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Committee on the Inalienable Rights  
of the Palestinian People  
290<sup>th</sup> Meeting (AM)

### **RECENT AGREEMENT ON RAFAH CROSSING 'NEW OPPORTUNITY' FOR COOPERATION**

#### **SAYS SECRETARY-GENERAL, AT PALESTINIAN SOLIDARITY DAY OBSERVANCE**

#### **Presidents of General Assembly, Security Council Also Address Meeting; Palestinian Elections, Israel 's Gaza Disengagement Cited as Signs of Progress**

As the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People was observed at Headquarters today, Secretary-General Kofi Annan told delegations that, while a solution to the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict had proved elusive, with Palestinians yet to see the beginnings of their own State and Israelis yet to feel secure in theirs, the agreement two weeks ago on the Rafah crossing had created a new opportunity to cooperate and bring tangible benefits for ordinary people – particularly among Palestinians.

Addressing the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Mr. Annan urged the Palestinian and Israeli leadership to work with each other and the Quartet to ensure the agreement was implemented in full and on time. He added that Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the Palestinians' success in ensuring calm during that period had raised hopes for a renewal of the political process. Unfortunately, the ensuing upsurge in violence had seriously undermined that fledgling coordination, bringing back feelings of frustration and disappointment.

If disengagement was to be a springboard to progress on broader issues, it was vital that the parties give new impetus to meeting their obligations under the [Road Map](#), which they had accepted and which had been endorsed by the Security Council, he stressed. Palestinians needed to be assured that the future viability of a Palestinian State would not be eroded by settlement expansion and barrier construction, and Israelis needed to be assured that their security would not be compromised by failure to act decisively against terror.

General Assembly President Jan Eliasson ( Sweden) said the last 30-year period had been a troubling and difficult one for the region. Political progress had been slow or absent. Images and realities of violence and human suffering had dominated the Palestinian-Israeli relations. Lack of trust had permeated the relationship. Against that sombre background, it was gratifying to note progress made this year. The Palestinian people had demonstrated their commitment to democracy during the presidential election in January. The international community had welcomed the Israeli withdrawal and dismantlement of settlements in the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank in late summer.

Welcoming the agreement on movement for the Rafah crossing, the Security Council President for December, Andrey I. Denisov ( Russian Federation) called on the parties to take immediate action to implement them. The Security Council also fully supported the holding of free, fair and transparent Palestinian legislative elections next January. Members were also united in the view that the international community must take concrete steps to ensure that extremists did not undo the positive changes in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. Those changes must make it possible to resume the implementation of the Road Map and to come closer to achieving the final goal – peace and security for both Israel and an independent Palestinian state.

Delivering a message from Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority, Riyad Mansour said that, despite the unilateral nature of the Gaza withdrawal and serious concern that it had been carried out in the framework of deepening colonization in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority would strive to transform the withdrawal into an opportunity to return to the negotiating table. The opening of the Rafah crossing had linked the Gaza Strip with the Arab world. It was also a step forward towards the realization of the independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian State.

Committee Chairman, Paul Badji ( Senegal), read out the names of the many Heads of State and Government, ministers and other officials who had sent messages of support and solidarity.

Statements in commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People were also made by: Mohd Radzi Abdul Rahman (Malaysia), in his capacity as Vice-Chairman of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian

People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories; Hamidon Ali (Malaysia), on behalf of Dato' Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi, Malaysia's Prime Minister in his capacity as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement; Abdullah M. Alsaïdi (Yemen), on behalf of Abu Bakr Al Qirabi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Yemen and Chairman of the Thirty-second Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers; Aminu Bashir Wali (Nigeria), on behalf of Nigeria's President in his capacity as Chairman of the African Union; Yahya A. Mahmassani, Permanent Observer for the League of Arab States, on behalf of the League's Secretary-General, Amre Moussa.

Additional speakers included: Chris Doyle, member of the International Coordinating Network on Palestine and Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding; and Nasser Al-Kidwa, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Palestinian Authority.

The Committee will meet at a date and time to be announced.

#### Statements

PAUL BADJI ( Senegal ), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, noted that three weeks ago the Committee had marked the thirtieth anniversary of its establishment by the General Assembly. It had not been a cause of celebration, but rather an opportunity to reflect upon decades of failed efforts to resolve the question of Palestine. Today's observance provided a chance to pledge unwavering commitment to bring about a just solution to the question of Palestine. The Day was also a reminder that there would be no final solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without the achievement by the Palestinian people of their inalienable rights to self-determination without external interference, the right to national independence and sovereignty, and the right of Palestinians to return to their homes and property.

He said the occupation of Palestinian land and the occupying Power's refusal to relinquish control over the Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, complicated efforts to arrive at a just solution to the conflict. This year had seen encouraging developments, a renewed rapprochement of the two parties to the conflict, contrasted by the continuation of illegal policies by the occupying Power, and an upsurge in violence triggered by the never-ending cycle of attacks and retaliation. The passing of Yassir Arafat, over a year ago, had represented a real challenge for the Palestinian people and institutions. It had led, however, to a peaceful, democratic transition, and, in free and fair elections, Mahmoud Abbas had been voted into the office of President of the Palestinian Authority.

Last September, the Committee had welcomed Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and four small settlements in the northern West Bank as a rare opportunity to revive negotiations within the framework of the Road Map and restart the stalled political process, he continued. Israel, however, remained in control of the borders of the Gaza Strip, thus hampering any meaningful economic development. At the same time, the situation in the West Bank remained a cause for concern. The creation of new facts on the ground was accompanied by alarming reports of plans for intensified construction in West Bank settlements, in contravention of Israel's obligations under the Road Map and in violation of international law and the advisory opinion of the Internal Court of Justice.

The Committee had been encouraged by the international community's intensified efforts at revitalizing the Road Map, he added. International donors had pledged substantial financial resources towards the recovery of Gaza in the aftermath of the pull-out, and the European Union stood ready to provide for a third-party presence at the Rafah Terminal between Gaza and Egypt. For its part, the United Nations should maintain its permanent responsibility towards the question of Palestine until it was resolved in all its aspects. Ultimately, it was the implementation of United Nations resolutions that would lead to a permanent two-State solution. The Committee, as the only intergovernmental body in the United Nations devoted exclusively to political aspects of the question of Palestine, would do its utmost to help the Palestinian people achieve their inalienable rights and realize their national aspirations in a State of their own.

Concluding, he called on Member States and intergovernmental and civil society organizations to redouble their efforts in support of a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the question of Palestine.

JAN ELIASSON ( Sweden ), General Assembly President, said the world continued to observe the Day in order to support the Middle East peace process and mobilize international assistance to the Palestinian people. The last 30-year period had been a troubling and difficult one for the region. Political progress had been slow or absent. Images and realities of violence and human suffering had dominated the Palestinian-Israeli relations. Lack of trust had permeated the relationship. Against that sombre background, it was gratifying to note progress made this year. The Palestinian people had demonstrated their commitment to democracy during the presidential election in January. The international community had welcomed the Israeli withdrawal and dismantlement of settlements in the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank in late summer.

He noted that, last week, on 25 November, following an agreement by both sides on movement and access, the President of the Palestinian Authority formally re-opened the Gaza Strip's border crossing with Egypt, giving the Palestinians control over one of their frontiers for the first time in their history. An important step was thus taken to fulfil the vision of a future Palestinian State. All those who made that possible, through painstaking and complicated negotiations with persistence and tenacity, were to be commended. The parties were encouraged to continue their cooperation on outstanding issues related to disengagement, supported by the international community.

Palestinians and Israelis must now build on those achievements and strengthen the momentum towards the peaceful settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he stressed. The Road Map, supported by the Quartet, provided a solid basis for the continued work for peace. The international community must intensify its engagement in helping the parties to end a conflict, which for far too long, had tormented the region and its peoples. It was crucial that the Palestinians and Israelis now cooperated to the fullest extent possible. Actions which could aggravate the situation and increase suspicions and mistrust must not be undertaken. Violence and acts of terror must cease. Hope and a sense of positive direction must be restored to the Palestinian and Israeli peoples.

Meanwhile, he said, everything must be done to alleviate the daily plight of the Palestinian people. Access and mobility were crucial for dealing with unemployment and poverty. International assistance should focus on capacity-building programmes, as part of a development strategy for a future Palestinian State. Hopefully, the full backing of the United Nations and the world community would reactivate the peace process and put an end to decades of Palestinian-Israeli confrontation and conflict. Both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples had had enough of despair and loss of life. They deserved a future of peace, security and good-neighbourly relations, and efforts should intensify towards making that happen.

#### Statement by Secretary-General

KOFI ANNAN, United Nations Secretary-General, said that a solution to the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict had proved elusive. Palestinians had yet to see the beginnings of the establishment of their own State; and Israelis, as well, had yet to feel secure in their own State. Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian success in ensuring calm during that period had raised hopes for a renewal of the political process, but the ensuing upsurge in violence had seriously undermined the fledgling coordination between the parties, bringing back feelings of frustration and disappointment.

After the agreement two weeks ago to open the Rafah crossing, facilitate movement between Gaza and the West Bank, and reduce closures in the West Bank, a new opportunity had emerged to cooperate effectively and bring about tangible benefits in the lives of ordinary people – particularly among Palestinians, who had suffered a serious economic decline and severe humanitarian problems due to the events of recent years.

He strongly urged the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships to work with each other, with Quartet Special Envoy James Wolfensohn, and with the Quartet to ensure that the agreement was implemented in full and on time. Action by the parties would complement the continued assistance provided by international donors to alleviate humanitarian suffering and boost the Palestinian economy.

Soon, both Palestinians and Israelis would go to the polls, in elections which would have an important bearing on the future of the peace process, he noted. The electoral season should not be allowed to prevent the parties from the essential work of building mutual trust and following through with implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings. In addition, if disengagement was to be a springboard to progress on broader issues, it was vital that the parties give new impetus to meeting their obligations under the Road Map, which they had accepted and which had been endorsed by the Security Council, he stressed.

He said that Palestinians needed to be assured that the future viability of a Palestinian State would not be eroded by settlement expansion and barrier construction, and Israelis needed to be assured that their security would not be compromised by failure to act decisively against terror.

Reiterating the Quartet's recent call for renewed action in parallel by both parties to meet their Road Map obligations, he said that those encompassed clearly specified action on security, Palestinian institution-building, humanitarian response, civil society and settlements. Performance of Road Map obligations was the way to move forward towards the shared goal of a sovereign, contiguous and democratic Palestine, living side by side in peace and security with Israel. For his part, he remained firmly committed to efforts aimed at achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine.

ANDREY I. DENISOV ( [Russian Federation](#) ), Security Council President, said that this year had been marked by substantive steps aimed at ensuring progress in the Middle East peace process, based on the corresponding Security Council resolutions. One of those steps had been the withdrawal by Israel from the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank of the Jordan River. That would enable progress along the Road Map towards an ultimate goal of two States living side by side in peace and security. The Council unconditionally supported the Quartet's work and advocated the continuation of the dialogue between the Palestinian National Authority and Israel. Of course, progress depended on several factors, notably on confidence-building measures on both sides. Effective actions should be taken by the Palestinian Authority to halt terrorist activity in the territory under its control and to establish reliable law and order there.

He said that, at the same time, Israel must halt all forms of settlement expansion and dismantle settlement outposts. The legitimate concerns of the Israeli side with regard to ensuring its own security, of course, must be taken into account. Without visible improvements in the everyday life of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the degree of hope present now in the Palestinian lands might turn into disappointment, which extremist forces would certainly exploit. In that context, ensuring freedom of movement for Palestinians and Palestinian goods, their relations with the outside world, and clear observance by the parties of the principle of refraining from steps that might predetermine the outcome of the final status negotiations – all those steps would promote movement forward along the path of a long-term political settlement.

The Council welcomed the agreement on movement for the Rafah crossing and called on the parties to take immediate action to implement them, he said. The Council also fully supported the holding of free, fair and transparent Palestinian legislative elections next January. The Council was united in the view that the international community must take concrete steps to ensure that extremists did not undo the positive changes in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. Those changes must make it possible to resume the implementation of the Road Map and to come closer to achieving the final goal – peace and security for both Israel and an independent Palestinian State.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of Palestine, reading out a statement by Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority, said the Palestinian cause had gone through many difficulties and significant challenges since the 1977. Since then, the launching of the peace process at the Madrid Conference had revived the hopes of the peoples of the region for the establishment of peace and stability. During those years, the Palestinian people had continued their just struggle to achieve their freedom and independence, and all States rejecting occupation and oppression had supported them.

Despite humble achievements at the start, he added, the peace process had suffered repeated setbacks as a result of the Israeli occupation and refusal to implement the resolutions of international law and the Road Map. Despite the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion, the construction of the "wall of annexation and separation" continued. Israel also continued its policy of confiscating Palestinian land. East Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine, was surrounded by walls on all sides. The peace process, the Road Map and the final status negotiations had been under the control of Israel's will, at the expense of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

Under such circumstances, however, many significant developments had occurred, particularly the Israeli withdrawal from within the Gaza Strip, he said. Despite the unilateral nature of that move and deep concern that it had been carried out in the framework of deepening colonization in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the concept of the "State with provisional borders", the Palestinian Authority was dealing with the situation in a positive manner and would strive to transform the withdrawal from within Gaza into an opportunity to return to the negotiating table. The agreement on the opening of the Rafah crossing had had an important impact on the Palestinian people, as it constituted a link for the Gaza Strip with the Arab world. It was also a step forward towards the realization of an independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian State. Before, during and after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the Palestinian Authority had taken efforts to maintain public security and order and improve the economic situation. It had also taken efforts to enhance the democratic process, which had begun with elections and would be followed by the Palestinian Legislative Council elections at the end of January 2006. The Palestinian people had chosen peace and negotiations as the path to reaching a just and comprehensive peace, and "our hands remain outstretched", he said.

The United Nations had played a central role in the life of the Palestinian people, he added. Since its establishment, the United Nations had shouldered its responsibility with regard to that cause, until its achievement of a just and comprehensive solution in all aspects. Today's observance was proof that the conscience of the world was alive and that its eyes saw the tragedy of the Palestinian people, as well as their right to freedom, independence and the establishment of an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital. Peace and freedom could not be achieved, however, under occupation, domination and the denial of rights.

MOHD. RADZI ABDUL RAHMAN ( [Malaysia](#) ) spoke in his capacity as Chairman of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories. He said that, despite some positive achievements in the aftermath of the Sharm el Sheikh Summit in February, and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip in August, testimonies by witnesses to the Special Committee had amply reflected the dire human rights situation in the Occupied Territories. Their accounts had demonstrated the harshness

of the military occupation and the ill effects of road closures and numerous checkpoints. Moreover, Jewish settlements isolating or cutting off Palestinian villages were negatively impacting all human rights of the Palestinians. "Ethnic cleansing" and "rampant expulsions" were the words used by several Palestinian witnesses to describe their miserable situation.

Once again, he noted, the Special Committee had not been allowed by Israel to visit the Occupied Territories and assess, first-hand, the human rights situation in Palestine. That restriction had also prevented any exchange of views with relevant Israeli authorities. The situation in Palestine, and indeed the world, had changed since the inception of the Special Committee's mandate 37 years ago. A new generation of leaders was taking over, and dialogue and cooperation were now preferred over monologue and confrontation. In that context, the Special Committee believed that Israel, after all those years of denying the Committee access to the Occupied Territories, should revisit the reasons behind its refusal.

During the Committee's field mission from 25 June to 9 July to Egypt, Jordan and Syria, he said that members had met 38 witnesses from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In Syria, they had heard testimonies from eight witnesses with direct and personal knowledge of the human rights situation in the occupied Syrian Golan.

More than ever, the Committee felt that the construction of the separation wall was violating every single right of the Palestinians, not only in respect of freedom of movement, but also the rights related to adequate housing, food, social life, education and health, he said. The wall was affecting the very national identity of the Palestinians and their legitimate claims to territories, which not long ago had been contiguous lands. As a result of the wall, Palestinians were losing control over a key strategic resource – water – through extensive destruction of groundwater wells and water pipes. Many rural communities were now forced to look for alternate water sources and often suffered from the ill-effects of contaminated water and inadequate sewage and sanitation systems.

He said that the wall also affected the energy supply. The combined effects of the wall, military incursions, confiscation of land for settlers, and road closures had prevented Palestinian electricity companies from maintaining a regular power supply or from attending to the needs of customers located on the other side of the wall. Moreover, many Palestinians in Jerusalem were deprived of electricity because their houses allegedly had been built illegally. Women and children were still paying a heavy toll, due to persistent harsh daily conditions. Rising unemployment and poverty, along with multifaceted restrictions of movement because of the wall, had prevented Palestinian access to health facilities. Such restrictions had also generated food insecurity and a decline in nutrition levels.

After the wall's completion, it was expected that only 39 per cent of the Palestinians would have access to health facilities, and as many as 120,000 children, reportedly, would be deprived of vaccinations, he said. Health outreach programmes had been cut off in some areas as a result of the wall, and mobile clinics had been prevented from reaching their patients. Pregnant women were increasingly at risk, because they could not easily access primary health care dispensaries and were held back at checkpoints on their way to the hospital at the time of delivery. Several witnesses had also spoken of attacks against children on their way to schools, as well as numerous impediments posed by closures, curfews, and long waiting hours at checkpoints or entry points at the wall. That trend seemed to indicate a growing and deliberate pattern by the occupying Power to hamper normal schooling, especially higher education.

He reported that the number of detainees was again on the rise, with up to 8,500 Palestinians reportedly detained in Israeli jails, including many children and minor children. Several hundred detainees were held in administrative detention for indefinitely renewable periods. Prisoners were allegedly subjected to degrading and cruel treatment, including torture. The situation of women was dire, according to several witnesses, and the condition of minors was no less appalling. Minors were subjected to various threats, such as destruction of their homes and life imprisonment, and those were sometimes confined in isolation.

In the occupied Syrian Golan, Israel had also tightened its grip on water resources, he said, and landmines still threatened the population there. The burying of Israeli nuclear waste allegedly continued in a tract of land close to the Syrian border in the vicinity of Jabal al-Sheikh summit. About half of the existing Jewish settlements were to be expanded, and citizens of the occupied Syrian Golan continued to be denied exercise of their traditional and cultural practices. The Special Committee observed with dismay the ever deteriorating human rights situation in the Occupied Territories and the occupied Syrian Golan. It was crucial that Israel take measures to restore trust across communities on the basis that two States existing side by side would soon be a tangible reality. Hopefully, the developments in Israel would offer a window of opportunity to all parties concerned and pave the way for a just and durable peace.

HAMIDON ALI ( Malaysia ), reading out a message from the Prime Minister of Malaysia and Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, reaffirmed the Movement's unequivocal support for, and longstanding solidarity with, the Palestinian people and leadership for their legitimate, long-standing quest for the full realization of their inalienable rights. Yet, as the international community observed the International Day, it continued to witness violence, death and suffering inflicted on the Palestinian people by Israel, the occupying Power. The Movement remained firm in its condemnation of the harsh policies and practices, as well as Israel's disproportionate and excessive use of force against the Palestinian people. He urged Israel to reverse the deterioration of the humanitarian situation and socio-economic condition in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. There must be greater commitment and sincerity in the move towards peace, he said.

The Movement continued to be concerned at the lack of real progress in the implementation of the Road Map more than two years since its adoption, he said. It took note, however, of the recent agreement brokered by the United States to provide access at the border between Gaza and Egypt. He called for its full implementation and urged the United States to sustain the momentum of security and full freedom for Gaza. While the Movement welcomed Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, these measures should be seen as part of the Road Map, not outside of it, and should be followed by similar steps in the West Bank. He also urged the Palestinian leadership to seize the opportunity to secure more progress. Clearly, there was an urgent need for the international community, in particular the Quartet, to ensure the Road Map's early and full implementation. Renewed efforts to salvage the Road Map must be further strengthened to ensure its early and full implementation. Concrete steps were important to give the Palestinian people hope for the future, lest they succumb to despair.

The continued construction of the separation wall had only contributed to further exacerbating the peace process, destroying the very foundations of political dialogue between the two sides, he said. The international community could not deny that any further deterioration of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory would be detrimental to the cause of peace in the whole region. The Israeli Government could not continue to ignore agreements arrived at by the two sides and its internationally recognized mediators. Israel must abandon terror tactics in favour of constructive dialogue and engagement with the Palestinians. Clearly, the international community must do more to manifest its support for a just resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The international community had a collective role to play in finding a solution to the Palestinian question. The United Nations must be seized with the question of Palestine until it was resolved in its entirety.

ABDULLAH M. ALSAIDI ( Yemen ), on behalf of Abu Bakr Al Qirabi, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Yemen and Chairman of the Thirty-second Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, said that today's meeting was taking place against an encouraging backdrop, namely the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip. That was one of the fruits of the struggle of the Palestinian people and the international community's support for that struggle. Despite the fact that Israel evacuated its settlements in the Gaza Strip, it continued to "tighten its grip" there, by controlling the seaports and airspace.

It was also expanding its settlements in the West Bank, with a view to absorbing the settlers who had left the settlements in the Gaza Strip. That action was also aimed at imposing a political "fait accompli", which would complicate the final status negotiations.

He said he was gravely concerned at the actions taken by Israel in East Jerusalem, leading to the Holy City's isolation from the rest of the Palestinian Territories. Surrounding the Holy City with settlements would lead to a dismemberment of the West Bank, thereby rendering the dream of a viable Palestinian State "nothing but a mirage", unless the international community compelled Israel to comply with international law, the relevant United Nations resolutions and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. He was equally gravely concerned at the "schemes hatched by the Israeli extremists" to encroach upon Islamic holy sites. That would not serve the peace or stability of the parties concerned.

The Security Council and the General Assembly, as well as the international community as a whole, should fulfil their role in supporting the Palestinian National Authority and enabling it to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed by Israel, he said. Israel should also end the blockage of Palestinian Territories and end construction of the expansionist wall, in accordance with the advisory opinion. He reiterated the vital importance of implementing Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) in full, as those provided for Israeli withdrawal from the Arab territories occupied in 1967. Also of vital importance was respect for subsequent agreements and initiatives, including the Arab Initiative and the Road Map, both of which provided for the establishment of a Palestinian State.

AMINU BASHIR WALI (Nigeria), delivering a message on behalf of Olusegun Obasango, President of Nigeria and current Chairman of the African Union, said Africa had exhibited, since 1977, its unwavering support for the Palestinian cause, because of its conviction that the Palestinian people, like all peoples, deserved to be accorded the internationally recognized right to freedom in dignity. Africa considered the present plight of the Palestinian people not only a reminder of failed opportunities, but also as a challenge for Member States to translate that vision into reality. Significant milestones, while a cause for satisfaction, should not make the international community complacent. The international community should not let slip the propitious opportunity to advance the cause of peace, development and security in the region. Peace could only be achieved through accommodation and mutual recognition.

The Palestinian issue could not be resolved by military or violent means, he said. The Union, therefore, welcomed recent efforts to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and commended the restoration of trust and confidence between the two leaderships. Indeed, Africa considered the understanding elaborated in the Sharm el Sheik document as a major milestone in efforts to address the plight of the Palestinian people, as well as the Road Map's full implementation. In the same vein, the Union considered the recent removal of Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank, and opening of the Rafah border crossing as helpful signs for peace. Those specific steps should serve to galvanize the action of the parties, in particular, and the international community, in general, towards a definitive solution that would bring peace to the region as a whole.

Aware of the Security Council's primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, the Union reiterated its support for the implementation of its resolutions and for the Quartet's Road Map. He also reaffirmed the Union's support for self-determination for the Palestinian people. The actualization of the principle of two States living side by side within secure and defined borders should strengthen peace and security in the region. Next year's commemoration should be the celebration of the achievement of Palestinian nationhood.

YAHYA A. MAHMASSANI, Permanent Observer for the League of Arab States, on behalf of the League's Secretary-General, Amre Moussa, urged the Palestinian Rights Committee and all other United Nations bodies concerned with Palestinian issues, to press ahead until Palestinians regained their undiminished and full exercise of their rights, despite pressure by the Israeli Government to terminate that work at the United Nations. The International Day was taking place in the wake of the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and certain settlements in the northern West Bank. The withdrawal had been a positive step, and raised hopes that it would launch a new era for political engagement, leading to Israeli withdrawal from all Occupied Territories.

Nevertheless, he said, events on the ground, including the expansion of Israeli settlements and the construction of the separation wall, as well as the "Judaization" of Jerusalem, had not been very encouraging. Also, Israeli control over the air space and the territorial waters of the Gaza Strip, as well as assassinations and assaults against peaceful civilians by the Israeli Air Force, had contributed to receding hopes. Even Special Envoy Wolfensohn had noted that Israel still acted as if it had not withdrawn from the Gaza Strip. A solution to the problems of the crossing points had only been reached after tireless efforts and negotiations by Egypt and other Arab States, and after the direct involvement of the United States and European Union.

Implementation of the obligations stipulated in the Sharm el Sheikh understanding could only be implemented in a progressive and favourable environment, he said. That would also lead to full implementation of all requirements under the Road Map. After nearly a full year, however, Israel had not fulfilled all the steps according to the timetable adopted at the time those understandings were reached. Achieving the desired results on a clear and solid foundation required supervision and the establishment of oversight mechanisms. The Palestinian people had suffered from Israeli practices in violation of the most basic human rights, international humanitarian law and the obligations of an occupying Power. Aggression against Palestinian villages and towns, extrajudicial killings and collective punishments, extended seizures and closures had further aggravated the situation, despite the fact that the Palestinian National Authority had made every effort at reform.

He noted that the League, at its summit in Cairo in 1996, considered a just peace to be a strategic option. The League had also adopted the Arab Peace Initiative at the Beirut Summit in 2002, in which Arab States had declared their readiness to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, if Israel completely withdrew from Palestinian and Arab Territories occupied in 1967, if an independent Palestinian state was established with East Jerusalem as its capital, and if a just solution to the Palestinian refugees was reached. Only then would Arab States be ready to establish normal relations with Israel.

CHRIS DOYLE, member of the International Coordinating Network on Palestine and Director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding, noted that, throughout the world, global civil society had expressed massive interest and concern over the Middle East peace process, or more accurately the lack of it. There must be more of a focus on peace, rather than merely on process. Peace was a vital requirement not just for Israelis and Palestinians but for the entire region. The State of Palestine must not be long in coming. There was a fear, however, that it would be bogged down in temporary, interim phases, or a State with provisional borders. A Palestinian State was essential. Palestinians needed a sovereign, viable State, based on 1967 borders, a mere 22 per cent of what was once their country. That required the complete end of the 38-year-old occupation. Palestinians were now in control inside the Gaza Strip. That was not just a requirement for Gaza, but also for East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The Israeli Government had now demonstrated that settlements, even those in the West Bank, could be evacuated. There was no excuse to stop now. It must never be Gaza first and last. The building of the wall inside the West Bank continued, in clear and open defiance of the United Nations and the international community. Regrettably, the Israeli Government stood once again in defiance of the international community, and there was a clear duty to take action to reverse that destructive process. Israeli activities in Jerusalem were also a major area of concern. The two-State solution was being imprisoned in a grave, not only of concrete and barbed wire, but also of hatred, anger and mistrust.

The other ingredient to full and lasting peace was human rights, he said. Torture, house demolitions and assassinations only served to exacerbate the situation. Economic regeneration was vital, which was why the progress of the Gaza-Egypt border was welcome. But, the situation remained severe. While the international community needed to act, political action, more than donor funds, would benefit the people most. Endorsing the Secretary-General's recent call for donors to support the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), he said the Agency now had the onerous task of catering for the needs of some 4.2 million Palestinian refugees.

Non-governmental organizations looked to the United Nations as the upholder of international law, he said. Right now, however, Israel must stop defying the institution – “waving its fist at the United Nations, in effect boasting to the world that it can get away with anything and that it has a Teflon status”. That era must come to an end. No State should be above international law. Standing up for the rule of law was not being anti-Israel but pro-peace. “We want peace in Palestine, not Palestine in pieces”, he concluded.

NASSER AL-KIDWA, Palestinian Authority Minister for Foreign Affairs, briefly took the floor to thank the Committee for its unwavering support to the just cause of the Palestinian people. He invited them to continue to provide that backing. He hoped that when the Committee met next year, it would be closer to the achievement of a Palestinian State with its capital Al Quds.

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