



Press Release

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PALESTINIAN ELECTION SUCCESS AUSPICIOUS, BUT SITUATION REMAINS FRAGILE, SAYS

SECRETARY-GENERAL, AS PALESTINIAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE OPENS 2005 SESSION

The year had begun auspiciously with the success of the Palestinian presidential election, but the situation still remained fragile, the Secretary-General of the United Nations said this morning at the opening of 2005 session of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian people. Now it was important to encourage the parties to deepen their political dialogue and match their positive words with action on the ground.

The Palestinian people had voted in large numbers for a candidate opposed to violence and committed to implementation of the Road Map, Kofi Annan said. The new attitude of cooperation between the parties had already borne fruit. Security coordination had been restored; the two sides were now in almost daily contact; and tomorrow, President Abbas and Prime Minister Sharon would meet in Sharm El Sheikh, together with Egyptian President Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah.

Mr. Annan urged all Member States to help the parties meet their commitments and strengthen their cooperation, so that the opportunity for progress towards peace now at hand was firmly grasped. The United Nations would continue to work with its partners in the Quartet for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, based on Security Council resolutions, and within the framework of the Road Map.

As the Committee took up the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, the representative of the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine, Somaia S. Barghouti, listed the first municipal elections in 20 years and preparations for the Palestinian Legislative Council elections as among the latest achievements on the ground. Despite positive developments, however, the Israeli military campaign had continued, leading to the death of more than 60 Palestinians during the first month of the year. Moreover, continued imposition of closures and roadblocks had seriously impacted the economic situation in the Palestinian territory.

Several speakers noted that President Abbas had confirmed his readiness to restart final status negotiations with Israel and committed himself to restructuring Palestinian security forces, strengthening Palestinian institutions and carrying forward democratic reform. Among the developments on the Israeli side, they looked forward to the implementation of Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan, in coordination with the Palestinian leadership, as an important step leading to the implementation of the Road Map.

Ms. Barghouti said that, in order to achieve that objective, the international community must compel Israel to comply with international law, including a recent ruling by the International Court of Justice on the construction of the separation wall, and move forward with proposal for a two-State solution. Israel should cease building the wall and make reparations for all damages caused by its construction.

Also this morning, the Committee adopted its programme of work for the session and the provisional programme of work for the international meeting on 8 and 9 March at the United Nations Office in Geneva, which would focus on the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

Introducing the Committee's programme of work, its re-elected Chairman, Paul Badji (Senegal), said that in 2005 the Committee would pay special attention to assessing the situation on the ground and conditions conducive to peace negotiations, including the complete cessation of all violent acts. It would also highlight the specific responsibility of the occupying Power to end its illegal policies and practices, and support active international involvement aimed at encouraging both parties to overcome the current impasse in the peace process. Further, it would focus on Palestinian economic recovery and the need to provide international assistance to the Palestinian people.

Also this morning, the Committee elected Ravan Farhadi (Afghanistan) and Orlando Requeijo Gual (Cuba) as its Vice-Chairmen. Victor Camilleri (Malta) was elected as the Committee's Rapporteur. The candidates were nominated by the representative of Indonesia, who also outlined the situation in the Middle East and emphasized the importance of the Committee's leadership in that respect. The representative of Mali supported that proposal. Statements were also made by the representative of Syria and the Chairman in his capacity as the representative of Senegal.

The representative of Lebanon expressed his gratitude to the Committee for its condolences on the demise of the Permanent Representative of his country.

Statement by Secretary-General

KOFI ANNAN, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said that the year ahead was a very important one for the cause of peace in the Middle East. The year had begun auspiciously with the successful conduct of the Palestinian presidential election. Palestinians could be proud of the peaceful and competitive atmosphere, which had marked the election campaign. The United Nations was glad to have been able to provide assistance to the electoral

authorities, as it would for the upcoming Palestinian Legislative Council elections.

The Palestinian people had voted in large numbers for a candidate opposed to violence and committed to implementation of the Road Map, he continued. He applauded them for doing so and congratulated the new President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, on the significant moves he had made in his first weeks in office. He was pleased that Prime Minister Sharon had also taken important steps. The new attitude of cooperation between the parties had already borne fruit. Security coordination had been restored. The two sides were now in almost daily contact. And tomorrow, President Abbas and Prime Minister Sharon would meet in Sharm El Sheikh, together with Egyptian President Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdullah. That was a welcome initiative.

Yet the situation remained fragile, he said. The parties must be encouraged to deepen their political dialogue and to match their positive words with action on the ground. In his inaugural address, President Abbas had confirmed his readiness to start final status negotiations with Israel. He had also committed himself to restructuring Palestinian security forces, strengthening Palestinian institutions and carrying forward democratic reform. The Secretary-General said he was sure President Abbas would act swiftly on those commitments. On the Israeli side, he looked forward to the implementation of Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan, in coordination with the Palestinian leadership, as an important step leading to the implementation of the Road Map.

He urged all Member States to help the parties meet their commitments and strengthen their cooperation, so that the opportunity for progress towards peace now at hand was firmly grasped. The United Nations would continue to work with its partners in the Quartet for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, based on Security Council resolutions, and within the framework of the Road Map. Meanwhile, the economic plight of the Palestinians demanded attention and action. United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), brought help and opportunity to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Those efforts needed the strong and sustained support of donors and the international community.

In conclusion, he thanked the Committee for its contribution to the goal of achieving peace in the Middle East and wished it success in carrying out its mandate.

Statements

PAUL BADJI (*Senegal*), speaking in his national capacity, noted that a year of intense activity had ended with the death of Yasser Arafat, and the Committee was beginning anew to fulfil its mandate. It was off to a promising start after the recent successful elections in Palestine, which showed evidence of the Palestinian Authority's determination to resume the peace process in a spirit of cohesion and unity. In that respect, the Committee would continue to support efforts aimed at assisting the Palestinian people regarding the enjoyment of their inalienable rights.

He stressed that both parties to the peace process must refrain from any action that would disrupt the region's current, delicate situation or attack the new-found confidence of the Palestinian Authority. They must further the aims of the Road Map in resuming the peace process and working towards the two-State solution. No unilateral action outside of that framework could contribute to a lasting settlement.

SOMAIA S. BARGHOUTI, Observer for Palestine, expressed full support for the Committee's proposed programme of work, which she characterized as an objective and realistic one. The Committee played an important role in the efforts of the United Nations to promote peace and security in the Middle East. As confirmed by the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the United Nations had a permanent responsibility in the question of Palestine until it was resolved in full compliance with the principles of international law and until the rights of the Palestinian people were achieved.

While noting some positive developments, she said that the overall situation remained very critical. The dangers of continuing occupation remained very real. As emphasized in the ICJ's advisory opinion, there was an urgent necessity for the United Nations to redouble its efforts to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, establishing a just and lasting peace in the region. It was important to continue negotiations to reach a solution in which two States lived side by side in peace. She also expressed her appreciation to the Secretary-General, whose presence at today's meeting reaffirmed the importance he attached to the work of the Committee and the question of Palestine in general.

Mr. BADJI, speaking in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, introduced the Committee's draft programme of work for 2005. He said the Committee would continue to support the Road Map and the Quartet in pursuing a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine. Expressing hope that the two parties would immediately resume negotiations and fully implement the Road Map to achieve the two-State solution, he said the Committee would continue to support all efforts towards that end, mobilizing all sectors of the world community in assisting the Palestinian people in the attainment their inalienable rights.

He expressed concern that illegal construction of the wall in the occupied Palestinian territory had continued, and stressed that the international community must ensure that the occupying Power abide by the provisions of a recent ruling by the International Court of Justice. Israel should immediately cease constructing the wall, dismantle the structure situated therein, repeal or render ineffective all legislative and regulatory acts, and make reparation for all damage caused by construction of the wall. He also emphasized the importance of ceasing and reversing all settlement activities in creating conditions conducive to resuming the political process.

The Committee would pay special attention to assessing the situation on the ground and conditions conducive to peace negotiations, including the complete cessation of all violent acts, he said. It would also highlight the specific responsibility of the occupying Power to end its illegal policies and practices, and support active international involvement aimed at encouraging both parties to overcome the current impasse in the peace process. Further, it would focus on Palestinian economic recovery and the need to provide international assistance to the Palestinian people.

He outlined other areas of the work programme, including activities of the Department of Public Information, the Committee and the Division for Palestinian Rights; international meetings and conferences; the Committee's cooperation with civil society; the United Nations Information System and the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL); the publications programme; and the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, to take place on 29 November 2005.

Commenting on the proposed programme of work, CHEICK SIDI DIARRA (*Mali*) said that, in general, he was pleased with the rich programme planned for 2005. He was also pleased to see the improvements introduced in that document. He particularly stressed the need to take into account the comments made during the review of the Committee's report for the previous session and a related draft resolution presented to the General Assembly. While some of that criticism was of ideological nature, other aspects – which had led to defection of certain countries that usually supported the draft – were constructive.

He added that, despite the fact that the Committee's documents were now available on the Web site, they should also be made available to Member

States before the organizational meeting.

The CHAIRMAN said that he was not surprised that criticism had been addressed to the Committee, since it was often of an ideological nature. Such criticism had been heard year after year. At its very birth, the Committee had been rejected by many. That was normal, as it dealt with "a highly politicized issue".

The Committee had made serious progress since its establishment in 1975, he continued. Many improvements had been introduced to its work, even in the way it presented the situation on the ground. The Committee would continue to hear criticism, but that should not prevent it from implementing its mandate. Many of the Committee's ideas had been rejected in the past, but had gained ground in the long run. At the same time, he agreed that it was important for the Committee to listen to Member States' opinions.

Year after year, the Committee looked at the General Assembly debate to see if there was criticism of its work. If criticism was valid, improvements were introduced. Despite the defection of some sponsors, the resolution taken up by the General Assembly had gained new supporters. As for the defections, one of the Member States believed it had to suspend its membership in the Committee. Yet, that country was a member of the European Union, and the position of that organization on Palestine was well known.

Mr. DIARRA (Mali) said that when the General Assembly had reviewed the draft on the Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, some constructive criticism had been presented by Canada. Those comments should be taken into account. When taking the floor, he had not been aware of the defection of a member of the Committee, but Canada's comments in the Assembly should help the Committee improve the substance of its work.

The CHAIRMAN said that the position mentioned in the debate had been taken by the new Government of Canada. Taking note of all the valid comments on its work, the Committee would also carry out its own self-examination.

The Committee then approved its work programme for the session.

It also approved a provisional programme of work for the international meeting on 8 and 9 March at the United Nations Office in Geneva, which would focus on the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. In that connection, the CHAIRMAN said that preparations for the conference were going well, and invitations had been sent out. He encouraged all Member States to participate in that event.

Ms. BARGHOUTI, Observer for Palestine, noted that the Palestinian Authority had recently held municipal elections for the first time in 20 years, as well as presidential elections, despite continuing difficulties on the ground. Preparations were also under way for Palestinian Legislative Council elections, which were scheduled for July 2005. All of those events served to enhance the Authority's political discourse and its efforts to develop international institutions.

Concerned that the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority had been frozen for too long, she expressed hope that the upcoming summit between the two parties' leaders would assist in implementing the Road Map. The ongoing Israeli occupation had caused deep feelings of anger and frustration among Palestinians, despite positive Palestinian steps to calm the situation on the ground. Israel had continued with its unlawful pursuits, seizing and destroying Palestinian property in serious violation of international law, and further undermining a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict.

The Palestinian Authority had repeatedly drawn international attention to Israel's unlawful separation wall, she said, which had been constructed in flagrant violation of international law, as well as a recent ruling by the International Court of Justice. Israel should cease building the wall and make reparations for all damages caused by its construction. The international community must compel to comply with international law, and move forward with its prospect for a two-State solution.

She added that the Israeli military campaign had continued, with its forces killing and wounding countless Palestinian civilians. During the first month of the year, more than 60 Palestinians had died, including women and children. The country was even seriously considering the destruction of 200 to 300 homes in Gaza so that it could build a trench to widen its so-called buffer zone. Moreover, its continued imposition of closures and roadblocks had seriously impacted the economic situation in the Palestinian Territory. The Palestinian Authority had affirmed its readiness to implement its obligations under the Road Map and Israel must do likewise.

FAYSSAL MEKDAD (Syria) congratulated President Abbas on his election and said that Syria followed all the developments in the Middle East with great interest. He noted the continued suffering of the Palestinian people due to the ongoing occupation and repressive practices of Israel. Those practices had been condemned by the General Assembly and the International Court of Justice, which had asked Israel to remove the separation wall. Despite that, that country continued its colonialist practices.

Syria hosted half a million Palestinian refugees and would continue to support that people in the face of present and future challenges. It was important to end the occupation and guarantee the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, finding a solution on the basis of the norms of international law and relevant United Nations resolutions. His delegation would follow the work of the Committee, to which it wished all success in its important endeavours.

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