations Public Forum in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace, set for Friday, 11 May, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the University of Pretoria. The Public Forum will provide non-governmental organizations, representatives of the academia and the media with the opportunity to discuss common concerns, especially civil society solidarity with the Palestinian people, as well as the relationship between African civic actors and international efforts to support a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Also speaking during the opening session were the High Commissioner of Mauritius to South Africa, the Ambassador of Cuba to South Africa (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), the Ambassador of Algeria to South Africa, High Commissioner of Malaysia to South Africa, and the High Commissioner of Pakistan to South Africa.

The Head of the African Union delegation to the Arab League also spoke.

### Opening Statements

Opening the Meeting, ESSOP PAHAD, Minister in the Office of the President of South Africa, speaking on behalf of President Thabo Mbeki, said that 2007 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in the intervening years, the conditions of the Palestinian people had continued to worsen. South Africa firmly believed that there could be no peace in the Middle East unless a sustainable solution to that conflict was found.

As host of the Meeting, South Africa would, among other things, call attention to recent global and regional activities aimed at reigniting the long-stalled peace process, especially the recommitment of Arab leaders to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. That initiative was not a difficult one to implement, he said, adding that it involved the return of all Palestinian lands and the creation of two States living side by side in peace and security.

South Africa's position was very clear: it urged the international community to give unconditional recognition to, and engage in dialogue with, the newly established Palestinian Unity Government, lift all restrictions on that Government, and recognize and take appropriate action to address the dire humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people. South Africa firmly believed in the Palestinian peoples' inalienable right to self-determination, as well as the fact that there was no military solution to the conflict, he added, reiterating that, until a solution was found to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the situation in the Middle East would remain a threat to regional and international peace and security.

South Africa continued to be troubled by ongoing settlement activity and continued to believe that the separation wall did not represent a legitimate security measure, he said, declaring that the barrier was, in essence, an "apartheid wall". He said that, overall, the situation on the ground demanded inspired and creative leadership on the part of Palestinian and Israeli leadership, as well as the sustained commitment of the international community, particularly those with strategic or other interests in the region or ties to regional players. He stressed that just as the Palestinian people demanded an end to the occupation, the majority of the Israeli population was tired of being a nation of war. There must be a renewed and sustained commitment to an Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts. That should include the possibility of holding meetings under the auspices of the United Nations between Israel and Syria on one hand and between Israel and the Palestinians on the other. All efforts should adhere to the relevant obligations outlined in United Nations Security Council resolutions based on the principle of "land for peace".

He went on to say that South Africa was also concerned about the humanitarian situation on the ground, particularly about reports that an estimated one third of the Palestinian population was food insecure. Moreover, key international donors had cut off aid to the population after Hamas had won the democratic elections last year. Many people were being forced to sell their belongings to cover basic necessities. The worst affected area was the Gaza Strip, where the situation was exacerbated by Israel's restrictions on movement. The resumption of aid to the Palestinian Authority was an absolute necessity to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people, he said. South Africa was of the view that the global community, particularly its

most powerful nations, must work assiduously to resolve this situation.

Comparing the situation of Palestinians in the Occupied Territory with the situation of South Africa's during apartheid, he said that, while Israel denied such intention or purpose, its oppressive actions – closures, checkpoints extrajudicial killings, among others – in contravention of international humanitarian and human rights law, certainly belied that stance. South Africa would continue to condemn Palestinian rocket fire into Israel, but it would also condemn Israel's ongoing military incursions into Gaza and other disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force.

He said that his Government hoped that this meeting would, among other things, demonstrate African and United Nations alignment on the creation of a viable Palestinian State, based on the two-State solution, at the earliest possible moment. South Africa also hoped the meeting would create more awareness among Africans and others in the international community, of the seriousness of the conflict and its global implications. The meeting should also demonstrate and create greater Sub-Saharan involvement in the global dialogue, at a time when support appeared to be declining, with some African nations no longer supporting the rights of the Palestinian people at the United Nations.

He also hoped that the meeting would promote an understanding of South African foreign policy towards the Middle East, call for an end to the Israeli, United States and European Union imposed sanctions against the Palestinian Unity Government, call attention to the situation in the Occupied Territory, and, call for the inclusion of members of Hamas in United Nations meetings as part of the world body's efforts to ensure a viable solution to the conflict. Finally, he said that South Africa would work diligently with all parties to ensure a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, and to convince the powers that this was an opportunity that should not be missed.

TULIAMENI KALOMOH, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, on his own behalf, emphasized the importance of holding the meeting in South Africa, and encouraged both Israeli and Palestinian leaderships to draw on the courage of renowned South African freedom fighters and activists in their similar search for a viable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Delivering a message on behalf of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, he said that there had been some important recent developments as Israelis and Palestinians continue to search for a solution to end their conflict. The agreement reached in Mecca between Palestinian factions had led to the formation of a Palestinian Unity Government that would hopefully work to curb the intra-Palestinian violence that threatened to destabilize the Gaza Strip.

He said that the Secretary-General encouraged that new Government to continue its efforts to overcome internal discord and move towards acceptance of the diplomatic Quartet's principles. He had also urged the international community to nurture that process and hoped that that included new thinking on ways to alleviate the Palestinian fiscal crisis. The Secretary-General had also been encouraged by recent international efforts to get the Palestinians and Israelis back on the negotiating track, the recent Riyadh Summit of the League of Arab States, which had endorsed the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and had established a Ministerial Committee to promote that process.

He added that United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had been actively promoting dialogue between the parties, and that Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas had begun to meet regularly to discuss a range of issues. The Secretary-general hoped that the internal challenges the two leaders faced would not deter them from moving forward with discussions on the political horizon. The diplomatic Quartet also had a vital role to play in supporting those efforts and in ensuring that both parties were held to their commitments.

"Yet many challenges remain," he said, recalling that, in his recent visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he had seen first-hand some of the obstacles that, over the years, had stalled progress in the peace process. He had been deeply troubled by the network of checkpoints, by continued settlement activities and by the construction of the barrier on a route that deviated from the Green Line. In talking to ordinary Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the Secretary-General had been struck by their deep longing for their own State and the many frustrations they faced in their daily lives. "The humanitarian situation is woeful and deteriorating, and the economy needs to be urgently revitalized," he added.

During that visit he had also come to a better understanding of the security concerns facing Israelis. "Rocket attacks and indiscriminate violence against civilians should be stopped without conditions," he said, adding, however, that security was also an urgent need for the Palestinians, who faced a rising death toll as a result of Israeli Defense Force (IDF) incursions, as well as internal violence in Gaza.

"I encourage both parties to demonstrate a true commitment to peace through a negotiated two-State solution," he said, calling on Palestinians to cease rocket attacks at Israel and other indiscriminate violence against civilians. They should also work towards the immediate release of the abducted BBC journalist, Alan Johnston, and of the Israeli soldier being held captive. At the same time, he encouraged Israel to cease settlement activity and construction of the wall, to ease Palestinian movement and release Palestinian revenues, and to show progress on the release of Palestinian prisoners. "Israel should also ensure that its military operations are in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law, so as not to endanger civilians," he added.

He went on to say that the United Nations would continue to actively support international efforts aimed at bringing an end to the 40-year occupation, and achieving a two-State solution. "A viable and independent Palestine and a safe and secure Israel would not only be a blessing for the two peoples, but would also help promote peace and stability in the wider region," he said. He also urged the international community, including Governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society and individuals to intensify their efforts to bring about a peaceful solution of the "terrible" conflict.

PAUL BADJI (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that the Committee was well aware of South Africa's important role in support of the Palestinian people. The long struggle against apartheid and its successful conclusion in 1994 had been an inspiration to everyone working around the globe on behalf of the Palestinian people's just cause. Many peace advocates in South Africa had since redirected their work towards injustices still suffered in other parts of the world, and their voices of support, endowed with moral strength and great significance had always empowered the oppressed, particularly the Palestinian people and their supporters worldwide.

"Therefore, we believe that the country of Oliver Tambo, of Nelson Mandela and other renowned freedom fighters is the appropriate venue for holding this meeting," he said, adding that South Africa was also playing an important and visible role in support of the Palestinian people at the United Nations, where that country had just assumed responsibilities as a non-permanent member of the powerful Security Council. He was convinced that South Africa would make an extensive contribution to the Council's work, which was often paralysed, especially on the question of Palestine.

He went on to say that the Committee's mission was to mobilize international public opinion in support of the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinians. The Committee fully supported the objective of two-States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side within secure and recognized borders, as endorsed by relevant Security Council resolutions. The Committee had also welcomed the diplomatic Quartet's Road Map peace plan, as well as the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

Recently there had been signs of increased momentum towards revitalizing those peace initiatives, he said, noting the reinvigoration of the Quartet and

the involvement of regional Arab partners, as welcome moves. Israel was called upon to seize the invigorated Arab Peace Initiative and other recent historic opportunities and demonstrate its willingness to compromise for the sake of a permanent peace in the region. "Rejecting it again will only lead to continued sufferings, killings and retaliations, by Palestinians and Israelis, for years to come," he said, adding that the international community had the duty to encourage the concerned parties to work towards the implementation of that important initiative.

He stressed, however, that increasing momentum in the overall peace process was being threatened by the grave security and humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, which was the direct consequence of the occupation. He said that Israel continued, almost daily, to carry out its military activities in the West Bank, including targeted assassinations, arrests, home demolitions, closures and curfews. The past few weeks had seen an intensification of those activities, all of which deepened the Palestinian people's despair and often triggered retaliation.

"Indiscriminately targeting civilians, whether by Israeli aircrafts, tanks or artillery or by Palestinian rocket fire is a violation of international law and has to be stopped," he said, stressing that Israel needed to stop its excessive and indiscriminate use of force and extrajudicial killings, and that the Palestinian leadership needed to impose its authority in the territory under its control and ensure compliance with the agreed upon ceasefire in Gaza.

He went on to say that, meanwhile, Israel continued to expand settlements and to construct its separation wall in the occupied West Bank, actions that contravened the Geneva Conventions and numerous resolutions of the General Assembly and Security Council. Israel continued to act as though it were above international law, and the Committee's position was that the wider international community must ensure that the occupying Power abided by the provisions of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion, as well as resolutions of the General Assembly on ceasing construction of the separation wall.

Further, the economic and social conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory remained grim, and most Palestinians still lived in poverty. He said that the Committee had welcomed the formation of the new Palestinian Cabinet two months ago, and hoped that that would allow the international community to restore much-needed economic and humanitarian assistance. "The humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people must not be held hostage to political constraints," he said, also separately calling on Israel to immediately release the remaining withheld Palestinian tax revenues and to resume regular payments of collected monies in accordance with bilateral agreements.

"It needs to be understood that the isolation of the Palestinian people and the resulting humanitarian emergency only provide a fertile ground for radicalization of parts of the Palestinian population," he declared, stressing that the Committee emphasized that the continuing occupation of the Palestinian Territory was the root cause of the conflict. This, the longest military occupation in modern history, would mark its fortieth year next month on 9 June. South Africa's example was proof that peace and reconciliation were the fruits of a vision, determination and serious compromises by both parties to a conflict. "We call upon Israel and the Palestinian leadership to take the necessary decision to resume a meaningful peace process and determine its final outcome."

SAMIH AL-ABED, Minister of Public Works of the Palestinian Authority, said the traditional support and solidarity given to the Palestinian people by the many and diverse nations of Africa had been so important for the Palestinian cause over the decades. South Africa was a beacon of hope for all peoples, for the South African experience had shown the world that justice, freedom, peace and reconciliation could indeed be achieved, despite the many obstacles and hardships along the way and that "we must, therefore, never give up our struggle to achieve these noble goals", he declared.

He said that for nearly 60 years now, the Palestinian people had been a stateless, the majority of them living as refugees. And, for 40 years now, the Palestinian people had been suffering under the oppressive and belligerent Israeli military occupation of their land. Tragically, as the many years passed, the plight of the Palestinian people had been compounded as their situation as refugees and in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, dramatically deteriorated, making the drive for a peaceful resolution of the question of Palestine more urgent than ever.

Today, under Israel's occupation, the Palestinian people continued to suffer from the widespread and grave violation of all of their human rights, the further dispossession and loss of their land, and constant humiliation and assaults on their dignity as a people. In grave breach of international law, Israel continued to carry out military attacks against civilians, killing and injuring Palestinian men, women and children; continued to destroy homes, properties and agricultural lands; and continued to construct, expand and entrench its illegal settlements and to construct the monstrous "apartheid wall" throughout the Occupied West Bank, particularly in and around occupied East Jerusalem, intensifying its siege and isolation of the Holy City.

Israel also continued to detain and imprison over 11,000 Palestinians, including over 100 women and hundreds of children and continued to impose all means of collective punishment upon the Palestinian people, including by severe restrictions on their freedom of movement throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory and to and from the outside world. In addition, he said that for more than a year now, the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority had suffered a debilitating and devastating international financial and political siege, imposed following the democratic election of the Palestinian Legislative Council in January of 2006.

"It is a tragic and glaring irony that such sanctions have been imposed on an occupied people and not on the occupying Power that for years has been committing systematic human rights violations and grave breaches of international law – war crimes – against the Palestinian civilian population under its occupation," he said. Together, the cumulative result of Israel's illegal policies and actions against the Palestinian people and of these unjust international sanctions that have been imposed, had been the steep deterioration of the political, security, economic, social and humanitarian situation.

"Too much time has passed and it is long overdue: the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian land must be brought to an end and the Palestinian people must have their freedom, exercising their inalienable right to self-determination in their independent State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, he declared, adding that the international community must redouble its efforts at this critical time to promote the realization of the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security on the basis of the 1967 borders, and the realization of the long overdue rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to return on the basis of resolution 194. "International law and justice must be permitted to prevail in order to allow peace to prevail," he said.

There was a window of opportunity, he said, noting that multiple efforts were being exerted by several parties, including the League of Arab States, the new Palestinian National Unity Government, and the members of the Quartet, aimed at reviving the peace process. "Yet, while everyone else talks of peace, Israel continues its colonization campaign aimed at sustaining its 40-year occupation of the Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, continues its military assaults on the Palestinian civilian population, and continues its collective punishment of the Palestinian people as a whole," he said, stressing that such actions totally contradicted peace efforts and exacerbated the situation, inflamed tensions and undermined the potential for dialogue and negotiation.

The Palestinian side had repeatedly expressed its readiness to resume a genuine peace process and undertake final status negotiations immediately towards an accelerated resolution of the conflict and the achievement of the peace and justice that the Palestinians have long suffered and strived for. It had recently taken many important steps in that direction in the recent period despite hardships and challenges. "We have formed a National Unity Government of the Palestinian Authority ... which has helped to quell some of the internal political and security difficulties we have been facing," he said,

adding that President Abbas had been given a significant and unprecedented mandate by this Government – thus by all political groups, including Hamas – to negotiate with the Israel, the occupying Power, a just and final peace settlement.

“We are hopeful that this Government will rightly receive the support of the international community at this critical time,” he said, adding that: “It is also our strong hope that the formation of the National Unity Government will bring an end to the international sanctions that have been unjustly imposed, allowing for the delivery of sorely needed aid to the Palestinian people.” Such aid was imperative for addressing the humanitarian crisis and poor socio-economic conditions in the Occupied Territory, particularly in imprisoned and impoverished Gaza.

He also drew attention to the importance of the efforts being exerted by Arab countries. The Arab Peace Initiative, which was first adopted by the League of Arab States in 2002, had been, with the leadership and encouragement of Saudi Arabia, revived and reaffirmed by the recent Arab Summit held in Riyadh. A Follow-up Arab Ministerial Committee had been established and had decided on some practical steps to invigorate the Initiative, including plans to meet with the Security Council as a whole, as well as with the Permanent Members, the Secretary-General, and the members of the Quartet. The Ministerial Committee had also called for an international meeting under the auspices of the United Nations and the other members of the Quartet for all parties to the conflict to attend.

Those developments provided an historic opportunity, which should be seized and not lost like so many before it. “We must build upon the momentum and push forward peace efforts in a serious and coordinated manner, with the resolve necessary to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably arise towards the ultimate achievement of a peaceful and just final settlement,” he said. The Palestinian side, with the support of the international community, including the important and traditional support of the African nations, was committed to achieving that goal. “So, if there is a partner for peace on the Israeli side to come and negotiate without conditions, we are ready to negotiate to bring an end to this tragedy and to make peace,” he declared.

#### Statements

Before giving the floor to representatives of Governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies, Ambassador BADJI introduced members of the Committee delegation to the Meeting.

M.I. DOSSA, High Commissioner of Mauritius to South Africa, said that, while the quest for peace had registered some progress, a final settlement had nevertheless been elusive. Indeed, the recent violence in Gaza had shattered the hopes of many on the Palestinian side and had done much to undermine the serious efforts to reignite the peace process so far. He said that his Government believed that the Road Map was one of the most sure routes to peace and encouraged both sides to adhere to their obligations under that diplomatic initiative. He added that Mauritius also supported the recommitment to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

ESTHER ARMENTEROS CARDENAS, Ambassador of Cuba to South Africa and Vice-Chair of the Meeting, speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, said that, during the last few months, concerned regional parties had exerted efforts and “hopes were rising” that the long-stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process would get back on track. At the same time, Cuba and the Movement were concerned that the international community continued to withhold funds from the newly formed Palestinian Unity Government.

The Non-Aligned Movement was also concerned by the continued deterioration of the situation on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The Movement would call on Israel to accept the Arab Peace Initiative, and to call on the wider international community to stand by its obligations to help bring about an end to the 40-year occupation of Palestinian lands.

MOURAD BENCHEIKH, Ambassador of Algeria to South Africa, reading out a message on behalf of his Minister for Foreign Affairs, paid tribute to South Africa's fight against apartheid and for reconciliation. South Africa was now a great nation and a shining symbol for those people still fighting for freedom and self-determination. Algeria, as well as South Africa, was aware of the suffering of people under occupation, whether in Palestine or in Western Sahara, and would continue to support all initiatives aiming to promote dialogue and a negotiated settlement.

He said that there was a sad and ironic silence – on the part of the international community and the United Nations Security Council – which reflected a double standard that not only drove Israel's aggression but exacerbated the already-bereft situation of the Palestinian people. He went on to express concern about the “boycott” of the Palestinian Authority, which threatened to change the situation from a political issue into a humanitarian crisis. “This is a dangerous slippery slope,” he said, asking how was it possible that the major Powers could refuse to support the newly elected Palestinian Government, when it had been those very Powers that were pressing the entire Middle East region to embrace their vision of democracy.

YAHAYA ABDUL JABAR, High Commissioner of Malaysia to South Africa, said that his Government's support of the right of the Palestinian people to form an independent State was one of the backbones of the country's foreign policy. Malaysia would, therefore, call on all parties to return to the negotiating table, and would urge all peace-loving countries to encourage Israel to accept the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, particularly on the principle of “land for peace”. Malaysia believed that all countries in Africa, particularly South Africa could play a role in pressing Israel to end its illegal and illegitimate practices on the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Malaysia called on Israel and all countries that had not done so recognize the newly formed Palestinian Government and to recommit to efforts to find a final solution to the question of Palestine.

MUFTAH MUSBAH ZAWAM, head of the African Union delegation to the League of Arab States, said that the question of Palestine was not foreign to the African Union and that it had been adopted by the regional group as a principled cause deserving of serious consideration and broad African support. He said that the African Union's participation in the meeting was intended to enrich the debate and to stress the point that the Palestinian people were entitled to their own State, where they could exercise their sovereignty like everyone else. The Union would also stress that Israel must be made to stop its killing and destruction in the Occupied Territory. It must be forced to abide by numerous international legal decisions – particularly those calling for the abandonment of its colonialist expansion policy and ceasing construction of its “apartheid wall” and act responsibly, in order to achieve just and lasting peace in the region.

ASHRAF QUERESHI, High Commissioner of Pakistan to South Africa said that his Government and people had been extending ongoing support to the Palestinian people in their struggle to exercise their legitimate rights. That struggle was the root cause of tensions in the region, and Israel's continued activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was the cause of much pain, hopelessness and disillusionment on the part of the Palestinian people. He said that the recent formation of a Palestinian Unity Government had been a most welcome development and that the international community must now press Israel to recognize that Government.

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