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SEMINAR ON ASSISTANCE TO THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE OPENS IN DOHA

Secretary-General Appeals to Donors to Increase Emergency, Other Forms of Assistance

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

DOHA, 5 February – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in his message to the opening session of the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, said Israeli restrictions, ongoing settlement activities and barrier construction continued to have a devastating effect on the precarious state of the Palestinian economy and the serious humanitarian emergency in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

In a statement read out by Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Angela Kane, he expressed alarm over the situation and appealed to all international donors to generously step up their efforts at delivering emergency and other forms of assistance to the Palestinian people.

The two-day meeting, sponsored by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, will assess the scope of the socio-economic and humanitarian emergency in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, examine international and regional response to the needs of the Palestinian people and explore what is needed to ensure Palestinian economic recovery.

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs for Qatar, Ahmad bin Abdullah al-Mahmoud, said the major Powers had played a prominent role in the suffering of the Palestinian people, and the international community bore a moral responsibility towards them. The Seminar was an attempt to assess the gravity of the situation, to highlight the conditions and muster support from all international actors who might play a role in alleviating the situation.

The State of Qatar had spared no effort to provide support to the Palestinian people, whether financial or moral, he said. However, all efforts to provide assistance to the Palestinian people were only remedies for the symptoms. The most effective change would be to end the occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Committee Chairman Paul Badji (Senegal) stressed that attempts to punish the Palestinian people collectively would not bring security to Israel. He called on Israel to become a partner in the rehabilitation of the Palestinian economy. As long as the Palestinians did not have a sound economy that provided jobs and food, peace would remain elusive.

Palestinian Legislative Council Member and representative of Palestine, Nabil Sha'ath, said Palestinians did not want to be a burden to the international community, but wanted to be able to build their future with their own hands. Palestinians needed humanitarian assistance because they could no longer produce for themselves or interact with the outside world.

Other speakers this morning were the representatives of Cuba, Tunisia and Chile. The representatives of the League of Arab States and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also spoke.

The Seminar, convened under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, will be divided into three plenaries, in which experts will participate in panel discussions. Experts in plenary I will discuss the socio-economic and humanitarian emergency in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Panellists in plenary II will look at the international response to the needs of the Palestinian people. Plenary III will focus on creating conditions for Palestinian economic recovery. Invited to the meeting are internationally renowned experts, including Israelis, Palestinians, representatives of the United Nations Member States and Observers, parliamentarians, representatives of the United Nations system, other intergovernmental organizations, academic community, civil society and the media.

This afternoon, in plenary I, participants will hear presentations concerning the socio-economic and humanitarian emergency in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in particular the impact of the occupation on the Palestinian economy, the socio-economic decline of the Gaza Strip and the plight of the most vulnerable, in particular the living conditions of Palestinian women, children and the elderly.

Opening Statements

AHMAD BIN ABDULLAH AL-MAHMOUD, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs for Qatar, said the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and their illegal practices, including the economic siege and the restrictions imposed on movement, had led to the deterioration of the economic and social conditions of the Palestinian people. Last year, the situation was further exacerbated by Israel's withholding of Palestinian taxes and financial assistance following the Hamas victory in the elections. The number of poor families and unemployment had risen, and the health and social conditions had deteriorated to unprecedented levels, thus prompting economic collapse and a major humanitarian crisis that might trigger unrest in the Palestinian Territory and in the general region.

He said the Seminar was an attempt to assess the gravity of the situation, to highlight the conditions and muster support from all international actors who might play a role in alleviating the situation. The General Assembly had repeatedly stressed the need to provide international assistance to the Palestinian people, as had the international community. The provision of international assistance to the Palestinian people to alleviate their economic and social plight and to support their economic recovery was a human duty. The major Powers had played a prominent role in the suffering of the Palestinian people, and the international community bore a moral responsibility towards them. The alleviation of the condition of the basic economic and social structures in the Occupied Territory was essential to the realization of stability in the Palestinian Territory and the region as a whole.

The State of Qatar, he said, had spared no effort to provide support to the Palestinian people, whether financial support in the form of financial assistance and salaries, moral support through sincere good offices geared towards resolving the differences among the Palestinians or through contributions to efforts to achieve a lasting and just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, all efforts to provide assistance to the Palestinian people were only remedies for the symptoms. The major change that would improve the economic and social conditions was to end the occupation of the Palestinian Territory, and to achieve a permanent, comprehensive and just settlement with the establishment of a Palestinian State within secure and internationally recognized borders.

In a statement read out by Assistant-Secretary-General for Political Affairs ANGELA KANE, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that, despite recent violence, the Quartet agreement on the need to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and to re-energize its own efforts had brightened the political landscape. In addition, Israeli and Palestinian leaders had resumed a direct dialogue and had begun to implement the understandings between them. It was vital to build on those steps with a credible political process that the world community supported. Without bold steps to guarantee the security of the Palestinian and Israeli civilian populations and without tangible measures to enable the Palestinians to lead a normal economic life, the political process would not succeed.

He expressed alarm over the precarious state of the Palestinian economy and the serious humanitarian emergency in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Israeli restrictions, ongoing settlement activities and barrier construction continued to have a devastating effect, he said. Israel's release of some of the withheld tax revenues was a welcome step, and he urged Israel to take further steps in that direction without delay. The Palestinians, for their part, must take firm steps to cease rocket fire and other indiscriminate attacks against Israeli citizens.

He stressed the importance of a concerted effort by the international community and urged all international donors to be generous and to step up their efforts at delivering emergency and other forms of assistance to the Palestinian people. He stated that he would work closely with the parties, regional partners and colleagues in the Quartet to revive the peace process. Only a permanent political settlement, which ended the occupation, could provide a sustainable solution to the economic and humanitarian problems of the Palestinian people and lasting security for Israel.

PAUL BADJI (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said the Palestinian economy was in dire straits, and ordinary Palestinians were the main victims. The Israeli Government needed to understand that, as long as the Palestinians did not have a sound economy that provided jobs and food, peace would remain elusive. Stressing that attempts to punish the Palestinian people collectively would not bring security, he called on Israel to become a partner in the rehabilitation of the Palestinian economy.

He said the Agreement on Movement and Access of 2005 would allow Palestinians to maintain commercial activities, while taking into consideration Israel's security concerns, but it had never been given a chance to work. It was crucial to make a serious effort to implement the Agreement as a priority for building trust and confidence in a future peace process. He said the security situation needed to be improved urgently to allow for investments. First and foremost, the Palestinians had to find a way to overcome their differences in a peaceful manner and to seek national unity as a matter of great urgency. At the same time, Israel must stop all activities that might prejudice the final outcome of the permanent status negotiations with the Palestinians.

He called on the international donor community to redouble efforts to deliver emergency assistance. He drew attention to the Quartet's recent appeal for continued international assistance and encouraged donors to focus on preserving and building the institutions of Palestinian governance, as well as the development of the Palestinian economy. At the same time, he said, the international community should remind the Israeli Government that, under the Fourth Geneva Convention, it had the duty as the occupying Power to protect the Palestinian population. That included the provision of basic services such as food, medical care and education. Efforts to provide economic and humanitarian assistance should be accompanied by genuine and robust efforts to revitalize the political process.

NABIL SHA'ATH, Member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and Representative of Palestine, said Palestinians were proud of the role of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, which had spared no effort to support the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. The Committee had continued to play its important role in spite of its critics. Although it was now the twenty-first century, Palestinians were still unable to enjoy their inalienable rights. The peace process had been going on for 25 years, but Palestinians were still suffering under an occupation that was getting worse every day. Moreover, mass sanctions had been imposed on the Palestinian people because some States did not approve of the results of the Palestinians' democratic election.

Palestinians did not want to be a burden to the international community, but wanted to be able to build their future with their own hands, he said. From 1995 to 2000, they had been trying to reach a solution that would bring peace and stability. Today, they were suffering from sieges and could not exercise sovereignty. The Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority had a responsibility to resolve their domestic crisis, but those problems were the result of occupation and an attempt to keep the Palestinian people under siege in the hope that they would implode. The solution would come only with the ending of the occupation.

The physical siege preventing the movement of goods and people was used to throw the people into poverty, he said. The economic siege was destroying the infrastructure and the Palestinian economy, which would be affected for years to come. The financial siege had resulted in the stopping of all payments and assistance to Palestinians. Among other things, salaries could not be paid. Moreover, in the past, remittances from Palestinians abroad had been important to the financial stability of the people. Those remittances were now frozen. Palestinians needed humanitarian assistance because they could no longer produce for themselves or interact with the outside world. Palestinians had hoped that the international community would

have put an end to the unfair siege, but it had not. The peace process had become a process without a peace. He called for a comprehensive permanent solution that would result in an independent Palestine.

Other Statements

The representative of Cuba, speaking on behalf of the Non-aligned Movement, said he was gravely concerned at the dire humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people. He called for the provision of emergency assistance to them. The international community had the duty to address that issue seriously, and to avoid the application of any kind of conditionalities when sending assistance to the Palestinian people. Non-aligned countries were very concerned that the flow of resources in assistance to the Palestinians had suffered in recent times because of political considerations in donor countries.

The representative of Tunisia said the political and economic siege on Palestinians could only be described as disastrous. The Seminar could not stop at talking about current events, but must focus on immediate action to be taken by the international community to end the crisis. There was no doubt that the international community and its institutions, as well as Israel, had a huge responsibility for the current situation. The representative of Palestine had referred to the economic and social conditions being faced by the Palestinian people. It was the duty of the international community to listen to the Palestinians and provide them with the assistance they needed.

The representative of the League of Arab States, quoting former British Prime Minister William Gladstone and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, said "Justice delayed is justice denied" and "Justice denied anywhere is justice denied everywhere". The international community had so far failed to compel Israel to respect international solutions or agreements it had signed with the Palestinian people. A dire consequence of the siege had been the internal and political security strife that impeded the establishment of a national unity Government. The descent into chaos and violence would have widespread implications. Israel must be aware that it would not be able to keep the Arab territories it had occupied. He called on the international community to find an end to the current situation and put an end to the suffering of the people.

The representative of Chile said that, unless the internal violence came to an end, the chances of the Palestinians achieving their inalienable rights would be lessened. Unless there was an end to the violence, one could not expect to see peace in the near future. He supported all the efforts of the international community to achieve peace, and called on the parties directly concerned to work to that end through their own efforts.

The representative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said his agency's mandate did not extend to the majority of the Palestinian refugees. It had no mandate in the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East's (UNRWA) area of operation. However, 23,000 Palestinians living in Baghdad were registered with UNHCR. They had never been recognized as refugees, but they had been protected and had enjoyed a relatively high standard of living under the former regime. Today, Palestinians in Iraq were targets of arbitrary arrests, detention and extrajudicial killings. Many had been harassed by Iraqis who accused them of being close to the former regime. A large number had fled to camps in Jordan and Syria. The Government of Iraq had the primary responsibility for their protection. UNHCR had appealed to Israel to allow Palestinians with direct ties to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip be allowed to return. UNHCR had called on neighbouring States to keep their borders open and to ensure that no Palestinian was subjected to forced return.

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