
INTERNATIONAL LABOUR CONFERENCE, 95TH SESSION, 2006

Report of the Director-General

Appendix

THE SITUATION OF WORKERS OF THE OCCUPIED ARAB TERRITORIES

The Report was prepared, as in previous years, following high-level missions to Israel and the occupied Arab territories and to the Syrian Arab Republic. The missions enjoyed once more the full cooperation of the interlocutors, reaffirming the support for the ILO's efforts to contribute to building peace and security in the region through monitoring and assessing economic and social development in our fields of competence. As always, the ILO followed the overall guidance of the United Nations in its activities in the occupied Arab territories.

The cooperation received was particularly welcome this year, as the missions were timed so as to visit the region after democratic elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council on 25 January and to the Israeli Knesset on 28 March 2006. The missions thus witnessed at first hand a situation in which a new Government of the Palestinian Authority had just assumed office and a new Israeli Government was still being formed. There was an expectation among the parties involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that these changes would lead to some redefinitions of the respective positions. Similarly, important actors in the international community reminded both sides of their international obligations and reaffirmed their commitment to the search for ways of averting a deepening of the humanitarian crisis and renewing the peace process. What the missions saw was that the daily life of workers in the occupied Arab territories not only continues to be dramatic but is further complicated by additional political uncertainties. As the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Alvaro de Soto, has highlighted, the major current challenges include finding ways for the United Nations and other international actors to ensure that the interests of peace are served and the needs of the Palestinian people met. This cannot only be through the activities of international agencies, since the services provided by the Palestinian Authority cannot be replaced.⁽¹⁾

The mission's examination of the situation of workers in the occupied Arab territories served to highlight the continuing plight of very large numbers of women and men who are unable to work regularly, productively and in acceptable conditions. Its report is written in factual language but describes a situation that amounts to a daily affront to human dignity and an immense accumulation of frustration directed against the multiple and recurrent obstacles that thwart people in their perfectly normal aspiration to earn a decent living.

The striking feature of the labour market of the occupied Arab territories is the persistent and unpredictable security restrictions on the movement of people and products. This, coupled with a Separation Barrier that deviates from the route of the Green Line and physically blocks movement within the territories as well as between the territories and Israel, disrupts the normal economic activity of Palestinian enterprises and is one of the major causes of the deteriorating conditions faced by workers.

The pullout from Gaza, no doubt an important event, has ended restrictions within the Gaza Strip. The latter's potential for economic and employment recovery is nonetheless hampered by continuing difficulties for Palestinian exporters. For a period in mid-2005, the security regime was eased and employment picked up, but more recently, this has been reversed. Four out of every ten Palestinians in the territories are living in poverty on less than US\$2.10 a day. The absolute figure is up from 600,000 in 1999 to 1,600,000 in 2005. Only one out of every ten women is able to work outside the home, despite the fact that Palestinian women are among the most highly educated in the world. Open unemployment, plus the large number of workers who have become discouraged from actively seeking work because the search is so fruitless, amount to an estimated 40 per cent of the Palestinian labour force. Two out of five of those in work in Gaza and one in five in the West Bank are employees of the Palestinian Authority. Their wages are estimated to support some 900,000 people.

The intricate linkages between economic, social and political development, on the one hand, and peace and security, on the other, have to be at the forefront of our thinking in addressing the pervasive and continuing problems of daily life faced by the people of the occupied Arab territories. This is the underlying premise behind ILO efforts in the region and elsewhere: economic and social security is a precondition of lasting peace. As the United Nations Secretary-General puts it in his report entitled *In larger freedom*: 'We will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights.'⁽²⁾ Translating this vision into peace and into peaceful means of action by all parties is the challenge before us.

An important dimension of the global corpus of international law on human rights is the right of workers and employers to associate freely and form and join organizations of their own choosing. In the current conditions in Palestine, progress towards the realization of this right could play an important role in creating transparent, inclusive and effective channels for relief and representation that lead towards sustainable enterprises, international trade and increased employment. In the ILO's global constituency, many workers, and employers, organizations emerged before an independent State was secured in their country. They not only performed an important role in improving conditions of work and life in often turbulent times, but also contributed to the spreading and deepening of a democratic civic culture in which problems could be resolved on the basis of mutual respect and dialogue. The mission met with both the Palestinian social partners, who share the universal demand of workers, and employers, organizations worldwide for a secure legal underpinning for their status in accordance with ILO standards on freedom of association.

The rights of Palestinian workers and their families constitute one of the essential steps on the path towards social-economic development, security, peace and enhanced freedom in the occupied Arab territories. This is why the Governing Body of the International Labour Office and the International Labour Conference have ascribed a constructive role to the ILO in helping, through its programmes, to improve the lives of working men and women and their families in the region. In this respect, the enhanced programme of technical cooperation for the occupied Arab territories, on which the Office will report again in November 2006, enjoys the widespread support of all regions and groups in the Governing Body.

The ILO has always held that security is never only a military matter. The ILO Constitution's statements that 'poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere' and that 'lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice' are extremely relevant in today's Middle East.

Human security is in deficit on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides of the unresolved conflict. Since the visit of the mission there has been an alarming increase in violence, with casualties on both sides, including children. The Government of Israel emphasizes physical security for its citizens. The Palestinian Authority stresses the economic and social insecurity as well as the physical security of Palestinians living

under occupation. Security in all its aspects . physical, social and economic . in Israel, on the one hand, cannot be separated from the same security needs of the Palestinian people living in the occupied territories, on the other. The comprehensive security of both peoples is inextricably intertwined. There is a shared responsibility to address the full range of issues jointly. The ILO trusts that it will be able to contribute to a renewed peace process on the basis of its specific competencies and its long-standing relationships with the tripartite constituency of the region.

May 2006.

Juan Somavia, Director-General.

Footnotes

(1) In a statement to the United Nations Security Council at its 5419th Meeting, 24 April 2006 (document SC/8697).

(2) United Nations: In larger freedom: Towards development, security and human rights for all, Report of the Secretary-General, General Assembly, 59th Session, document A/59/2005, para. 17. Preface

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