



Press Release

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Committee on Inalienable Rights
of the Palestinian People
Civil Society Conference
AM & PM Meetings

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AS CONFERENCE CONCLUDES, CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS COMMIT TO PROTECTION FORCE FOR PALESTINIANS

NGO Declaration and Plan of Action Adopted

Non-governmental and civil society organizations committed themselves to pressure their governments and urge the United Nations to move quickly in creating an international buffer and protection force in the occupied Palestinian territory, according to one of two documents adopted this afternoon at the conclusion of the United Nations International Conference of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People.

The NGO Declaration states that the failure so far of the international community to provide serious protection to Palestinian civilians living under military occupation had mobilized activists of non-governmental and civil society organizations, at extraordinary personal risk, to provide human protection to the Palestinians.

It goes on to say that the necessity of the presence of those brave activists as the only buffer between helpless civilians and a powerful military machine stood as an indictment of the international community's failure.

The two-day Conference was convened by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People owing to its increasing concern over the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the tragic loss of innocent lives, the humanitarian crisis, and the rapid deterioration of the Palestinian economy. Under the theme "End the Occupation!", the Conference sought to provide a chance for civil society organizations from around the world to exchange views on the situation, coordinate their activities and develop action-oriented proposals.

This afternoon's adoption of the Plan of Action also committed the civil society organizations to work to ensure that the United Nations authorize the international buffer and protection force as a first step to ending the occupation and implementing outstanding resolutions regarding a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

Also according to that text, the groups would use all means at their disposal to educate the public about the realities of life under occupation and the daily violations of Palestinian human rights.

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The document called on the General Assembly to request an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the illegality of Israel's occupation. The organizations also committed themselves to helping to establish an international citizens' commission to investigate violations of international law.

By further terms, the organizations would "ring the alarm" about the consequences for the Middle East of a United States war against Iraq, and work to ensure that the "transfer" or "ethnic cleansing" of Palestinians never happened again and that past wrongs were righted in accordance with international law.

In closing remarks, Papa Louis Fall (Senegal), Chairman of the Palestinian Rights Committee, said the challenge ahead was to ensure that the spirit and energy of the Conference turned plans into reality. The road to the end of occupation faced numerous obstacles, requiring the efforts of all layers of the international community, including civil society. The Committee, with the assistance of the Division for Palestinian Rights in the United Nations Secretariat, was fully committed to supporting civil society in all its endeavours in that regard.

He recalled that during plenary I, the daily face of occupation had been vividly described by experts on the ground. Plenary II, on the work of civil society under occupation, had been a reminder of the tireless efforts of grass-roots activities from around the world. The third plenary, on challenging the occupation, had provided information about effective campaigns at the local, national and international levels. The fourth plenary, on ending the occupation, had introduced various initiatives and activities being planned and implemented. Each panel presentation was followed by an open discussion.

Prior to concluding, the Conference held its fourth plenary on ending the occupation. Terry Greenblatt, Director of Bat Shalom, Jerusalem, a feminist grass-roots organization committed to ending Israeli occupation, said it was attempting to "grow" an Israeli anti-occupation movement based on the understanding that peace required painful and expensive measures, with the end of occupation as a first step. That also required an "almost colossal national un-learning and re-learning process" for Israel's Jewish population and an unconditional recognition that the secure future of Israel depended upon the security and viable future of its Palestinian neighbours.

John Rempel, Chair of the NGO Working Group on Israel-Palestine and representative of the Mennonite Central Committee of New York, expressed concern

about the lack of political will in the Security Council to implement its own resolutions on the conflict. Nor had the General Assembly been able to provide a setting within which the rights of Palestinians could be amply supported. The widespread and false perception among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that the conflict was between two equals in search of a way to coexist on disputed land must be corrected, he emphasized.

Other panellists this afternoon were: Phyllis Bennis, Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, D.C.; Pierre Galand, Chairman of the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine, Brussels; Mercia Andrews, President of the South African NGO Coalition, Pretoria; Juan Carretero Ibañez, Secretary-General of the Organization of Solidarity of the People's of Africa, Asia and Latin America, Havana; and Nadia Hijab of the Steering Committee of the United States Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation.

This morning, on the theme "Challenging the occupation", panellists highlighted ways in which the Palestinian struggle could be made visible to an international audience. Among the methods suggested were framing media depictions of the Palestinian struggle so that they could be understood by wider audiences; changing the scripts superimposed on the Palestinian struggle by the United States media; and clarifying the Palestinian message.

The first thing that must be conveyed was that the 3.5 million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation – in effect, a foreign military dictatorship – was the largest group of non-citizens in the world today, said Ziad Asali, President of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. Regrettably, the spectacle of suffering and cruelty created by Palestinian suicide bombing attacks against Israeli civilians had solidified support among Americans for Israel's brutal policies of repression in the occupied territories.

Na'eem Jeenah, speaking for the Palestinian Solidarity Committee and the Muslim Youth Movement, suggested creating Palestinian parallels to the tactics employed in the South African anti-apartheid struggle. One way to translate the right of return for Palestinian refugees, for example, was to create a Palestinian equivalent of the "Release Mandela" campaign. Just as his release signified the dissolution of apartheid, the refugees' right of return could be the beginning of the end of the Zionist project.

Other panellists this morning were: Lamis Andoni, a journalist from Boston; Jeff Halper, Coordinator of the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions; Richard Falk, a professor of International Law and Practice at Princeton University and member of the Inquiry Commission of the Commission on Human Rights; Adam Shapiro, a representative of the International Solidarity Movement; and Bruce Robbins, a professor at Columbia University.

Background

The United Nations International Conference of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People met in its third plenary session this morning to consider the theme "Challenging the occupation". As panel addressed the topic "Making the occupation visible", Moderator Kathy Bergen urged each panellist and representative to consider what message they sought to communicate to their constituencies.

Statements

LAMIS ANDONI, a journalist from Boston, said it was ironic that in the present age of instant broadcast, issues were more confused and obfuscated than ever. Images and narrative were disconnected from each other and from the reality on the ground. The necessity of discussing how to make the occupation visible was symptomatic of a larger problem, one aspect of which was the superimposed script used to explain United States and Israeli policies towards the occupation. The Palestinian people understood instinctively that the siege on Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's headquarters was aimed at delegitimizing the Palestinian existence as a prelude to the political liquidation of the Palestinian people and their rights. However, that did not fit the superimposed script used by the American media, which cast President Arafat as the problem and prescribed the reforms required by the United States as the solution.

Noting that the reforms required by the United States did not match those reforms desired by the Palestinian people, she said the Palestinians wanted actively to determine their own future, while the United States wanted to pave the way for a new leadership that would be more palatable to Israel and the United States. Today's script envisaged the United States, with its demands for reform and regime change, emerging as the liberator of the Palestinian people. Yet, the Palestinian people understood instinctively that the struggle was not about President Arafat, and they were not ready to let the United States interfere in the name of reform. The script must be challenged, she added.

There were three other scripts employed by the American media, she said. The first was that the main problem was Palestinian violence. The Permanent Representative of the United States, speaking yesterday in the Security Council, had outlined his country's objectives in the Middle East: to stop the terrorists; to reform the leadership; and to revive security coordination. That cast the Palestinians struggle as a threat to security, rather than a struggle for their inalienable rights, and aimed at criminalizing all Palestinians. It also dictated that the problem lay in extremism on both sides, and that the Palestinian people's problems were not limited to the occupation.

Urging that the right of return and all other rights guaranteed by international conventions should not be tampered with to fit the superimposed script, she asked that those involved in the struggle not accept those scripts, which emptied words such as "independent State" of their power. They should cut through such imposed language as "reforms", "democracy", "extremism" and "security" to revive the movement that was supposed to have started in South Africa just before 11 September 2001 to campaign against Israeli apartheid. They should not be confined by what was acceptable to the American media and public opinion, she emphasized.

JEFF HALPER, Coordinator of the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions, Jerusalem, said Israel had removed the occupation from political discussion by denying it entirely. Because it laid exclusive claim to the entire country from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, Israel reasoned that it could not be an occupying Power, since a country could not occupy itself. Its status, therefore, was merely "administrative" until such time as the final status of the territories taken in 1967 was resolved. That position was not accepted by any other State, nor by the international community as a whole. However, it did receive important backing from the United States, which had agreed at the start of the Oslo process to reclassify the territories from "occupied" to "disputed", thus validating Israel's de facto rule.

The first vital step in ending the occupation was to make it visible and bring it back to the centre of the political debate, he said. To achieve that, the conflict must be reframed in compelling terms that exposed the occupation as a major obstacle to its own just and sustainable resolution. The starting point of that reframing should be addressing the need for a viable Palestinian State and a just solution to the refugee problem. If the public discussion were reframed in those terms, the logic of a resolution to the conflict based on justice and the needs of all parties was self-evident. If, however, Israel were allowed to continue framing the conflict in terms of self-defence and its own security, with no reference to Palestinian rights or the fact of occupation, then its win-lose approach would prevail.

Pointing out that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was presented as one of two "sides" – two enemies – he said that was not the way it should be framed. The conflict did not divide neatly and naturally between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. As an Israeli Jew, he "sided" with both Israeli Jews and Palestinians who sought a just peace. He was on the side that stood for equality, human rights, democracy, peaceful coexistence and regional development. There was another side, but it did not divide neatly either. It consisted of those Israeli Jews and Palestinians who advocated exclusivity, conflict, a win-lose approach and continued injustice and suffering. Emphasizing that many Israeli Jews opposed the occupation was an effective way of delegitimizing it, he added.

ADAM SHAPIRO, a representative of the International Solidarity Movement, said the occupation was the foundation of the conflict, and noted that there was no Palestinian resident of the West Bank present to give voice to his or her daily experiences in confronting it.

The International Solidarity Movement's mission, he said, was to get internationals out in the streets of the occupied territories, to challenge soldiers at the "chokepoints", to push forward with humanitarian aid shipments and not be turned aside or prevented from accessing the refugee camps. In Jenin, the humanitarian shipments that had got through had been left in the city proper. Only the action of the Movement's members to smuggle the supplies in on their backs had seen them delivered to the refugee camps.

He said that, as an American and a white person, his life was more valuable to the Israeli Government and Israeli soldiers than the lives of his Palestinian colleagues, adding that peace could not be imposed before the Palestinians had gained their freedom. There were two sides to the conflict, but they should not be cast as Israeli versus Palestinian. The proper paradigm was that of oppressors versus oppressed.

Recalling the statement by United States President George W. Bush in regard to the war against terrorism – "You're either with us or with the terrorists" – he said it was no coincidence Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had been the first person to be seen lip-syncing those words. The refrain should be, more properly, "You're either with colonialization and oppression, or with freedom." Those who were with the Palestinians would continue to stand in the face of soldiers and tanks, with justice and freedom in their hearts, to ensure that Palestinians gained their freedom.

RICHARD FALK, a Professor of International Law and Practice at Princeton University, said the United Nations had a mixed record on the Palestinian question. It deserved credit for setting forth Palestinian rights under international law, the United Nations Charter and the Organization itself, and had continued to lend moral authority to the Palestinian struggle by lending its auspices to such meetings as the present Conference. But it had failed miserably to protect the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people and, because of that failure, it was critically important to arouse civil society to use its leverage in pressing for an end to the illegal and criminal occupation.

He stressed that resolutions applying to Palestine must be taken as seriously as those directed at Iraq. Never had the Palestinian ordeal been as desperate as today, and the challenge to the conscience of humanity was even greater. It was time to realize that the occupation was not only illegal and criminal, but an exterminist one that sought to obliterate the very existence of the Palestinian people. The world must not allow that to happen, he stressed, adding that the international community must recognize the failure of the United Nations to live up to the letter of its own law.

There were two sets of issues underlying the criminality of occupation, he continued. The first came from Israel's refusal to accept United Nations resolutions, beginning with the obligation to withdraw from the occupied territories, as well as its flagrant violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Secondly, Israel had ignored international legal obligations that the international community had the authority to uphold. While it was the practice of the international community to state that leaders who violated fundamental rights were committing crimes against humanity, it was now up to the voices of civil society to speak the truth to power and to underscore the extent to which crimes were daily being committed against the Palestinian people.

He recommended that the General Assembly be encouraged to pass a resolution seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice concerning the illegality of the occupation. It was also time that civil society formed an independent international commission to look into crimes against humanity and the Fourth Geneva Convention, and the failure to implement Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

BRUCE ROBBINS, a Professor from Columbia University, said he was present not as a representative of any organization, but because he had participated in the effort to publish a letter by American physicist Alan Sokal, entitled "Peace in the Middle East: An Open Letter from American Jews to Our Government", which evinced deep dismay at the Israeli army's occupation of the West Bank and United States support for it.

It was important to realize that the people who had signed that letter unreservedly supported Israel's right to exist in peace and security, but did not support the occupation, he emphasized. They would not describe themselves as pro-Palestinian, nor did they place much trust in the present Palestinian leadership. They were unambiguously devoted to the preservation and best interests of Israel, but were convinced that those interests could only be served by affirming that Palestinian lives counted as much as Israeli lives.

He said the letter called for a prompt resolution of the conflict based on two sovereign States – Israel and Palestine – partitioned along the pre-1967 borders as modified only by mutually agreed territorial swaps. Those proposals were unoriginal because they represented a broad international consensus, and unambitious because they envisaged a division in which Israel would get 78 per cent of historic Palestine. However, the letter did break an unspoken American taboo against questioning American aid to Israel by proposing that aid be made conditional on the acceptance of the two-State solution. And while those in support of the letter did not propose an immediate cut-off in aid, they did propose that aid be used for different purposes, such as relocating Israeli settlers in the occupied territories within Israel proper.

The supporters of the letter, he said, wanted conditions set on American aid, and to tell Israeli voters before the next election that the United States would continue to subsidize Israel, but only if the occupation ended. If Israel wanted to continue the occupation, Israelis must pay for it. Given those contents, it had come as no surprise that some reactions to the letter had shown violent opposition. Yet, it was surprising that 90 per cent of the reactions had been very favourable. Hundreds of supportive letters were coming in every day, he added.

One lesson to be learned from the letter campaign concerned the power of the Internet for grass-roots mobilization of geographically dispersed civil groupings, he said. Another concerned the power of non-experts to work their way into the print media by working together to end their anonymity and see their views espoused in public. A third concerned the sense of belonging, he said. Despite a lack of firm statistics, it appeared that the movement was not specifically Jewish, in that its members were not used to being counted, first and foremost, as Jews.

ZIAD ASALI, President of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, said that arguments in favour of Palestinian human rights were often cast in terms of international law or historical justice. Polling research indicated that Americans were largely unmoved by both those styles of argument, which could be decisive in many other cultural contexts, such as among Arabs or Europeans. Security Council resolutions and other relevant aspects of international law simply cut little ice in American society, which had long regarded the United Nations as a forum for anti-American sentiment. Americans had never accepted the authority of international law deriving from multilateral institutions, he said, adding that they believed instead in the supremacy of American constitutional law and self-defined United States national interests.

Americans responded to human issues they could identify with at the visceral and cultural levels, he said. The spectacle of suffering and cruelty created by Palestinian suicide bombing attacks against Israeli civilians, which were consistently and widely broadcast on American television, had solidified support among Americans for Israel's brutal policies of repression in the occupied territories. Certainly the experience of the 11 September 2001 attacks had made Israeli efforts to identify its position with that of the United States all the easier.

What was missing from the American consciousness was an understanding of life under occupation, he continued. Few Americans were aware that the occupation even existed. Most believed that East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were in Israel, and that Israel was behaving democratically in those areas. The situation was exacerbated by the many voices arguing that the occupation either never existed or had somehow been ended by the Oslo process. The first thing Americans needed to learn was that the 3.5 million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation – in effect, a foreign military dictatorship – was the largest group of non-citizens in the world today.

Americans were outraged by the systematic disenfranchisement of indigenous African peoples in South Africa during apartheid, he said. Most Americans

probably had the impression that Palestinians in the occupied territories were citizens of Israel or enjoyed rights analogous to those of Israeli citizens. It must be made clear that occupation meant living without citizenship under a government to which one had no access, all based solely on ethnic identity. Such a situation was – by definition in the American cultural context – scandalous and totally indefensible.

NA'EEM JEENAH, a spokesperson for the Palestinian Solidarity Committee and President of the Muslim Youth Movement, said it was not sufficient to get people to accept the truth and justice of the Palestinian cause. The message must be translated into the language of the people. For example, the clarity of the message used in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle had been essential, yet there was no similarly clear message from Palestine.

Suggesting that creating a Palestinian message that paralleled the one used by South Africa's anti-apartheid movement would be useful, he said that linking Israel and South Africa could make a useful hook for international solidarity activists around the world. It was important to enunciate the objectives of the Palestinian movement: to end the occupation; dismantle the settlements; establish a sovereign, viable Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital; and to ensure the right of return for Palestinian refugees. In setting those objectives, Palestinians and their supporters could say that their platform was international law.

Another important parallel with South Africa could be to find a Palestinian equivalent of the "Release Mandela" campaign, he said. The day of Nelson Mandela's release was the day that the apartheid State had begun to dissolve. The parallel in the Palestinian struggle could be the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Like Mr. Mandela's release, it sounded like a goal that could only be achieved in the distant future, yet the day that it was accepted would be the beginning of the end of the Zionist project. In that context, he said, it was important to recognize that the occupation was not the beginning of Palestinian oppression; the "original sin" was the dispossession of Palestinian land.

Remarking upon the Israeli-Palestinian conflict vis-à-vis the South African anti-apartheid struggle, he said that, as in South Africa, the campaign should use international solidarity to isolate the Israeli State, as well as a whole gamut of boycott strategies, sanctions and a severing of diplomatic relations with Israel. The argument that isolation did not work in the new political order was invalid; it may be harder to implement, but it was not impossible. Finally, he called for substance to be given to the symbolic launch of an international anti-apartheid movement against Israel.

Discussion

A representative from a Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO), drawing a link between the Palestinians and Canada's First Nations indigenous cultures, said she had been told that Palestinians were not indigenous people, but that was obviously a fallacy.

Asked by another representative how legal avenues could be more fruitful with respect to the Palestinian question, Mr. FALK said the International Criminal Court had the potential to investigate and indict for crimes against humanity. International law could also be used as a lever to prevent further arms exports to Israel as long as the occupation continued, he noted, adding that the international community had been complicit in allowing United States law to go unenforced with respect to how those weapons were used.

A member of the Palestinian-American Congress said that, under international law, an occupier could annex territory it had occupied if armed resistance stopped. What had been called Palestinian violence, especially in the media, was armed resistance, and once it ended, Israel had the right to annex what was left of Palestine. It was vital that the international community refer to Palestine as an occupied country.

Mr. Falk noted that territories that had been occupied illegally had the right, under international law, to resist. That right was connected to the legitimate right to self-determination, and the Palestinian struggle was best understood as an unfinished struggle against colonial occupation.

Another representative said that neither Arabs nor Palestinians had ever been enemies of the Jews, but they opposed Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and the daily destruction in which it was engaged there.

One representative, noting Americans did not really understand the discussion in its current context, said it would be useful to change the term "occupation" to "foreign military dictatorship". It was also important to do something active within the United States, and for the pro-Palestinian lobby to speak with confidence. The American media certainly portrayed the issue with a pro-Israeli bias and the Palestinians should speak with a unified voice to correct the misunderstanding that had been perpetuated.

Another speaker said he was concerned, as a Palestinian refugee, that some organizations dealt with the occupation as if it had begun in 1967. His family had been uprooted in 1948 when the occupation had really started. Those wanting to refer to the roots of the Palestinian struggle must go back to 1948, not 1967.

Regarding comparisons of the Palestinian struggle with South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, one representative said that all struggles against racism must be linked to the Palestinian struggle. There could not be a struggle for global justice that failed to address that issue. Each struggle was interconnected and they were all related to injustice of power, in which struggle Palestine was one of the clearest examples.

Mr. HALPER acknowledged that it was important not to start the Palestinian story in 1967, saying it was about a 100-year process of displacement. A regional solution was required because the impact of having pushed millions out made it impossible to resolve the problem within the confines of Israel-Palestine. He favoured a two-stage solution, in which a Palestinian State would be created first and then a regional bloc – incorporating Israel, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan as a natural geographical and cultural unit – would be organized somewhat like Europe. Each group would have its own national space, but would not be locked into it.

He also acknowledged that the goals of Palestinian mobilization were not clear, and that the evolutionary possibilities for the next stage of the struggle were more open than they had been in South Africa.

Another representative stressed that a very focused message was needed to sustain interest in the Palestinian cause. That message should emphasize that the Palestinians and Israelis were not enemies. It was important that American Jews support the right of Palestinians to their own State because they comprised a very strong lobby in the United States.

The final speaker this morning remarked that since the two parties, as well as the international community, had been unable to come up with a solution to the conflict, it was incumbent upon international civil society groups to do their utmost. Yet, so far at the Conference, they had not achieved a solution either. He stressed that one of the qualitative leaps in the "Free South Africa" movement had been the holding of civil disobedience campaigns outside foreign embassies. That could be done for the Palestinian cause, he suggested.

Concluding Remarks by Panel

Mr. JEENAH said there had been three generations of struggles during the past half century – in Viet Nam, South Africa and now Palestine. If the Palestinian struggle was not recognized, the territory would lose its place in history. He stressed that the struggle happening there was the same as the one against apartheid in South Africa.

Mr. SHAPIRO underscored that it was incumbent on the international community to ensure that Palestinians not only had rights, but also were allowed to exercise them. It was vital for the international solidarity of all peoples to join the Palestinians in exercising those basic rights.

Mr. HALPER said the Palestinian conflict had fundamental implications for the entire international community. It was a test for the international system to create a new world based on human rights and international law to replace the old one based on domination and oppression. If the international community could not bring its instruments to bear in defeating the occupation, what would the implications be for all those whose struggles were less well known? he asked.

Mr. FALK said there was no ambiguity as far as the fundamental issues in the Palestinian Authority were concerned: ending occupation, dismantling the settlements, establishing a Palestinian State, and upholding the rights of Palestinian refugees. While all those issues were underwritten by international law, it was a fundamental failing of the peace process that it had excluded the relevance of international law and, as such, could not succeed.

Ms. ANDONI called for the freedom of all the detainees, who had been criminalized in American public opinion, saying that communication should not mean compromising commitment to international law. Communication and the media were important, but grass-roots activists were at the heart of bringing about change on the ground.

Mr. ROBBINS said it was extremely important to show people that steps towards fairness were possible, even if absolute justice was not going to happen. Every possible step to assist indigenous peoples in other countries would show that fairness was possible in the Middle East.

Mr. ASALI, noting that the power of the United States had been applied over too many decades against a reasonable solution in the Middle East, asked what was wrong with that country, which had the most open system in the world.

Afternoon Plenary Statements by Experts

TERRY GREENBLATT, Director Bat Shalom, Jerusalem, said her organization, a national feminist grass-roots organization established in 1994, was committed to working for an end to the Israeli occupation and a just resolution of the conflict. Its unacknowledged and untapped experience, and its understanding of the human dimensions of political and legal issues, were critical to all peace and justice initiatives.

Outlining Bat Shalom's successful efforts to gain access to international policy-making arenas, including the Security Council in May, she said it had recently proposed to the Quartet that a commission of women peace activists from Palestine, Israel and the international community be convened to help create a sound and broadly accepted foundation for renewed negotiations and to guarantee the integration of civil society's needs into that process.

Underscoring that ending the occupation was a precondition for peace and negotiation, she said that, towards that goal, Bat Shalom had recently launched Women's International Peace Activist Network (WIPAN) with the aim of harnessing the collective power and moral force of the international community of feminist grass-roots peace activists and policy makers.

Bat Shalom was attempting to "grow" an Israeli anti-occupation movement based on the understanding that peace required painful and expensive measures, with the end of occupation as a first step, she said. That would also require an "almost colossal national un-learning and re-learning process" for Israel's Jewish population, as well as an honest analysis of their historical narrative. It would also require acknowledgement of its responsibility in turning millions of Palestinians into refugees and an unconditional recognition that Israel's future and security depended upon the security and viable future of its Palestinian neighbours.

Noting that Israel was squeezing the lifeblood out of an entire population, she said her organization continued to express its rage against Israeli policies, the military forces that implemented them, and the profound silence of Israeli civil society. Construction of the "security walls" would further isolate, devastate and exploit vast areas of agricultural lands, which would neither provide the security desired by the Israeli public nor suppress the Palestinian aspirations for a sovereign nation.

PHYLLIS BENNIS, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, said that with the 1947 partition agreement, the international community had created the Palestinian crisis and would have to provide its solution, as well. While national particularities made it difficult to present a unified framework for solidarity in support of the Palestinians, international law and human rights could provide one. For instance, taking the example of Camp David and former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's "generous" offer, one had to admit that the offer to the Palestinians was generous in comparison to what had been offered previously. However, there was no scope for a valid comparison in the past practices of an oppressor; the comparison must be based on the precepts of international law, in which case the offer was not at all generous.

She said the United Nations could be an ally in the struggle against the Israeli occupation, but only if civil society worked to make it one. Conference participants must struggle to make their voice heard and demand a place at the table. It would be a long struggle and extend far beyond the issue of Palestine and the end of the occupation, but civil society must maintain the pressure on the United Nations to make the words "We the peoples" descriptive of the actual state of affairs. It must criticize the United Nations when it fell short and blame the United States for incapacitating the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Secretary-General in the implementation of resolutions.

Explaining that the United Nations would not act "outside its box", she said civil society must open the box. Warning that grandiose plans to reform the Security Council would not be realized, she recalled that in times past the General Assembly had been the engine of activity, not the Security Council. The first act of newly independent States had once been to send their delegations to take their seats in the General Assembly Hall. Whenever the Security Council was blocked, the obligation for action shifted to the General Assembly. Civil society must concentrate on developing the role of the United Nations as a potential partner in the struggle to protect the Palestinian people, she reiterated.

There were two kinds of international protection, she continued. In one, non-violent activists placed themselves between the Palestinians and their Israeli oppressors. The other demanded the protection of governments and international organizations. The fact that civilians were required to put their lives on the line demonstrated the failure of the international community to provide the Palestinian people with the protection they were internationally guaranteed. The goal of the final Conference session should be the creation of a coordinated action committee on the question of Palestine, united by the framework of international law and justice, centred on the United Nations and designed to ensure both kinds of protection as long as the occupation continued.

PIERRE GALAND, Chairman of the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the Question of Palestine, said that given the possibility of a "seismic eruption" of two worlds along the two shores of the Mediterranean, a collective awareness had built on the need for European and Arab governments to participate more actively in finding a solution to the Palestinian question and ending the occupation. There had been an impetus within the European coordinating bodies to highlight the importance of the Palestinian question.

He recalled the agreement reached in 1995 under the so-called Barcelona process, in which the countries of Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East had decided to create a free trade zone, aimed at fostering coexistence. On 10 April, the European Parliament had voted to suspend that agreement owing to Israel's continued occupation and violation of Palestinian human rights. Five basic principles were central to the Palestinian question: recognizing national resistance as the main issue; upholding the right of equality; rejecting colonialism

absolutely, ensuring a coherent and structured international order; and refining the notion of world citizenship.

A recent project in Belgium had served as the basis for mobilizing public opinion on the issues, he recalled. For each school supply purchased for a Belgian child, another had been bought for a Palestinian child and delivered by Belgian military aircraft. Fighting for the rights of Palestinian children imprisoned in Israel was also extremely important, she said, noting that prisoners' rights should also be on the international agenda to ensure that they were not abandoned as terrorists. He also called for a meeting regarding Israel's systematic violations of international resolutions, including the recent Security Council resolution on the Jenin refugee camp, as well as the possible creation of an international tribunal.

JUAN CARRETERO IBÁÑEZ, Secretary-General of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, urged the Palestinian Rights Committee to redouble its efforts to end the suffering of the Palestinian people. While Israel used the pretext of national security to justify outrages and violations of other people's rights, the majority of Security Council members remained silent or restricted themselves to appealing for an end to the violence. In that context, civil society had a very important role to play in clarifying the truth of the situation.

He said the Israeli Government would not enjoy security until it complied with the relevant Security Council resolutions and fulfilled its commitments to the creation of an independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. Meanwhile, the United States accused Iraq of not fulfilling its obligations under international law and producing weapons of mass destruction. That begged the question of why the self-titled world guardian did not attack Israel as a constant violator of Security Council resolutions and a possessor of all types of weapons.

Each passing day saw a greater need to send an international force as a first step in achieving a true ceasefire and creating the necessary conditions for the renewal of the peace process and an end to the violence, outrages and Israeli occupation, he said. The Israeli Government should be penalized in a manner similar to that used against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Its United Nations membership should be suspended and those responsible for war crimes judged and sanctioned as international criminals, he added.

JOHN REMPEL, Chair of the NGO Working Group on Israel-Palestine and representative of the Mennonite Central Committee, New York, expressed concern that the Security Council lacked the political will to implement its resolutions. The General Assembly had tried to provide a setting within which Palestinian rights could be supported, but it, too, had been unable to bring Israel into compliance with the Geneva Conventions and United Nations resolutions. Palestine had gone "the second mile" in its willingness to negotiate under adverse circumstances, but that approach had not borne fruit, leading civil society groups to redouble their advocacy efforts with United Nations players.

He said the unfinished work of NGOs whose constituencies were largely North American was to convey to them and to the wider public a true picture of the conflict. There was a widespread and false perception that the conflict was between two equals in search of a way to coexist on disputed land. However, Israel was an occupying Power and no just future was possible for either side without an end to the occupation in accordance with Security Council resolutions. Most NGOs and civil society players in that drama recognized that no just and peaceful future was possible without an end to the occupation that had devastated Palestinian civil society, its institutions and the lives of ordinary Palestinians.

Further, the development of the Palestinian economy had been sabotaged to the extent that domestic and international agencies had been reduced to supplying relief to masses of displaced and malnourished people, he said. That deplorable state of affairs had shifted the focus among some international governmental and non-governmental organization donors to viewing the core problem as a humanitarian rather than a political one, requiring only structural solutions. He strongly cautioned governments and NGOs against forms of cooperation with Israel that abetted the redefinition of the core problem and marginalized the Palestinian Authority and other domestic agencies. He also opposed the still unfolding Israeli policy of unilateral separation as a way of dealing with the moral and practical "untenableness" of its occupation.

NADIA HIJAB, co-Chair of the Steering Committee of the United States Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, said that while many of those present were active in the international solidarity movement, they must increase activity in their home countries to effect a change in the balance of power regarding support for Israel. Each of the countries in which the representatives lived had ties to Israel and had signed on to the resolutions applying to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They should make sure their governments used all means possible to implement those resolutions, in accordance with international law. The rule of law offered protection, and, in supporting it, civil society would be preserving global peace for all humanity, not just protecting Palestinians.

She continued by highlighting four features of the Campaign's focus on addressing the Palestinian cause within the framework of international law and human rights. The focus on international law allowed the organization to avoid getting entangled in the debate about the ultimate outcome of the Middle East conflict. People resonated naturally to the language of human rights, which were grounded in the principles and values that were universally held dear, enabling a diverse collection of individuals to sign on to the effort. The only prerequisite to belonging was belief in the principles of freedom from the occupation, and equal rights for all.

The Campaign advocated changing United States policy from its focus on supporting occupation to a focus on promoting peace and justice. There were three specific policies in question: the provision of military aid to Israel; the role of United States corporations in the sales of arms and equipment; and the use of the United States veto at the United Nations.

Regarding education for mobilization, she said many people were uninformed or misinformed about the basics of the conflict and the role of their government. Investing in long-term education based on rights and the law would give people the tools to analyse all domestic and international conflicts. The Campaign also supported direct actions to address the levers of policy. That included working to get congressional representatives and corporations to stop supporting the occupation.

She said that, through its members, the Campaign could serve as a clearinghouse for putting people in touch with resources and with each other. By making such links, the Campaign strengthened the channels for exercising influence over United States policies. And through the support of the United Nations, the Campaign could establish networks between national campaigns in different countries and exchange experience, expertise and information to build a global movement for a just peace in Israel and Palestine.

Discussion

One representative said that the Conference participants represented a magnificent network of NGOs that were ready to work and that there was a broad civil society leadership present. With a plan of action in place, those present would be in a very good position to assist their Palestinian friends. She suggested the convening of an international conference where Palestinian representatives could discuss directly the issues that concerned them.

A representative of Sri Lanka said his Government had recognized the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to return to their homes. The participants had heard many good arguments, but the heart of the Palestinian people continued to bleed and the conflict went on. Offering the Sri Lankan experience as an example of reconciliation, he said the Israelis and Palestinians should be brought together simply to talk and offered his country as a venue for such talks.

Questioning the timing of the plans being discussed, another speaker said the situation could change within the next days, weeks, or months. Hopefully, the tide would turn in favour of the Palestinian people, but it could also turn in a direction that dictated a continuation of the Palestinian people's unconquerable struggle. On the subject of suicide bombers, he said that was a Palestinian affair and for the Palestinian Authority to deal with. The Palestinian people had the moral right

to resist, he reiterated, adding that the participants should not join the Sharon Government and the Secretary-General in condemning suicide bombings. Those young bombers had given their lives so that Palestine might live, and Conference participants should not kill them again.

So long as the United States continued to use an unbalanced policy in regard to Palestine, said another speaker, there would be no speedy end to the occupation, even if the General Assembly adopted a resolution to end it. The United States would use its veto right in the Security Council.

On another issue, he said the number of Palestinians in detention camps continued to increase. There was no more room in the jails and they were being arrested and killed. It was Israel's view that all Palestinians must be killed, he added.

Every year, said an Orthodox Jewish speaker, there was a resolution at the United Nations to end conflict in the Middle East. But the first step to solving a problem was to understand it. It was of tremendous pain to the Jewish people that they were always looked upon with suspicion when they voiced support for the Palestinian people. Yet, the chief rabbi of Jerusalem, before the partition, had pleaded with the United Nations to recognize the indigenous population of Palestine but had been ignored. Instead, the United Nations had recognized the Zionist movement as the representative of the Jewish people throughout the world. Tragically, the notion that all the peoples of the Middle East could live in peace had been dismissed. Judaism and Zionism were separate issues, he stressed, saying there was no reason why Jews and Muslims could not coexist.

DON BETZ, representative of international NGOs on the question of Palestine and Chairman of the Steering Committee, then read out the NGO Declaration.

The representative of Portugal said the document would have been acceptable a week ago, but in light of the siege of Mr. Arafat's compound, the Conference should mandate the Steering Committee to add some paragraphs to the NGO Declaration.

His proposals were accepted for inclusion in the final version of the NGO Declaration.

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