



UNITED NATIONS

Press Release

Special Committee on Israeli Practices concludes visit to Damascus

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Damascus: -- Committee Members express concern about the human rights situation in the Occupied Syrian Golan, restrictions imposed on family visits, treatment of prisoners from the Golan in Israeli prisons, attempts to alter Syrian Arab identity.

The three-member Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories concludes its annual field visit to the region in Damascus on 5 July. The visit began in Egypt on 23 June and took the Committee also to Jordan, where they listened to witnesses of the human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. During its visit in the Syrian Arab Republic the Special Committee met with the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Dr. Fayssal Mekdad and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as representatives of United Nations agencies in Syria. The Committee visited the city of Quneitra, where it met with the Governor of Quneitra province and six witnesses, to hear about the human rights situation in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

The Committee was informed by all interlocutors of the serious constraints on the right to freedom of movement, in particular the right to visit relatives in Syria and the impact such separation has on affected families. In its meetings, the Committee also received reports of a series of economic measures impacting the human rights of the population living under occupation, such as high tax policies, confiscation of land, restricted access to water resources, destruction of agricultural land and uprooting of trees. Information provided to the Committee indicated several problems regarding education, particularly the replacement of the Arab educational curriculum in Arab Schools under occupation by Israeli curriculums. Access to adequate health services was equally highlighted as a concern to the population of the Occupied Syrian Golan. Witnesses and official interlocutors believed that such policies were specifically intended at altering the Syrian Arab identity of the population under occupation. The human rights of Syrian women in the occupied Golan and the impact of the occupation were emphasized as being of particular concern, including access to adequate health services and restrictions on family visits.

The treatment of prisoners from the Golan in Israeli prisons was highlighted, in particular the health situation of specific individuals and the lack of adequate access to health services to prisoners. Interlocutors highlighted that these prisoners were detained only on account of expressing their views or resisting occupation and that they were being ill-treated and tortured. The Committee also heard complaints about harsh prison conditions as well as obstacles faced by family members trying to visit prisoners. The presence of landmines was also highlighted as a constant threat to the population.

The Special Committee reiterated its view that Israel must abide by its legal obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. The Committee urges that steps be taken to remedy current infringements on human rights in the occupied Syrian Golan in line with international obligations. Witnesses again expressed their hope that the international community would break its silence and act more resolutely to urge Israel to respect international law and its international legal obligations.

During its visit, the Special Committee focused on developments pertaining to human rights since the adoption by the General Assembly of its 39th report in December 2007. The report of the Special Committee's field mission will be submitted to the General Assembly at its 63rd session this year.

The Special Committee was established in December 1968 by General Assembly resolution 2443 (XXII). It is composed of three Member States: Sri Lanka (Chairman), Malaysia and Senegal. Sri Lanka is currently represented by Prasad Kariyawasam, Permanent Representative of that country to the United Nations in New York. Senegal is represented by Babacar Carlos Mbaye, Permanent Representative of that country to the United Nations in Geneva. Malaysia is represented by Zainol Zainuddin, Deputy Permanent Representative of that country to the United Nations in New York. Since its establishment, the Special Committee has repeatedly been denied cooperation by the Government of Israel or access to the occupied territories.