



# Press Release

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Committee on Inalienable Rights  
of the Palestinian People  
Civil Society Conference  
PM Meeting

**CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS DISCUSS GRASSROOTS  
ACTIVISM IN OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY**  
**Emergency Relief and Coordination Also Feature in Panel Discussion**

Grassroots activism in the occupied Palestinian territory, emergency relief and humanitarian assistance as well as coordination on the ground were among the issues discussed this afternoon by the International Conference of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People.

This afternoon's panel discussion, entitled "Civil society and occupation", was part of a two-day meeting of the International Conference, which was convened by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Highlighting the reasons why an international presence was needed alongside the Palestinians, Huwaida Arraf, Co-founder and Organizer of the International Solidarity Movement, said that when internationals were present at Palestinian protests, Israeli soldiers, who could fire on Palestinians without fear of an international outcry, knew that the killing of foreign nationals would spark an outcry. Having internationals present also raised media attention. In addition, being present on the ground, each international bore witness to events that they could share with their respective communities back home.

Ghassan Andoni, President of Rapprochement Center for Dialogue and Understanding, addressed some of the difficulties faced by civil society in confronting Israeli occupation, including lack of funding, concrete structures, community volunteer bases and boldness in waging non-violent resistance. If peace were not waged with the same determination

as war, peace would never win, he added.

Yehudit Harel, representative of Gush Shalom, said that while her organization did not represent a revolutionary, unified mass movement in Israeli society, there was a progressive trend in the country, which required strengthening so that it could be translated into a political power capable of ending the Israeli occupation in the near future.

Walid Badawi, Deputy Director of the United Nations Development Programme, Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP), said curfew was incarceration of entire populations by other means. Many West Bank cities had been under continuous curfew for the past two years, with as little as 75 days of freedom. Since the current crisis began, UNDP/PAPP had focused on generating employment. Decentralization and cooperation with local non-governmental organizations and grassroots organizations were also key features of UNDP's programmes, he said, as the mobility of national and even international staff had become increasingly difficult.

Thomas Neu, representative of American Near East Refugee Aid, noting that Palestinian civil society was alive and well, said local NGOs had demonstrated very impressive professional capabilities and developed effective management structures. That was also reflected in local organizations, such as the network of "popular schools", located in private homes and staffed by volunteers who wanted to ensure that children continued to receive education during the round-the-clock curfews of the past three months.

Summarizing the debate that followed the panel presentation, Moderator Nadia Hijab of the United States Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation said that civil resistance could only do so much to change oppressive policies of occupation. Only by altering the balance of power could the situation of the Palestinian people be improved.

A representative of the League of Arab States also addressed the Conference.

The Conference will meet again at 10 a.m. tomorrow to consider the theme, "Challenging the occupation".

### Background

The United Nations International Conference of Civil Society in Support of the Palestinian People met in its second plenary session this afternoon to consider the theme "civil society and occupation". Related topics under that theme include: grassroots activism in the Palestinian territory; emergency relief and humanitarian assistance to the victims; coordination and cooperation on the ground; and strengthening non-governmental organization networks in times of crisis.

### Statements

Prior to this afternoon's panel discussion, a representative of the Arab League addressed the Conference, saying that the violent acts of the occupation forces against the Palestinian people were well known. The press had conveyed their crimes, including the demolition of houses in Ramallah, the killing of civilians, the destruction of institutions and the detention of some 6,000 Palestinians. Detainees suffered from malnutrition and poor living conditions while awaiting trial. The iron-fisted policy of the Israeli authorities had taken a great toll on the Palestinian economy. Unemployment had reached 50 per cent and 60 per cent during the curfew. Many Palestinian citizens had been removed from their homes as part of the deportation policy.

The practices of the Israeli authorities constituted flagrant violations of the United Nations Charter, human rights covenants and the Geneva Conventions, he said. The Israeli Prime Minister was doing his best to obstruct the peace process and to maintain the occupation indefinitely. He had abandoned all peace agreements with Arab countries. Calling upon the international community to respect the international legitimacy of the Palestinian people, he said that without international solidarity, the situation would only encourage more extremism. The Arab League had presented an Arab peace initiative in March 2002, which paved the way for a just and lasting solution to the conflict, but the other side had rejected it. The conflict would continue, therefore, and take on greater proportions. The United Nations must act before it was too late.

HUWAIDA ARRAF, Co-founder and Organizer of the International Solidarity Movement, recalling she had originally gone to Palestine with a conflict resolution programme centred on youth interaction, said she had decided she could not stay with that programme after seeing the gravity of the injustices committed. The problem with the United Nations was that nothing had been done to help the Palestinian people. The International Solidarity Movement was a Palestinian-led movement that used non-violent direct action methods and strategies on behalf of the Palestinian cause, she said. Its purpose was to highlight the occupation as the root cause of violence in the region. She said the movement did not condemn violent opposition because they believed that the Palestinians had a right to defend themselves by force. But they were committed to non-violent opposition because the strength of their cause lay in the truth and justice of the Palestinian cause, and in the belief that the Palestinians deserved equal rights as well as respect for their human rights and dignity. It was the strength of the movement that the Palestinians' cry for freedom was an ideal in support of which every justice-loving person could speak and act.

Highlighting the reasons why an international presence was needed alongside the Palestinians, she said that when internationals were present at Palestinian protests, Israeli soldiers who could fire on Palestinians without fear of an international outcry, Israel knew there would be an outcry if foreign nationals were killed. In addition, having internationals present raised more media attention and foreign nationals could talk to their local media on behalf of the Palestinians. Third, being present on the ground, each international bore witness to the events, which they could share with their respective communities back home. There would eventually come a time when everyone would know the grave injustices that had been committed and ask why the

international community had not acted sooner.

She said thousands of internationals had helped in that manner, for which the Palestinian people were grateful. Yet, greater participation and more action were needed. The international solidarity movement advocated participation in marches, and protests, as well as the blocking of tanks and soldiers. There were only two stipulations to being a part of the movement: each member must believe in the freedom of the Palestinian people, based on the relevant Security Council resolutions and international law; and only non-violent mechanisms would be used. The movement's next campaign was the "Olive Harvest Campaign", in which internationals were invited to help the Palestinian people get to their land for the harvest.

GHASSAN ANDONI, President, Rapprochement Center for Dialogue and Understanding, noting that Israel had been running an occupation for 40 years, said it was dangerous to raise a generation of occupiers, as different norms were created with each generation of occupiers. The battlefields in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were residential areas. That being the case, why was it difficult to believe that Tel Aviv could become a battlefield? There was no such thing as a "good" war and war should not take place in the streets of Nablus or Tel Aviv.

To achieve peace, separate Israeli and Palestinian peace movements were not needed, but rather an active resistance in Israel and a peace movement in Palestine. Palestinians had a duty to fight and resist Israeli occupation.

Emphasizing that a two-State solution was a win-win solution, he said peace was possible because both sides were tired and the chance for peace was more relevant. Noting that control and expansion were important tools for the occupation force, he said one of the problems with civil-based resistance was the utilization of resources. The vast majority of Palestinians were suffering but were not actively involved. But recently in Nablus, people had taken to the streets, defying curfews and forcing the occupation to adjust to active resistance.

Civil society had much to do with confronting occupation, he said. Lack of funding impeded civil society from fully engaging in the struggle against occupation. Palestinian NGOs were concerned about their funding. When they became too political, funding was often withdrawn. Another issue was structure. NGOs carried out their activities without a community volunteer base. Why were the people who wanted peace shy about it, while those who wanted to wage war were bold? If peace were not waged with the same determination as war, peace would never win. While the vast majority believed in peace, they did not have the guts to fight for it, he added.

YEHUDIT HAREL, Spokesperson for Gush Shalom, said the Israeli peace organization was struggling to end the occupation and oppression by promoting a just peace that would provide for the establishment of a free and fully sovereign Palestinian State alongside Israel, according to the 1967 borders, with Arab East Jerusalem as its capital and with a just solution for the Palestinian refugees. Given the daily suffering of and

violence directed against the Palestinian people, her role as representative of the battered Israeli peace camp was more crucial than ever. A two-pronged strategy called for re-engaging Israeli support for a just and equitable peace for both peoples and for the international community to step in immediately by sending protective forces under United Nations auspices to protect the Palestinian people and help end the conflict.

She said 67 per cent of the Israeli people wished to see a capable and balanced international protection force deployed in the region. The warmongers had their own agenda and might use the excuse of the conflict to carry out schemes for another ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. Back in Israel, colleagues from various grassroots organizations were preparing for an anti-occupation rally and food convoy to Nablus, which had been besieged and under almost constant curfew for eighty-five days. The organization of those convoys was not meant as a mere humanitarian mission, or a statement of solidarity with the Palestinian people, but as a political statement, begging the world to awake and concentrate on the region.

Gush Shalom wished to reshape the twisted discourse of the past year, which rendered a just cause into "terrorism", she said. The war waged by Prime Minister Sharon on the Palestinian people was not a war on terrorism, nor one waged for the Israeli people, but rather, it was a war for the sake of the settlements. It was important to recognize the great injustice done to the Palestinian people at the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. An honourable existence, based on full equality for both peoples was possible -- hence the slogan, "One land -- one future -- for two peoples -- for the better or the worse".

Accepting the Palestinian resistance as a struggle for national liberation, she rejected the "war against terrorism" concept and re-framed the current conflict as a colonial war for the sake of the settlements. A large coalition of grassroots groups had united in unequivocal support of the objection to cooperation with the occupation in any form and of the conscientious objection of many Israeli soldiers and reservists. While Gush Shalom did not represent a revolutionary, unified mass movement in Israeli society, there was a progressive trend in the country that required strengthening so that it could be translated into a political power capable of ending the Israeli occupation in the near future.

WALID BADAWI, Deputy Director of the United Nations Development Programme Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP) said the programme was one of the leading humanitarian and development organizations in the occupied Palestinian territory. Since its inception in 1978, it had made a considerable contribution in assisting the Palestinian people through periods of occupation, civil unrest and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. UNDP/PAPP had mobilized some \$400 million in resources on the behalf of the Palestinian people and the tangible results of its work were visible in hundreds of classrooms, water supply networks and sewage collection systems, hospitals and primary health clinics. Recent incursions by Israeli troops had had a devastating effect on the Palestinian economy and on development. The current situation warned of a looming humanitarian crisis.

In the Jenin refugee camp, some 800 families had been made homeless, he said. In addition to the many killed and wounded, 24-hour curfews had been imposed in all occupied refugee camps, towns and villages. Many West Bank cities had been under continuous curfew for the past two years, with as little as 75 days of freedom. Curfew was incarceration of entire populations by other means. Of the almost 3 million people of the occupied Palestinian territories, more than 2 million — some 62 per cent — were vulnerable due to food insecurity, special hardship and housing and shelter damage. According to the World Bank, some 70 per cent of Palestinians were living in poverty.

He said that since the current crisis began, UNDP/PAPP had undertaken a number of emergency initiatives and projects aimed at generating employment, he said. Decentralization and cooperation with local partners such as NGOs and grassroots organizations was another key feature of those programmes, as the mobility of national and even international staff had become increasingly difficult. Employment generation covered four areas of activity, including development of social and municipal infrastructure; agricultural activities; economic development and capacity-building; and support to the health sector. The UNDP/PAPP was supporting Palestinian civil society institutions to assume their rightful role in the reform efforts currently underway. PAPP's approach allowed partner organizations to be involved in projects from design to implementation. Even in times of crisis, sustainable human development was not only possible but also crucial to making the transition from conflict situations to sustainable state building.

THOMAS NEU, Representative of American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA), said that while some NGOs were involved in political activism and consciousness-raising, others concentrated mostly on resource-building. The bottom-line consideration for many NGOs was that they were guests of both the Israeli and Palestinian governments -- and also subject to their own home-state governments -- and must, therefore, refrain from taking overt political positions. Political expression was more properly the function of local NGOs.

The good news, he said, was that Palestinian civil society was alive and well. Local NGOs had demonstrated very impressive professional capabilities and developed effective management structures. That was also reflected in local organizations, an example of which was the network of "popular schools", that were located in private homes and staffed by volunteers who just wanted to make sure that children continued to receive education during the round-the-clock curfews of the past three months.

He said many international NGOs were reluctant to become involved with efforts aimed at sustaining individual and community survival, since they had originally aimed at longer-term development strategies. Yet, there was no alternative. All around, the situation was deteriorating and even now, in the midst of the most serious of humanitarian crises, the NGOs faced arbitrary operational difficulties, as their food and water trucks and even ambulances and mobile clinics were turned back. Some NGOs staff members did not have travel permits, while international staff had found it nearly

impossible to obtain visas and permits to live in the Palestinian areas.

Individually and through such structures such as the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA), he said, international and national NGOs had increased coordination mechanisms, partly due to the recognition that they faced similar difficulties in the nature of their work. They must stress the issue of access, which was the most urgent operational difficulty faced by all NGOs. Given the ever-tightening measures imposed by Israel, what would the situation be like in an actual state of war? he asked, stressing the great need for effective advocacy to bring about new conditions that would enable international and local NGOs to fulfil their emergency mandate and help return Palestine to the path of development.

### Discussion

A representative of the organization Lawyers without Borders said the diplomatic solution in Bethlehem had largely been the result of internationals marching on Bethlehem to make a statement regarding events there. There was great safety in numbers and the large presence of peaceful internationals was part of the answer. Applauding those who went into conflict areas every day, she added: "Talk does not cook rice".

Another speaker said that the outcome of the Conference, which had brought together representatives of NGOs and international institutions, should be transmitted to the world through the media. Swift, decisive measures should be adopted to reinforce the position of the Palestinian people, who were suffering in an unprecedented manner. Action should be taken today, she stressed.

A representative of the Tunisian Labour Confederation said the Conference demonstrated the importance and justice of the Palestinian cause. Condemning the criminal acts of the Sharon Government, he said the label of terrorism was not applicable to the Palestinians, who were fighting for their right to peaceful coexistence. He warned that if the Security Council resolutions were not implemented, the credibility of the United Nations would be undermined. It was important to apply those resolutions without double standards and to recognize that Israel, alone in the region, possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Another representative, stressing the significance of the possibility of war with Iraq, said the two issues should not be separated. On 11 September 2001, there had been a swift Israeli movement into Palestine under the cover of a media blackout. He also said it was important for NGOs and people of the world to support the youth movement in the United States, noting that the biggest roadblock to convincing young people to work was their inability to see that they could make a difference and help to wrest the power away from those beating the drums of war in the United States.

The next speaker, citing the Secretary-General's speech of this morning, concerning the Quartet's plans for Palestine, said those plans left open the possibility of continuing

violence and massacres for the next three years. They were biased and proposed to replace the sequential approach with a consequential approach. The burden could not be placed upon the Palestinians, he said, suggesting that delegations from the Conference seek audience with the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council. A delegation of representatives, headed by the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, should visit the region and convey the viewpoints of those present. Furthermore, the representatives present must face reality and push for the inclusion of an explicit cause in the Conference's final document warning of the danger posed by war with Iraq, as highlighted by the previous speaker.

He stressed the importance of recognizing that the Sharon Government had pursued a criminal policy because the Bush administration had given it the green light to do so. The Bush administration should be held accountable for its support of Prime Minister Sharon and for its full engagement in the plan to liquidate the Palestinian Authority, politically and physically.

The Moderator said that a letter to the Secretary-General that was being circulated for signature, extended the participants' gratitude for his continued support of a greater United Nations role in ending the Israeli occupation and reaching a just and comprehensive peace between Israel and Palestine, based on the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian State. The letter also asked the Secretary-General to reiterate his call for a "robust international protection force" under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, to protect the Palestinians living under occupation and those Israeli civilians who might be threatened by the consequences of the occupation.

The next representative suggested that the representatives present set aside and "End of occupation" day around which action plans could be formed.

Another proposal was that a letter be sent to United States President George W. Bush, calling for all American funds to be withheld from Israel until it ended the occupation.

A representative of Medecins sans Frontieres noted that the need for mental health care had increased since September 2000 and that access as well as civilian protection were key issues for her organization. The NGO Working Group for the Security Council in New York had been raising those issues in private meetings with members of the Council. While there had been many Council meetings on the topic of civilian protection, there had been no results in that field.

A representative of Save the Children-Canada said the Conference should lobby for the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict to travel to the region and obtain specific child-protection measures from Israeli leaders. The findings of his mission should be made public and include firm commitments.

Another speaker said the Conference should be writing to the Secretary-General, not to President Bush. What had happened to all the Security Council resolutions dealing with

the Palestine issue? How much weight did NGOs really carry? she asked. The Secretary-General should ask the United Nations to invoke Chapter VII authority as it had done with Iraq.

The Conference should make recommendations on the formation of an association in support of the Palestinian people, another speaker said. Machinery was needed to coordinate issues at the international level. A statement should be sent to the parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to end the violations against the Palestinian people.

Given the urgency of the situation, the gravity of events in Palestine and the possible imminence of an attack on Iraq, one speaker called strongly for collective efforts to halt the barbaric way in which the Palestinian people were being treated. NGOs had the responsibility to mobilize and organize themselves and to agree on a few action goals at the meeting.

### Responses by Panellists

Ms. Harel said the suicide bombings were not legitimate. The best way to help was to establish anti-occupation movements and to exert pressure on governments, including that of the United States.

Ms. Arraf suggested that the importance of non-violent resistance lay in the fact that the Palestinians did not have the means to oppose one of the largest armies in the world. Their strength lay in the truth of their cause, not in their arms. For instance, in May she had been kidnapped while trying to enter the Church of the Nativity to bring relief to the people inside. The Israeli Government had then tried to deport her and her colleagues, to which they had responded with a hunger strike. Israel had deported some of those people in the second and third weeks of their hunger strikes. Then, on 7 August, nine more internationals had been arrested and deported for joining Palestinians in protesting the curfews. Israel had deported many international activists because they did not want witnesses, but the International Solidarity Movement did not stop. The organization's power lay in its ability to scare the Israeli Government.

Mr. Andoni, stressing that he recognized the right of the Palestinians to fight, asked them to fight wisely. Sometimes non-violence could do more to protect, though violence could hurt the other side. But the ability to hurt was not synonymous with the ability to achieve, and to achieve was why the representatives had gathered for the Conference. They did not need to teach the Palestinians how to run their resistance; the Palestinians could teach everyone else that. Theirs was an international issue and people from all over the world were invited to join the struggle. If the Palestinian cause was lost, each person's life, wherever they lived, would be affected.

Mr. Badawi reiterated his support for the exchange of ideas and proposals of the forum.

Finally, Mr. Neu pledged the commitment of the local and international NGOs in the

occupied territory to lend their support to ending the poverty of the Palestinian people. In turn, he asked that the representatives support the mobilization of resources for the redevelopment of Palestine.

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