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UNITED NATIONS AFRICAN MEETING ON QUESTION OF PALESTINE CONCLUDES

WITH ADOPTION OF FINAL DOCUMENT

Participants Welcome New Global Efforts to Revive Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

PRETORIA, 10 May – Taking note of its [final document](#), the United Nations African Meeting on the Question of Palestine “wholeheartedly welcomed” the increased international efforts to achieve a viable peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, seeing in those efforts the world community’s renewed determination to bring a close to the decades-old conflict.

The Meeting, which was convened by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, wrapped up its two-day session in Pretoria, South Africa, this evening encouraged by recent positive political developments on the ground, chiefly the formation of the new Palestinian National Unity Government, the regular meetings that had begun to take place between President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, the revival of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and the League of Arab States’ decision to establish working groups tasked with engaging international partners in that regard and efforts by the diplomatic Quartet to broaden the scope of its work by engaging regional actors.

At the same time, the participants, who included United Nations and other diplomats, world renowned experts on the situation in the Middle East, parliamentarians and members of the academic community and civil society, expressed “great concern” at the deepening economic and humanitarian crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Those hardships, in their view, were a direct consequence of the continuing occupation, further compounded by the withholding of direct donor assistance to the Palestinian Authority.

While observing the positive effect of the introduction of the Temporary International Mechanism, the participants felt that it was neither commensurate with the Palestinian development requirements, nor sufficient to address current humanitarian emergency needs. They also deplored that much of the Palestinian budgetary shortfall was caused by Israel’s illegal withholding of the customs and tax revenues collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, and called on the Israeli Government to immediately and unconditionally release to the Authority the remaining funds withheld and resume regular monthly payments in accordance with bilateral agreements.

The participants expressed the view that an independent State of Palestine could benefit from the experience of African States in their quest for decolonization, independence, sovereignty and ending apartheid, as well as the experience of Africa on the path to economic independence and sustainable development. They also stressed the important role played by African States in wider efforts aimed at the resumption of the political process and the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In that context, the participants called for enhancing Africa’s contribution to the Middle East peace process and encouraged increased African action in regional and international formats.

In closing remarks, Paul Badji (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that the Committee and all the participants in the Meeting had been grateful for all those experts that had made the journey from the Occupied Territory to South Africa to share their experiences and give first-hand accounts of the situation on the ground. During the past two days, those distinguished speakers had led thorough discussions and had looked into ways to return to the hard-won achievements of the peace process and use them in the present difficult situation.

Aziz Pahad, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of South Africa, said that, as the Meeting had convened, all the participants had been aware of the regional and international threat that was brewing because of the inhuman treatment that the Palestinian people faced on a daily basis. The gathering had provided an excellent opportunity to address the unrealistic distortions that tended to capture the world’s attention when Middle East issues were raised.

The Meeting, as well as tomorrow's Public Forum, must look at ways to mobilize support for the revived Arab Peace Initiative, he said. International civil society must raise its collective voice against attempts to demonize the Palestinian people and to impose a regime change from outside the Palestinian Authority. Civil society, as well as the wider international community, must intensify efforts to convince the Israeli public and, in turn, the Israeli Government, that acceptance of the Arab Peace Initiative was a constructive and tangible way to move towards a two-State solution.

Moved to tears, Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations in New York, encouraged the participants to visit the Occupied Territory to witness the humiliation and degradation of the Palestinian people as they waited in endless lines at countless checkpoints or eked out a meagre survival in refugee camps. The people of South Africa knew that feeling. They had lived it, he said.

He went on to urge the international community to recognize and support the new National Unity Government, particularly since not doing so would lead to the collapse of all Palestinian institutions. There was a small window of opportunity. The Palestinian people had begun to put their house in order. They had established a unity Government, which had put an end to Palestinian in-fighting, and that Government had said that it respected previous agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At such a historic moment, Africa could help by exerting maximum political pressure on the United States and Israel to press the Israeli leadership to begin direct negotiations, without condition.

During the afternoon plenary, which focused on African solidarity with the Palestinian people's quest for statehood, Soyata Maiga, Chairperson of the Association of Women Jurists of Mali, said that African States had long held that the Palestinian people were undergoing the largest human tragedy in modern history, as evinced by Israel's imposition of random checkpoints and closures, its destruction of homes and infrastructure and its indiscriminate violence that killed and injured innocent civilians in contravention of international law.

She said that the African Union should consider stepping in to provide assistance while the international community fretted over whether to cooperate with the new Hamas-led Government. Although Africa still had its own problems – wars, poverty, HIV/AIDS – African nations would, nevertheless, “step up” and help the Palestinian people shoulder their burden right to the end – the day they achieved independence.

Other experts participating in the discussion were Salam el Herfi, Ambassador of Palestine to Tunisia; Garth le Pere, Institute for Global Dialogue in South Africa; and Saadi Altumaizi, Ambassador of Palestine to Ghana.

Plenary III: African Solidarity with the Palestinian People's Aspirations for Independence and Statehood

Experts were expected to discuss enhancing Africa's contribution to the Middle East peace process, the role of the African Union and the role of the Pan-African Parliament in supporting a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

SALMAN EL HERFI, Ambassador of Palestine to Tunisia, expressed sincere appreciation for some 40 years of solidarity shown by African States with the Palestinian people. He recalled how Africans had always been a part of the Palestinian people's struggle, from Oslo to Madrid. Palestinians had learned a lot from Africa about the importance of dialogue and opening direct negotiations with the opposition, he said, detailing his personal experience to that end as one of the most well-known Palestinian experts on African affairs. With the peace process at an impasse, the Palestinian people would need to work even more closely with Africans to help restart the negotiations, he added.

GARTH LE PERE, Executive Director, Institute for Global Dialogue, Midrand, South Africa, then touched on the public perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He pointed to the force of ideas and how its initiators; who, because of their preponderance of power, were able not only to influence ideas about the conflict, but to present them as incontrovertible reality. He said it was important to consider the often overlooked voice of ordinary people on both sides of the political divide. The history of trying to resolve the conflict had been an affair that had taken place around negotiating tables, typically outside the region on the basis of generic, universal formulas. Largely neglected had been the role of social movements, protest, and grass-roots activism as critical axes of peacemaking and conflict resolution.

By example, he said that both Palestinian and Israeli women had played a significant role in trying to end the Israeli occupation in the West Bank, and other groups, such as the Israeli-Palestinian Physicians for Human Rights, provided medical care for Palestinians. Those alliances highlighted the growing realization that formal, official Government-to-Government interactions were not always sufficient to secure international cooperation for peace or for resolving deep-seated conflicts. He also touched on the role of the Jewish lobby in Washington, which had been said to ensure that whatever party was in power in America, the views of that lobby were always at the fore. He added that he believed that that situation was not unique to America.

Overall, ending the occupation was a precondition for working towards a better life for all on both sides, on the basis of “the three As”, he said, recalling the writings of Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, who had called for acknowledgement that grave wrongs had been committed against the Palestinian people, accountability by Israel that it bore responsibility for what had happened and acceptance grounded in the normative imperative that Palestinians had the right to equality, freedom and self-determination.

SOYATA MAIGA, Chairperson, Association of Women Jurists of Mali, said that African States had long held that the Palestinian people were undergoing the largest human tragedy in modern history, as evinced by Israel's imposition of random checkpoints and closures, its destruction of homes and infrastructure, and its indiscriminate violence that killed and injured innocent civilians in contravention of international law. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union, had invited high representatives from the Palestinian Authority to its meetings, and had included references to the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory in many declarations.

She said that the Pan-African Parliament could perhaps play an important role in raising awareness about the grim realities facing Palestinian people and generate more public support on their behalf. African parliamentarians could also consider ways to boot commerce between the Palestinians and Africa. They could also identify ways to work with African civil society, which was participating more than ever in the United Nations, to mobilize even more continent-wide solidarity.

She said that the African Union should also consider stepping in to provide assistance while the international community fretted over whether to cooperate with the new Hamas-led Government. Although Africa still had its own problems – wars, poverty, HIV/AIDS – African nations would, nevertheless, “step up” and help the Palestinian people shoulder their burden right to the end – the day they achieved independence.

SAADI ALTUMAIZI, Ambassador of Palestine to Ghana, said that a few weeks ago, the Israeli people had been “all flag-waving smiles and happiness” as they celebrated the fifty-ninth anniversary of their independence. For Palestinians, it marked just one more year of misery and dispossession. It was time for change, he said, drawing attention to the recent formation of a Palestinian Unity Government “after tricky on-again-off-again” negotiations. The 22-member League of Arab States had also revived the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. With that in mind, he said that, while Israel had in the past mocked Arabs as the “masters of missed opportunities”, it appeared that, this time, it was Israel that was about to miss a historic chance to change the legacy of the entire Middle East region.

He said the only way forward was to ensure that, once political initiatives got under way, no unilateral activities took place or circumstances were created on the ground that undermined that diplomacy. On African solidarity, he said African Governments and civil society organizations had an urgent task to pressure Israel and the international community to revive the peace process, particularly at a time when Israel was attempting to strengthen its diplomatic ties with African countries.

When the floor was opened for comments and questions, the first two speakers said that the real problem was the fact that United Nations resolutions could not be implemented because of the United States veto. They wondered what could be done to address that serious problem. One speaker also asked what could be done to mobilize civil society – particularly African countries – in a global effort to end the occupation, similar to what had occurred during the apartheid era and in the run up to the war in Iraq.

In response, South Africa's Ambassador to the United Nations, DUMISANI KUMALO, who chaired the panel, stressed the importance of regional solidarity and civic action to press for change. He recalled the discussions in the Security Council ahead of the United States invasion of Iraq and how the African countries on the Council at that time had stood against the war. What no one saw on television was that those small countries were backed – off camera – by large regional blocs such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Mr. LE PERE said that he was "deeply pessimistic" about the role of the United Nations in the matter, particularly when the make-up of the Security Council reflected cold war realities that favoured the veto-wielding permanent members, particularly the United States. Since that was the case, he said he was afraid that a different centre of gravity was needed to move the issue forward.

Ms. MAIGA said that African civil society had begun to question the veto power resting with the Council's five permanent members, and had led the call for reform of that 15-nation body. Perhaps it was time to consider mobilizing wider international opposition to the Council's current inertia on most Middle East issues, she said, wondering also if it was perhaps not time to take advantage of alternative international mechanisms, such as the International Court of Justice.

Mr. KUMALO reminded the Meeting that, when a United Nations resolution reached the point at which it could be vetoed, it meant that there were enough "yes" votes to pass it. "So don't worry so much about the veto, that, at least, shows that there's support," he said, adding that, the day that a resolution on the question of Palestine was not vetoed, "that's the day you should get worried".

Closing Session

The Meeting's final document was presented by VICTOR CAMILLERI (Malta), Rapporteur of the African Meeting and of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

AZIZ PAHAD, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of South Africa, said that it had been exciting to hear delegations and other participants over the past few days trying to bring reason to the "burning" issue of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. As the participants met, all were aware of the regional and international threat that was brewing because of the inhuman treatment that the Palestinian people faced on a daily basis. He said that everyone also knew what was at the heart of that treatment, such intractable positions and beliefs, including, among others, strategic and oil interests, "clash of civilizations" and "axis of evil".

It was also clear that the Quartet was not the body that could respond to the needs of the Palestinian people, nor affect the change the majority of the international community wanted. Indeed, participants at the Meeting had expressed concerns about the make-up of the Quartet and had noted that its work was not transparent even to the United Nations Security Council, the one body that was responsible for maintaining international peace and security. It was his view that, despite attempts to isolate the Palestinian leadership and disregard the outcome of the recent democratic elections, the Palestinian people and their leaders had demonstrated every willingness to compromise.

The Meeting had provided an excellent opportunity to address the unrealistic distortions that tended to capture the world's attention when Middle East issues were raised. The Meeting, as well as tomorrow's Public Forum, must look at ways to mobilize support for the revived Arab Peace Initiative. Indeed, the power wielded by some Governments demanded a massive mobilization of all sectors of civil society, including trade unions, academics, religious leaders and others. International civil society must raise its collective voice against attempts to demonize the Palestinian people and to impose a regime change from outside the Palestinian Authority.

Civil society, as well as the wider international community must intensify efforts to convince the Israeli public and, in turn, the Israeli Government, that acceptance of the Arab Peace Initiative was a constructive and tangible way to move towards a two-State solution. Those actors must also drive change at the United Nations to counter the Security Council's intransigence and to ensure that the world body's resolutions were fully enforced. Governments and people must be mobilized to press for the changes that would ensure that, once and for all, the Middle East could be at peace with itself.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations in New York, said that the Palestinian people and leadership profoundly appreciated the "great people" of South Africa for their hospitality and show of solidarity. He said that all the participants had agreed that this was perhaps the most difficult moment the Palestinian people had faced. Moved to tears, he encouraged the participants to visit the Occupied Territory to witness the humiliation and degradation of the Palestinian people as they waited in endless lines at countless checkpoints or eked out a meagre survival in refugee camps. The people of South Africa knew that feeling. They had lived it, he said.

He went on to urge the international community to recognize and support the new National Unity Government, particularly since not doing so would lead to the collapse of all Palestinian institutions. There was a small window of opportunity. The Palestinian people had begun to put their house in order. They had established a unity Government, which had put an end to Palestinian in-fighting, and the Government had said that it respected previous agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Further, all political parties, including Hamas, had authorized President Abbas to negotiate with Israel on behalf of the Palestinian people. "This is an important fact that is being overlooked," he said. The international community should also recognize the true opportunity provided by the Arab League's revival of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. If Israel did not accept the opportunity offered, one thing was certain. "We will not go away. We are not helpless," he said, adding that the Palestinian side was not intimidated and would continue to test the Security Council. It would also continue to take advantage of every mechanism within the United Nations.

At this historic moment, Africa could help by exerting maximum political pressure on the United States and Israel, to press the Israeli leadership to begin direct negotiations, without condition. "We are ready. Without conditions. We are willing anywhere you want," he said.

In closing remarks, PAUL BADJI ([Senegal](#)), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that the Committee and all the participants in the Meeting had been grateful for all those that had made the journey from the Occupied Palestinian Territory to share their experiences and give first-hand accounts of the situation on the ground.

Summing up the two-day Meeting, he said that the experts had looked at ways to return to the hard-won achievements of the peace process and put them to use in the current situation. Speakers in plenary I, on the situation on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza, had discussed Israel's unrelenting campaign to create facts on the ground, including ongoing settlement activity and the continued construction of the separation wall. Speakers had also painted a grim picture of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and had agreed on the need for the international community to help alleviate the deepening humanitarian crisis.

In plenary II, which focused on international efforts to enhance the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, speakers had stressed that, while the peace process had been stalled for quite some time, it was still, nevertheless, relevant. The role of the United Nations and its powerful Security Council had also been discussed. In plenary III, on African solidarity with the Palestinian cause, speakers had discussed how international peace efforts could be supported within and through the United Nations system. He expected all the participants would leave the meetings with concrete ideas on how they, and their Governments, could support the long-suffering Palestinian people.

The Meeting also aimed to build on recent international and regional momentum to bring the Israeli and Palestinian sides back to the negotiating table. It will also feature, tomorrow, a United Nations Public Forum in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace, to be held at the University of Pretoria from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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