



DIVISION FOR  
PALESTINIAN RIGHTS

**UNITED NATIONS EUROPEAN NGO SYMPOSIUM  
ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE**

**Brussels  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

1. The United Nations European NGO Symposium on the Question of Palestine was held under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People at Brussels on 26 February 1998, immediately following a two-day Conference in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.
2. The Symposium was convened in accordance with General Assembly resolutions 52/49 and 52/50 of 9 December 1997. It was attended by 6 panelists and workshop resource persons, and by representatives of 37 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 12 of them as observers. It was also attended by representatives of 44 Governments, 2 intergovernmental organizations, a delegation of Palestine, 5 United Nations bodies and agencies and 3 NGO coordinating committees.
3. The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People was represented by a delegation composed of Ibra Deguène Ka (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee and head of the delegation; Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla (Cuba), Vice-Chairman; Ravan A.G. Farhadi (Afghanistan), Vice-Chairman; George Saliba (Malta), Rapporteur of the Committee; and M. Nasser Al-Kidwa (Palestine).
4. The programme of the meeting was formulated by the Committee taking into account suggestions made by members of the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine. The theme of the Symposium was "NGO action in support of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people".
5. At the opening session, Mr. Ka spoke in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. A statement was made by Mr. Al-Kidwa, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations and representative of Palestine. The opening session was also addressed by John Gee, Chairman of the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine.
6. The invited experts made presentations in the plenary session, which were followed by a discussion. Marai Abdul Rahman, Secretary-General of the Palestinian Council for Justice and Peace, and Amnon Kapeliouk, Member of the Committee for Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue, spoke on the Middle East peace process, its current situation and prospects. The European position and the policy of the European Union were analysed by Isabelle Avran, Secretary-General of the Association France-Palestine and Member of the French Platform for Palestine. Fiona McKay, a lawyer with Redress, a London-based NGO, spoke on the theme "International law, world public opinion and the role of NGOs: a critical assessment".
7. In the afternoon, participants met in a combined workshop to assess the implementation of the Geneva NGO plan of action and to decide on the next steps. They discussed political campaigns and the role of NGOs to mobilize public awareness. Amnon Kapeliouk and Pierre Galand, Chairman of the Belgian-Palestinian Association, were the resource persons for that combined workshop.
8. The participating NGOs reaffirmed the NGO plan of action adopted at their previous meeting at Geneva in August 1997 and issued a final statement outlining the political priorities for their work (see annex I).

## II. OPENING STATEMENTS

9. **Ibra Deguène Ka**, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, informed participants of the results of the Conference in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, which had just conducted its work. He said that speakers had expressed the greatest concern

over the stalemate in the peace process and the exacerbation of tension and violence in the region. They had called for intensified efforts by the international community in support of the historic reconciliation process between the two sides, for the effective implementation of the agreements reached and for the resumption of the negotiations on the agreed basis. NGOs constituted an influential voice at the national level, informing and shaping public opinion, and representing their constituencies before policy-makers. Many NGOs had substantial assistance projects in the Palestinian territory. He expressed appreciation for the creation of national NGO platforms on the question of Palestine in some European countries and commended the initiatives of European NGOs vis-à-vis their national parliaments and the European Parliament, as concrete steps towards the implementation of the plan of action adopted in Geneva in 1997.

10. **M. Nasser Al-Kidwa**, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, referred to several important anniversaries in 1997 and 1998 namely, 50 years of the dispossession of the Palestinian people, 10 years of the *intifadah*, and 5 years since the signing of the Declaration of Principles, which, he said, should provide additional incentives for increased efforts to establish peace. He said that the peace process faced an extremely difficult situation as a result of continuous and systematic Israeli obstruction. The Israeli Government had tried to negate concluded agreements, establish a Bantustan system in the Palestinian territory and was not prepared to meet the minimum requirements of a just peace. Instead, it encouraged intensive settlement activities, undertook to change the legal status of Jerusalem, and was involved in actions to undermine their partners in peace, namely the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

11. **M. Al-Kidwa** called upon other important players like the United States of America to show the necessary will to ensure compliance by the parties with the signed agreements. In his view, the European Union should take a more assertive position and use the available means within existing frameworks to play a more active political role. In order for the international community to support the Middle East peace process, it must foster compliance and uphold international legitimacy originating from Security Council and General Assembly resolutions. He called for NGO support in that endeavour.

12. He also said that one of the most important tasks ahead was the follow-up of the tenth emergency special session of the General Assembly and the convening of experts of the High Contracting Parties to ensure respect for the Convention. He called for the full participation of Palestine in the United Nations. He called upon the international community for support to rebuild the economy after decades of Israeli occupation and drew attention to the preparations for the millennial celebration in Bethlehem in the year 2000. He concluded by thanking the Secretary-General for averting another possible catastrophe in the Middle East by assuring full respect for Security Council resolutions.

13. **John Gee**, Chairman of the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine, deplored that in the six months since the previous European symposium, no progress had been made towards peace. Israel continued to expand its settlements in the West Bank and the Israeli-imposed closure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip was stifling the economic development of the Palestinian people. He said that the Palestinian people needed to see real progress towards the restoration of their national rights and to feel that the conditions under which they lived were improving. He urged the European Union to seek to play a larger role in peacemaking, in line with the influence it has in global politics, its important financial contribution to the Palestinian Authority and its trade partnership with Israel. He recalled that the European NGOs had called upon the European Union to suspend the bilateral protocols with Israel, which gave the latter significant trading benefits. Only when the Israeli Government moderated its stand towards the Palestinians should the suspension be lifted. He commended the European NGOs that campaigned for a firmer stand by their Governments in favour of Palestinian rights.

### III. PANEL DISCUSSION

#### A. The Middle East peace process: current situation and prospects

14. **Amnon Kapeliouk**, member of the Committee for Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue, said that the peace process had become bogged down because of the right-wing segment in the Israeli Government, which often paid lip service to the cause of peace, but, in reality, was lacking political will. He said that the Palestinian territory was turning into a series of Bantustans. He expressed the view that the Government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was more extreme with regard to the question of Palestine than any other Government in history. It pretended to talk about the final status negotiations as a way to freeze the implementation of the interim agreement which it did not support. The continued delay of the opening of the airport in Gaza demonstrated that the Government was not committed to resolving any issue. He argued that recent tension in the Gulf had permitted the Israeli Government to freeze the talks once again and that propaganda and discreditation of the Palestinian Authority were shattering mutual confidence. In his view, Prime Minister Netanyahu was trying to create an irreversible situation by building settlements, changing the status of Jerusalem and presenting the Palestinians with a fait accompli. He said that although international sympathy for the Palestinians was at its highest point, major players like the United States of America and the European Union had not done enough. He warned against what he considered a dangerous situation heading for the abyss.

15. **Marai Abdul Rahman**, Secretary-General of the Palestinian Council for Justice and Peace, said that the majority of the Israeli people was in favour of peace, but there was a clear lack of action to promote peace. The application of the principles of peaceful coexistence would allow the parties to solve the complex issues. The Oslo accords had been a step towards applying those principles, however, those accords remained incomplete, because they had not reached their final stage, i.e., the negotiations on final status. Instead, under the pretext of Israeli security, all kinds of measures had been imposed to stifle the Palestinian people. He said that the Palestinians were losing their patience and that efforts were needed from the international community to revive hope. He argued that Europe had a moral responsibility towards the Palestinian people, because it had helped to establish the Israeli State and now it should help to establish a Palestinian State. Financial support could not substitute for necessary action at the political level. It was precisely political support that the Palestinians needed most.

#### B. The European position and the policy of the European Union

16. **Isabelle Avran**, Secretary-General of the Association France-Palestine, member of the French Platform for Palestine, emphasized that, on several occasions in the past, European intervention had proved successful, in particular in relation to human rights violations by Israel. She gave an overview of the European Union's policy towards the Middle East, which was aimed at Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories, building mutual trust between Israelis and Palestinians and which was based on role-sharing between the United States, the Russian Federation and Europe. Europe saw its principal role as supporting economic development and regional economic cooperation and as guarantors for a long-lasting peace. She said that political events, in particular the closures of the Palestinian territory, had turned out to be counterproductive for economic assistance and Israeli security. She concluded that the European policy to dissociate economic assistance from the peace process had proved wrong. She suggested possible ways of action by the European Union in order to renew the hopes for peace, namely the temporary interruption of trading concessions to Israel and the suspension of imports of Israeli agricultural produce, the suspension of inter-university cooperation and the lifting of bank guarantees.

**C. International law, world public opinion and the role of NGOs:  
a critical assessment**

17. Ms. Fiona McKay, staff member of Redress, a London-based NGO, emphasized that international human rights law and international humanitarian law remained applicable as long as the occupying Power retained jurisdiction over the occupied territory. The Oslo agreements did not alter that situation, since article 47 of the Fourth Geneva Convention made it clear that an agreement between an occupying Power and the people under occupation would not automatically end the applicability of the Convention. The Palestinians still required the protection of humanitarian law, and they were entitled to it by law. Israel continued to exercise jurisdiction in the occupied territories, it retained veto power over all Palestinian legislation and retained control over infrastructure, water and movement. She stressed that, at the same time, Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights and the imposition of collective penalties continued. Israel had legalized torture in defiance of international law. She then elaborated on the obligations of States parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Convention against Torture and said that Governments had so far failed to display the political will to implement the relevant clauses of those instruments.

18. She stressed that NGOs could play an important role in mobilizing public opinion on those issues and in pressing their Governments to implement them. Putting injustices into an international law framework, she said, could help NGOs fight those injustices in two ways: first, by providing a standard by which to criticize, and second, by taking advantage of the enforcement mechanisms that it provided. Citing concrete examples, she concluded that NGOs were the only actors that could hold Governments responsible and accountable under international law. They could make the connections between their Government's obligations and the violations that were taking place, and point out their role in enforcement.

**IV. CLOSING STATEMENTS**

19. John Gee, Chairman of the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine, introduced a final statement by its members. He said that they had reaffirmed the NGO action plan adopted in Geneva the previous year and that many of its provisions constituted long-term goals and actions to be implemented by the NGO community. He called upon all NGOs to join in its implementation.

20. Chawki Armali, General Delegate of Palestine in Belgium and representative of Palestine, said that the just concluded Conference in Support of the Palestinian People as well as the European NGO Symposium had succeeded in putting the cause of the Palestinian people back in the focus of the international community. He noted an increasing understanding within the European countries of the consequences of the policies of the current Israeli Government. The European Parliament was discussing those policies: the Jewish community in Belgium disapproved of them and supported the creation of a Palestinian State. He said that action by all peace-loving people in the world was required to bring about a just solution of the question of Palestine.

21. Ibra Deguène Ka, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that the Committee had rightly decided to hold the European NGO Symposium immediately after the Conference in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. Both events had once again brought the question of Palestine to the forefront of the international agenda, and reaffirmed the determination of the world community to ensure a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement in accordance with international legality and United Nations resolutions. He emphasized that the NGO community played an important role in fostering international action to bring the occupation of Palestinian territory to an end. He commended, in particular, NGO efforts to bolster concrete steps by the European Union and its member States to support the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people, and to provide economic and other assistance for Palestinian nation-

building efforts. He expressed the hope that the many representatives of European Governments, European institutions, parliamentarians, prominent persons and NGOs who had participated in the two events would help to mobilize even further European action in that regard.

## ANNEX I

Final statement by the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs  
on the Question of Palestine

The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participating in the United Nations European NGO Symposium on the Question of Palestine held at Brussels on 26 February 1998 express their deep concern at the stalemate in the Israel-Arab negotiations and, more particularly, those between the Palestinian National Authority and Israel.

The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements signed in September 1993, which defined the framework for these negotiations, based on the principle of land for peace, raised hopes for the construction of a just peace through the establishment of an independent Palestinian State. It also raised hopes for the stability of the region and security founded upon the perspective of cooperation and not upon military force.

The policy of the present Israeli Government is destroying these hopes, whereas the transitional period prior to the negotiation of the final status issues should have been used for concrete confidence-building measures.

Delays and difficulties had already accumulated prior to the election of the Government of Benjamin Netanyahu. Now, this Government rejects even the principle of land for peace by its refusal to redeploy Israeli forces, intensification of the policies of land confiscation, demolition of houses, expansion of settlements and the transfer of Palestinian residents from Jerusalem, which empty the negotiations of real content. The closure it has imposed upon the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the non-implementation of the economic accords and agreements already reached have had a devastating effect upon the Palestinian economy. Thus, international aid only serves to meet an emergency situation instead of promoting sustainable development.

This policy of closures is unbearable for the Palestinian population affected by it and is counter-productive to true Israeli security. The same can be said for the infringements of the human rights of the Palestinians and of the Fourth Geneva Convention - among other things, the legalized use of torture - in the occupied Palestinian territories. Hopes for the return of the refugees to their homeland are non-existent while the Government of Israel persists in its intransigent stand.

The European NGOs share the concerns that have been expressed by the European Commission, but believe that the European Union should take more decisive measures to ensure that Israel desists from pursuing policies that are destroying hopes for peace.

The NGOs reiterate their commitment to a just and lasting peace based on self-determination for the Palestinian people, an independent Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital and the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

The NGOs, appreciating the gravity of the economic situation of the Palestinian people, urge that European Governments maintain financial aid to the Palestinian people while calling for the full lifting of Israeli closure measures; furthermore, the NGOs urge that they increase their support for the United Nations Relief and works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), whose operations are vital to millions of Palestinians.

The NGOs reaffirm their commitment to the action plan adopted by the United Nations European NGO Symposium on the Question of Palestine in August 1997.



The NGOs will pursue their work of lobbying their national parliaments and Governments, the European Commission and the European Parliament, as well as the Council of Ministers, to urge that the European States and the European Union, at the political level, use the economic role that they have undertaken since the beginning of the negotiation process by conditionally freezing the interim accord signed by the European Union and Israel until Israel complies with all its political and economic commitments signed with the Palestinian side.

The NGOs will develop concerted efforts vis-à-vis their respective Governments for the implementation of United Nations resolutions ES-10/3 of 15 July 1997 and ES-10/4 of 13 November 1997 for the convening of a conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention in order to help secure respect for this convention in the occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem.

The European NGOs express their support for the initiative undertaken by the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (LAW), in cooperation with the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine, to organize a conference on "50 Years of Dispossession" in Jerusalem from 7 to 10 June 1998.

The European NGOs express their appreciation for the work carried out by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the Division for Palestinian Rights.

## ANNEX II

List of participants and observers**Participants**

Association France-Palestine, Paris  
 Association Luxembourgeois pour les Nations Unies, Luxembourg  
 Belgian-Palestinian Association, Brussels  
 Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding, London  
 Enfants-Refugies du Monde, Montreuil, France  
 Euro-Palestinian Economic and Consultancy Unit, Brussels  
 French Platform for Palestine, Paris  
 Foundation on Social Analysis and Political Education, Berlin  
 Greek Committee for International Democratic Solidarity, Athens  
 International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva  
 International Progress Organization, Vienna  
 International Union of Family Organizations, Paris  
 Lutfia Rabbani Foundation, The Hague  
 Najdeh, Hannover, Germany  
 North-South XXI, Geneva  
 Oxfam, Brussels  
 Parliamentary Association for Euro-Arab Cooperation, Brussels  
 Pax Christi International, Brussels  
 Save the Children, London  
 Society for Austro-Arab Relations, Vienna  
 Spanish NGO Committee on the Question of Palestine (IEPALA), Madrid  
 United Towns Organization, Paris  
 World Alliance of Young Women's Christian Association, Geneva  
 World Muslim Congress, Geneva  
 World Vision, Brussels

**Observers**

Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, Cairo  
 Arab Lawyers Union, Cairo  
 Arab Organization for Human Rights, Cairo  
 Centre National de Coopération au développement, Brussels  
 Comité de vigilance pour une paix réelle au proche-orient, Paris  
 Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas, Paris  
 Justice and Peace Commission, Brussels  
 Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (LAW), Ramallah, West Bank  
 Palestinian Council for Justice and Peace, Ramallah, West Bank  
 Pollen, Brussels  
 Redress, London  
 Vlaams Palestina Komitee, Brussels

### **Coordinating committees for NGOs on the question of Palestine**

Asian Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine  
 European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine  
 North American Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine

### **Panelists and workshop resource persons**

Marai Abdul Rahman  
 Secretary-General, Palestinian Council for Justice and Peace

Isabelle Avran  
 Secretary-General, Association France-Palestine; Member of the French Platform for Palestine

Pierre Galand  
 Chairman, Belgian-Palestinian Association

John Gee  
 Chairman, European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine

Amnon Kapeliouk  
 Committee for Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue

Fiona McKay  
 Redress, London

### **Delegation of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People**

Ibra Deguène Ka	Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations, Chairman of the Committee
Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla	Permanent Representative of Cuba to the United Nations, Vice-Chairman of the Committee
Ravan A.G. Farhadi	Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, Vice-Chairman of the Committee
George Saliba	Permanent Representative of Malta to the United Nations, Rapporteur of the Committee
M. Nasser Al-Kidwa	Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations

**Governments**

Belgium, Benin, Brunei Darussalam, Cameroon, Cape Verde, China, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Cyprus, France, Gambia, Ghana, Greece, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Ireland, Jordan, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Namibia, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Qatar, Romania, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Viet Nam, Yemen

**Intergovernmental organizations**

Islamic Development Bank  
Organization of African Unity

**Other organizations having received a standing invitation to participate  
as observers in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly and  
maintaining permanent observer missions at Headquarters**

Palestine

**United Nations organs, agencies and bodies**

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Information Centre, Brussels, World Food Programme (WFP)

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