



Press Release

Department of Public Information · News Coverage Service · New York

GA/9812
7 November 2000

Fifty-fifth General Assembly
Plenary
54th Meeting (PM)

ASSEMBLY ADOPTS TEXTS ON 'BETHLEHEM 2000' AND UNITED NATIONS COOPERATION WITH CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY

Acting without a vote this afternoon, the General Assembly adopted resolutions on "Bethlehem 2000" and on cooperation between the United Nations and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

By terms of the text on "Bethlehem 2000", a multifaceted commemorative event scheduled to last from Christmas 1999 to Easter 2001, the Assembly expressed its support for the project and requested the Secretary-General to continue to mobilize the pertinent organizations and agencies of the United Nations system to increase their efforts to ensure its successful completion.

During the discussion of the resolution, many speakers stressed the need to restore peace in the region. The Permanent Observer for Palestine said the Palestinian people had enthusiastically taken part in events related to Bethlehem 2000, and felt blessed by having the birthplace of Jesus Christ in their land. Perhaps, he said, that was a sign that the suffering in the region would end, and that the celebrations could go on. He called for all to pray together so that the current suspension of celebrations would not continue for long and that peace would be restored.

Israel's representative said he was confident that despite the current crisis in the Holy Land, the spirit of cooperation between peoples and religions would, in the end, prevail. "Let us endeavour to do our utmost to protect the uplifting spirit of Bethlehem 2000 and not permit this moment to be tarnished by political accusations and spiteful and accusatory language", he said. The events were a chance to bring people together in a spirit of peace and reconciliation.

/...

Assembly Work Programme

The General Assembly met this afternoon to take up its agenda items on cooperation between the United Nations and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and on "Bethlehem 2000".

/...

Bethlehem 2000

At its last session, the Assembly adopted a resolution (document A/54/22) expressing support for the "Bethlehem 2000" project, a multifaceted commemorative event scheduled to last from Christmas 1999 to Easter 2001. The resolution called for accelerated assistance and engagement by the international community, including the private sector, to ensure the project's success.

Before the Assembly today was a draft resolution on Bethlehem 2000 (document A/55/L.3), sponsored by Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Comoros, Costa Rica, Cuba, Cyprus, Egypt, Madagascar, Malaysia, Malta, Namibia, Senegal, United Arab Emirates and Palestine.

By its terms, the Assembly would welcome the "global and historic celebration in Bethlehem and the onset of the third millennium as a symbol of the shared hope for peace among all peoples of the world". Recalling that "the Palestinian city of Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus Christ and one of the most historic and significant sites on earth", the Assembly would express support for efforts of the Palestinian Authority on the Bethlehem 2000 project, and ask the Secretary-General to continue to mobilize pertinent United Nations agencies in their efforts to ensure a successful conclusion to the project.

Action on Draft Resolution

/...

The Assembly then began its consideration of Bethlehem 2000.

IBRA DEGUENE KA (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee for the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, introduced the draft resolution on Bethlehem 2000 (document A/55/L.3). He said discussion of the item should have taken place in a more relaxed atmosphere. From Christmas 1999 until the recent regrettable events, thousands of people from all over the world had converged on the Palestinian city of Bethlehem to celebrate, in joy and peace, the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, and to welcome the dawn of the third millennium. They had been particularly sensitive to the eternal message emanating from that city of tolerance, harmony, reconciliation and peace.

He recalled that in 1997 the Palestinian Authority had launched the Bethlehem 2000 Project, which intended to allow for restoration of numerous religious and historical sites and reconstruction of the town's infrastructure for the millennium celebration. To help the Palestinian people in this endeavour, the Committee had taken on the job of promoting the Project and raising awareness of it internationally.

The Assembly, he said, had adopted resolutions 53/27 and 54/22, thereby showing its support. The Committee had systematically given a special place to the Project in its programme of work, such as a United Nations seminar on the perspectives and development of the Palestinian economy and the peace process in the Middle East held in Cairo in June, under the auspices of the Committee. That seminar had stressed the need to continue the drive to raise public awareness for the Project.

The Committee had also held meetings with the European Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, non-governmental organizations, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Non-Aligned Movement, where the goals of the Project had been promoted. The section for Palestinian Rights of the Secretariat posted information on the Project on the Internet. Moreover, the Department of Public Information (DPI) had opened a special Web site, "Bethlehem 2000". He recalled the historic voyage by Pope Paul II to the Holy Land, who had preached a message of peace in Bethlehem.

The initiative to raise the profile of the project had succeeded in bringing in substantial contributions. There was still much to be done over the next few years, not only in Bethlehem but also in other West Bank and Gaza Strip towns. The project was a kind of pilot for those other towns and villages. A lot of international support and aid would be necessary to improve the economic and social position of the Palestinian people and establish a viable Palestinian economy. He, therefore, appealed for continuing support for the Project and other Palestinian towns and villages, as well. Once the situation was normal again, people from all over the world would continue to flock to Bethlehem. They would do so in a climate of peace and reconciliation of all religions.

He then announced that Andorra, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Chile, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Kuwait, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Netherlands, Norway, Oman, Panama, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Spain, Sweden, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Togo, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Kingdom and Venezuela had become co-sponsors of the resolution.

M. NASSER AL-KIDWA, Permanent Observer for Palestine, said the residents of Bethlehem and other villages were being subjected to a new bloody campaign of violence that had claimed more than 150 martyrs and injured 3,000 people over 40 days. That was not the climate he had hoped for to renew the celebration in the General Assembly of Bethlehem 2000. In fact, that was why the item had been postponed. Regrettably, despite the postponement, the situation remained the same. The Palestinian side had made tireless efforts to mark the transition from the second millennium to the third millennium in a spirit of peace.

The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People had included the current item in addition to other important programmes that highlighted the importance of the topic. There had been important events in Bethlehem over the last year, including the participation of several presidents in the celebration of Christmas in Bethlehem, and a visit by Pope John Paul II. Celebrations were scheduled to continue through Easter 2001.

The Palestinian people had enthusiastically taken part in this universally important time, feeling blessed by having the birthplace of Jesus Christ in their land, he said. Perhaps that was a sign that the suffering would end, and that the celebrations could go on, with Jerusalem as a capital. Given the situation at the moment, it was no time to celebrate, yet it highly important for the General Assembly to adopt the resolution.

He added that he felt confident that one day Palestine would join other nations as Palestine the State. He called for all to pray together so that the current suspension of celebrations would not continue for long and that peace would be restored.

RAFAEL DAUSA CESPEDES(Cuba) said that this meeting was taking place at a time when the peace process had been shattered by the brutal aggression unleashed by Israel. Bethlehem 2000 had developed into a deep-seated process of thinking and searching for peace and hope. The wave of violence unleashed by the Israeli forces had nevertheless not spared Bethlehem. Bethlehem, along with other Palestinian cities, had suffered serious damage.

The ongoing nature of Bethlehem 2000 and the major results achieved to date justified the pride that his delegation felt, but the international community should continue to provide support, he said. The peace process in the Middle East was going through one of its most complex phases. The world had seen how the Israeli forces were opposed to a peaceful end to the conflict in the Middle East. Weeks of aggression had left more than 150 Palestinians dead. He condemned those barbaric acts and called in the international community to speak out forcefully them. It was an honour for his delegation to co-sponsor the draft resolution, he said. The international community must not allow 2000 years of religion and culture to be opposed by those who were against a just and peaceful solution to the Middle East's problems.

RAVAN FARHADI (Afghanistan) said the celebration of Jesus Christ's birth would continue until Easter of 2001. The main objectives of the resolution had been achieved. The Abrahamic religions required respect for Jesus Christ. Pope John Paul II had participated as had representatives of the Orthodox and Protestant faith. He paid tribute to the international contributions, including assistance provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and all the States and religious organizations. He thanked Jordan and Palestine for their service and good offices. He also commended the help of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

He said Muslims believed that Jesus Christ was a messenger of God. The Koran mentioned him as such, and also mentioned the Virgin Mary. A throng of eminent Muslims had participated in the celebrations as in a genuine gesture to consolidate peace and reconciliation. Those who harboured evil and had recourse to violence sought to provoke. Their visit to blessed places only served the continuation of hostility. He called on all to achieve the lofty goals of Bethlehem 2000, and hoped that the draft resolutions would be adopted by consensus.

JEAN-DAVID LEVITTE (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union and associated States, said the discussion of the draft resolution submitted by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People was taking place in tragic circumstances. He reiterated the Union's deep concern in the face of the very heavy toll of violence in the Palestinian territories, as well as in Israel.

The Union welcomed the threefold message that the resolution carried -- consensus of the United Nations; unity of the region in the celebration of the onset of the third millennium in Bethlehem, without any obstacle or restriction; and aid for economic development of the Palestinian territories. It fully supported the Bethlehem 2000 project promoted by the Palestinian Authority, the municipality of Bethlehem, and UNESCO. The project was aimed at restoring historical, archaeological and religious sites of unique significance. It was also directed at improving tourism facilities, so that Bethlehem would become a major destination beyond the celebration period of the millennium.

The Union had been strongly involved in the preparation of the Bethlehem 2000 project and had, moreover, financed particular projects like the modernization of the Beit Jala Hospital and the renovation of Manger Square in the Old Town. The European Union was pleased to welcome the spectacular success of the project, which had deeply transformed the city towards increased tourism development, thanks to the commitment of the Palestinian Authority and to the support of the international community. He hoped that the drama striking the Palestinian territories would exert no negative influence on the development of the site. He stressed the need for free access for all tourists, believers or residents wishing to travel to Bethlehem, whatever their nationality or religion.

CONSTANTINE MOUSHOUTAS (Cyprus) said that Bethlehem, Palestine, was geographically very close to Cyprus and even closer spiritually. The dignified celebrations of the birth of Jesus, the Christmas Market in the City of Nativity, the Festivals, concerts and street parades had been attended by thousands of people from many countries and by a number of heads of State and government. It was Cyprus' ardent wish that the spirituality which had prevailed only a few weeks ago would guide the international community's endeavours to achieve peace and to solve problems during those critical times.

Cyprus welcomed the peace process and the progress achieved in the Middle East, and deeply regretted the recent bloodshed and loss of life, he said. Cyprus was pleased to have heard that the peace process might start again and hoped that it would produce positive results. To that end, no efforts should be spared in the direction of a just and viable solution, based on United Nations resolutions. Cyprus was directly affected by any development in the region, whether it was conflict or peace. His country lived with the vision of a free and peaceful island, without occupation troops and barbed wires. He hoped that a success in the region would have a beneficial effect on Cyprus too.

The recent tragic events must not be allowed to push the peace process off track, he continued. Cyprus agreed with the Security Council call on the parties for the end to the violence and for the immediate resumption of negotiations within the Middle East peace process. In the light of the sad developments, special care must be taken for the security of the thousands of expected tourists and visitors in Bethlehem. Their free and safe movement and unhindered access to the holy places of the city must continue, and the security and safety of the faithful of all religions must be of primary concern.

He reiterated his country's support for Bethlehem 2000 and commended the Palestinian authorities, the UNDP, UNESCO and other United Nations organizations, as well as the donor countries, for doing what needed to be done for the final success of that global undertaking.

MICHEL KAFANDO (Burkina Faso) said that in the sombre scene of the Middle East, where for more than a month riots had been breaking out, Bethlehem 2000 appeared to be a beacon of hope. Conceived as a historic and cultural manifestation to inaugurate the new millennium and, in the same vein, celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Christ, the event should transcend its symbolism and promote dialogue, reconciliation and brotherhood.

His country congratulated Yasser Arafat, who had shown once again his love of tolerance, he said. He equally saluted the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and its Chairman, thanks to whom this question had been regularly on the Assembly's agenda since 1988.

That initiative would hardly have been viable had it not been supported, in particular on a financial and logistic scale, by countries and organizations like the European Union, the UNDP, World Bank, UNESCO, and several non-governmental organizations. For his country, the exceptional character of Bethlehem 2000 resided above all in its transcendent vision. It represented, in fact, a symbiosis of mysticism and realism, of belief and rationality -- all virtues which could foster peace in the Middle East.

ABDULLA AL-SULAITI (Qatar) said this was a historic moment: at the outset of the third millennium in Bethlehem, Yasser Arafat and others had released a number of white doves to symbolize the hope of the world for peace. At that time, the international community was hopeful that peace had arrived. But now it seemed as if the Bethlehem 2000 project was threatened, as well as peace in the entire region.

Qatar would have liked to see this discussion take place within the framework of real peace. The escalating violence in the region, particularly that by the Israeli forces, ran counter to all United Nations resolutions, and risked creating a backlash on the part of the Palestinian people. He said the Israeli Government should meet its commitments. Nations of the world must take responsibility and act on a multidisciplinary approach, and all parties in the region must play a major role. He said the international community should also contribute to an international

peacekeeping force to ensure that the peace process could be rescued, and Israel should accept having an investigating fact-finding team on site. Bethlehem 2000, he said, was a project that could ensure the protection of holy sites and act as a beacon of hope. All Members of the United Nations should provide assistance to this project.

ARNE B. HONNINGSTAD (Norway) said the year 2000 had not turned out as all had hoped in the Middle East. The violence and massive destruction throughout the area -- also in Bethlehem -- that had been witnessed in the last weeks had shocked the whole world. He expressed his heartfelt condolences and sympathy for the victims of the latest violence and their families.

He said the large number of casualties had appalled Norway. The great efforts made by the Palestinians on the Bethlehem 2000 Project had had many positive results. The international participation was most impressive. At the outset, the common goal for the Bethlehem 2000 Project was to provide a better future for Bethlehem and the whole Palestinian territory within the context of nation-building and peace-building for the third millennium. Norway deeply regretted that the population of Bethlehem and the surrounding areas had been unable to benefit from those results for as long as had been hoped.

He said the Palestinians had a peace process, but they had no feeling that peace was really built. The best way to end the violence, before it spread even further, was to move as quickly as possible towards a final agreement. That would, however, required willingness to compromise.

Norway was pleased to participate in the preparations for the Bethlehem 2000 celebrations, as well as in the celebrations themselves. Since announcing its commitment, Norway had followed the preparations with great interest and was proud to have been able to support the restoration of the city. Norway had welcomed the call for substantial international assistance to the project, and had viewed Bethlehem 2000 as an important opportunity to broaden the commitment of donor nations to reconciliation and peace in the Middle East.

REDA BEBARS (Egypt) said it had not occurred to anyone, during the celebrations in Bethlehem, that some time later that village and some villages adjacent to it would be subjected to the kind of acts of aggression which had been raging unabated for five weeks.

Until the beginning of the violence, the developments over the last year had been positive. The Palestinian Authority had done all it could to facilitate the world commemoration of this historic occasion. The commemorations were meant to last until Easter next year. However, it seemed that Israel had an aim to subject the Palestinian people to a campaign of military pressure, to remind them of the continuous suffocating Israeli occupation.

JOSÉ ANTONIO LINATI-BOSCH, Observer for the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, expressed concern about the recent violence in the Middle East. The conflict had had an impact on the security of his organization's personnel providing humanitarian relief in the area. While there was a consensus that a satisfactory result for all those involved must be reached, he was also conscious that it would not be easy to arrive at such a happy ending.

He said the United Nations must play an explicit role in making Bethlehem 2000 a milestone of hope, peace, coexistence and prosperity. The final solution to the Palestinian problem would include financial, legal and technical measures "if we are to obtain, through Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, a universal message for the human family to live in harmony and peace". He stressed that Bethlehem 2000 must become not only a date or a project of goodwill, but also a point of departure for a permanent solution to a long and violent conflict.

YEHUDA LANCERY (Israel) said this year Israel had welcomed, and continued to welcome, thousands of Christian pilgrims from across the globe to celebrate 2000 years since the birth of Jesus. Israel was proud to take part in that momentous occasion and had invested close to \$1 billion to make the event as fulfilling as possible for the Christian pilgrims. Israel and the Palestinians had implemented joint plans to improve and expand the main thoroughfare leading from Bethlehem to Jerusalem and the crossing facility between Jerusalem and the Palestinian Authority-administered area of Bethlehem. Those efforts to enhance the pilgrimage experience followed a proud Israeli tradition of promoting religious freedom.

He said the Christian community had enjoyed unlimited rights of religious activity, fulfilment and control in the holy sites of Jerusalem and Nazareth and others throughout the country. That tradition had helped make the celebration of the birth of Jesus a more meaningful experience for all those who participated. That had been highlighted by the recent visit of Pope John Paul II. In recalling the original purpose of the discussion on the subject of Bethlehem 2000, he said it was portrayed as an opportunity to celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, to upgrade basic social services and to articulate a global vision of hope and peace for all peoples.

He joined with his Palestinian colleague who had referred to the need to restore peace to the land of peace. He was confident that despite the current crisis in the Holy Land, the spirit of cooperation between peoples and religions, reflected in the joint plans for the year 2000, would, in the end, prevail.

"It is our hope that we can join together at this auspicious moment in history to fulfil the noble goals of the Bethlehem 2000 celebration, and of the millennium festivities as a whole", he said. "Let us endeavour to do our utmost to protect the uplifting spirit of Bethlehem 2000 and not permit this moment to be tarnished by political accusations and spiteful and accusatory language." The events were a chance to bring people together in a spirit of peace and reconciliation. "Before us stands an opportunity which comes along once in a thousand years", he said. His country would, therefore, join the consensus on the draft resolution, despite its reservations.

RENATO R. MARTINO, Permanent Observer for the Holy See, said that Bethlehem was a city of great tradition and memory, of sorrow and joy. Most of all, Bethlehem was a city that reminded the international community of peace. It was also the city of Rachel, of David, and of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The Holy See hoped for progress in the peace process in the Middle East, for the guarantee of freedom of movement and unhindered access to the holy places in Bethlehem and throughout the region for the faith of all religions and all nations, and that the settlement of disputes might truly symbolize an atmosphere of peace and reconciliation for all peoples.

He observed that Pope John Paul II had spoken about the grievous tensions of the Middle East, calling on all the parties involved in the peace process not to spare any efforts for the re-establishment of the climate of dialogue that had existed up until a few weeks ago. Mutual trust, rejection of arms, and respect for international law were the only means capable of reviving the peace process.

2000. The Assembly was then informed that Burkina Faso, Grenada and Guinea had joined as co-sponsors of the draft resolution on Bethlehem

Without a vote, the Assembly then adopted the text.

* * * * *

For information media - not an official record