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Committee on the Inalienable Rights
of the Palestinian People
357th Meeting (AM)

PALESTINIAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE OPENS 2013 SESSION UPON LAUNCH OF INTERNATIONAL YEAR

OF SOLIDARITY, AS SPEAKERS OUTLINE STEPS TO REDRESS 'HISTORICAL INJUSTICES'

Deputy Secretary-General, General Assembly President, Permanent Observer on behalf of Palestine's President among Speakers

During today's official launch of the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, the President of the State of Palestine called on the international community to support the observance and expressed hope it would lead to the end of Israel's 47-year occupation of Palestinian lands and to the creation of an independent Palestinian State with full United Nations membership.

"These are necessary steps for rectifying the unprecedented historical injustices which the Palestinian people have endured for decades since Al-Nakba of 1948," said Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and President of the State of Palestine, in a message read out by Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, during a meeting of the Palestinian Rights Committee.

Last November, General Assembly resolution 68/12 proclaimed 2014 as the International Year. Mr. Abbas said the State of Palestine had formed an official national committee to help implement it, in cooperation with the Palestinian Rights Committee, formally known as the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and with the participation of Governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society.

Palestine was upholding its commitment to the Middle East peace process, despite diminished hopes and the grave situation on the ground, owing to Israel's continued illegal actions and violations, he said. Through resumed negotiations, it sought to reach a comprehensive peace accord paving the way for a complete end to Israel's occupation, fulfilment of the Palestinians' human rights, security and a just solution to the plight of the refugees.

Jan Eliasson, Deputy Secretary-General welcomed the International Year, saying that he and the Secretary-General urged all in the international community to work together to translate the solidarity and desire for peace expressed on this occasion into positive action for security and for justice. "We cannot afford to lose the current moment of opportunity."

Indeed, he said, the coming year would be crucial for achieving the two-State solution. Israel and Palestine must honour their commitment to negotiate it in line with Security Council resolutions and resolve all core issues related to territory, security, Jerusalem, refugees, settlements and water. All parties must act responsibly and refrain from actions that could undermine the talks.

Mr. Eliasson expressed concern over the increase in violence and incitement on the ground last year, particularly from extremists and settlers. He urged Israeli authorities to stop and punish those Israeli extremists and warned that the announcement of new settlements jeopardized the two-State solution. He was also concerned by the continued displacement of Palestinians through housing demolitions in Area C of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which was in breach of Israel's obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law.

The situation in Gaza also was "deeply troubling", he said, expressing hope that the Rafah border crossing into Egypt would soon resume normal operations to help address pressing humanitarian needs. He welcomed the recent resumption of construction material delivery into Gaza for United Nations projects and called for its extension to private sector initiatives. He also urged donors to bolster contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the lifeline for millions of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and the wider region.

Richard Wright, Director of UNRWA's New York office, drew attention to the dire situation of some 18,000 Palestinian refugees trapped in the Yarmouk camp

located on the outskirts of Damascus, Syria's capital. Neither UNRWA nor any non-governmental organization had been given access to the camp for more than four months. "We are hugely concerned," Mr. Wright said, pointing to widespread malnutrition, and, among children in particular, anaemia, rickets and protein deficiencies. People were dying of starvation.

Two days ago, he noted, UNRWA was granted permission from Syrian authorities to deliver food and medicine to the camp, but a convoy of four trucks carrying supplies were fired on and unable to enter. UNRWA was negotiating with the Syrian authorities to access the camp through an alternative, northern route. "We're working very hard to try to find some relief for these people, but they are in a very perilous situation and hunger is rife."

John Ashe, President of the General Assembly, noted that, last November, the Assembly had adopted several resolutions attesting to the international community's continued support for the Palestinian peoples' aspirations, among those was the text proclaiming the International Year. Noting the observance coincided with preparations for the post-2015 development agenda, he stressed that there could be no lasting peace without socioeconomic development for the Palestinians.

Mr. Ashe echoed the Secretary-General's call on all sides in the conflict to refrain from actions that could raise doubts about the validity of efforts to achieve peace. New Israeli settlement construction, as well as property demolition and land confiscations in widely accepted Palestinian areas could complicate the two-State solution. He hoped that the renewed United States-mediated negotiations would lead to a just and lasting settlement to the conflict. He welcomed the Israeli authorities' agreement to release 104 long-held Palestinian prisoners, a step repeatedly called for by the Assembly, as well as the recent commitment by Arab leaders to renew their 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

Palitha T.B. Kohona (Sri Lanka), Chair of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories, also hailed the release of prisoners and echoed the call for an end to settlement activity, which was "unhelpful" to negotiations. The Special Committee aimed to visit the region again this year. He was very concerned that the cost of failing to reach a peace accord could be more serious violence. Sri Lanka's President, a long-time friend of the Palestinians, had recently visited the region, and the Government had set up a vocational training centre to help develop marketable expertise among the Palestinian working population.

Zeid Ra'ad Zeid al-Hussein (Jordan), Security Council President for the month of January, said the question of Palestine remained prominent on the Council's agenda and was the subject of monthly briefings and quarterly open debates. The next debate, to be held on 20 January, would be chaired by Jordan's Foreign Minister. The Council remained committed to a lasting solution achieved through direct negotiations, and it supported the economic initiative of the Quartet — comprising the United Nations, United States, European Union and Russian Federation — to bring transformative growth to the Palestinian economy.

The Council had urged the parties to refrain from action that could undermine negotiations, and had expressed concern over Israeli settlement activity, he continued. Members also remained seriously concerned over the humanitarian situation, particularly in Gaza, and stressed the need to increase access for goods and people to and from the enclave, as well as funding for UNRWA.

Echoing those concerns, Committee Chairman Abdou Salam Diallo (Senegal) said Israel's massive settlement-building clearly contradicted all initiatives to restore trust. The Gaza blockade must be lifted immediately. More than 5 million Palestinians had been forced into exile, he said, stressing that only a free, independent Palestinian State, with viable, secure borders, would enable them to return safely and with dignity.

He, too, called for the Agency's increased funding for UNRWA, as millions of Palestinians depended on it. The international community also must support the recent United States-led diplomatic efforts. It was a historic, political and legal duty to ensure the Palestinian people enjoyed their inalienable right to life, self-determination, education and freedom of worship and movement. The Committee, he noted, would work with Governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society to make the International Year a success.

Doug Hostetter, Co-Chairman of the NGO Working Group Israel-Palestine, said the Group, which comprised organizations active in humanitarian, development and peace work, stood with Palestinian partners on the ground in calling for a boycott of products made in illegal settlements and encouraged divestment from corporations that benefitted from the occupation. The Group sponsored educational events within the United Nations system that advocated peace and gave Palestinians a platform. He encouraged the Committee to actively include civil society organizations in events for the International Year, saying such groups were able to say out loud the "prohibited truths" seldom mentioned in diplomatic forums or the halls of the United Nations where the power and influence of one permanent Council member had stifled debate and action.

At the outset of the meeting, the Committee adopted its 2014 draft programme (document A/AC.183/2014/CRP.1) and accredited three civil society organizations to the Committee: Tarabut-Hitchabrut: A Jewish-Arab Movement for Political and Social Change (Israel); Committee for a Just Peace in the Middle East (Luxembourg); and the International Institute for Non-Violent Action (Spain). It also re-elected Mr. Diallo as its Chair; and as Vice-Chairs, Zahir Tanin (Afghanistan), Rodolfo Reyes Rodríguez (Cuba), Wilfried Emvula (Namibia), and María Rubiales de Chamorro (Nicaragua). Christopher Grima (Malta) was elected as Rapporteur.

Mr. Diallo announced that on Monday, 20 January, at 2 p.m., the Committee would hold a side event at Headquarters on the dire situation in Gaza. It would feature a screening of the documentary *Where should the Birds Fly?*, followed by a conversation between the film producer Fida Qishta and Gazan Palestinian journalist Laila el-Hadad.

Mohammed Loulichki (Morocco) said that the Al-Quds Committee, chaired by Morocco's King Mohammed VI, would begin its twentieth meeting today, with a focus on, among others, the difficulties facing Palestinians under occupation, Israel's continued settlement-building and the importance of safeguarding Jerusalem.

Xavier Lasso Mendoza (Ecuador) said the United Nations International Meeting on the Question of Palestine would be held in Quito from 25 to 27 March.

The representatives of Turkey, India and Iraq also made statements.

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