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Committee on the Inalienable Rights
of the Palestinian People
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ARAFAT'S MEMORY SHOULD STRENGTHEN PALESTINIAN EFFORTS TO REALIZE STATEHOOD,

SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS AT OBSERVANCE OF INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY

Palestinian Rights Committee Also Hears Messages from Presidents of General Assembly, Security Council

Yasser Arafat's memory should serve as an inspiration to unite and strengthen the Palestinian people in their efforts to realize their national aspirations to statehood and self-determination through peaceful means, Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the Palestinian Rights Committee this morning as it observed the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

As the Committee — formally known as the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People — began its observance with a moment of silence in memory of the late President of the Palestinian Authority, the Secretary-General noted that the Palestinian people had endured a dismal existence of grinding poverty and dispossession during the past four years of bloodshed and chaos. That experience had demonstrated all too clearly that violence beget only violence, pushing the prospect of a peaceful solution to the Middle East conflict farther away.

Pointing out that the people of Israel also had borne great losses, he said the international community must not give way to despair and pessimism, but gather its strength and renew its commitment to work for a reinvigorated peace process. The Quartet's Road Map continued to embody a path to peace accepted by both Palestinians and Israelis and the international community remained strongly supportive of it. The Road Map must be given the chance to succeed and the parties must begin to live up to their commitments under it.

Noting the particular poignancy of this International Day of Solidarity, Nasser Al-Kidwa, observer for Palestine, read a message from Mahmoud Abbas, newly-appointed Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which stated that while the Palestinian people had experienced widespread sadness at the passing of their leader, they and their leadership had responded to their tragic loss in a civilized, orderly manner with a smooth and peaceful transition of power.

Emphasizing that international support remained necessary to enable the Palestinians to accomplish their goals, including the creation of an appropriate environment for holding transparent, honest and fair presidential elections on 9 January 2005. The Palestinian people rejected all unilateral measures, including Israel's plan to withdraw from Gaza and its continuing construction of a separation wall. Those steps would affect the final status of negotiations, militarily and unilaterally predetermining the final outcome of the Palestine question.

Committee Chairman Paul Badji (Senegal) noted that although the State of Israel had been

proclaimed without delay, following the termination of the mandate for Palestine, the Arab State meant for the Palestinians had yet to come into existence. The Palestinian people had endured long years of warfare, expulsion and occupation, and it was President Arafat who had given them an identity that the world could no longer ignore.

However, the reality on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories was that there had been no sign of improvement over the past year, with the death toll exceeding 4,000 since the beginning of the intifada in 2000, he said. One must hope that the Quartet and the international community would intensify their engagement to facilitate implementation of both parties' obligations under the Road Map. All must find the strength and encouragement to persevere in efforts to bring about a peaceful, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine.

Bernard Goonatilleke (Sri Lanka), Chairman of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories, outlined that body's activities in the past year. While it had not been allowed to visit the occupied territories, it had gathered sufficient evidence of the seriously deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation during its recent field trip to Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. Some 84 witnesses had highlighted appalling living conditions resulting from Israeli military incursions and the construction of the separation wall, as well as the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan.

Farouk Kaddoumi, head of the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) Political Department, thanking all those who had extended condolences and expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian people, described the late President Arafat as a true hero and courageous leader.

General Assembly President Jean Ping (Gabon) and Security Council President John Danforth (United States) also addressed the Committee.

The representatives of Malaysia (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), Turkey (on behalf of the Thirty-first Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers) and Nigeria (on behalf of the African Union) also spoke this morning, as did a representative of the League of Arab States.

The Committee also heard from a representative of the non-governmental organization Working Group on Israel/Palestine, who spoke on behalf of the International Coordinating Network on Palestine.

Before concluding today's meeting, the Committee Chairman noted that some 42 messages of support and solidarity had been received from numerous heads of State and Government, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, governments and other entities.

Background

The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People met this morning in observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

In its resolution 32/40 of 2 December 1977 and subsequent resolutions, the General Assembly called for the annual observance of the Day in recognition of the need to promote and support the struggle of the Palestinian people for self-determination, peace and independence.

At the outset of the meeting, the Committee observed a moment of silence in memory of the late President Yasser Arafat, as well as all those who had given their lives for the cause of the Palestinian people and the return of peace in the region.

Statements

Committee Chairman PAUL BADJI (Senegal) noted that this year's observance of the International Day of Solidarity was taking place at a particularly trying time for the Palestinian people. In addition to the extremely difficult situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, they continued to mourn the loss of their leader. The Palestinian people had lost one of their best sons --

a man who had devoted most of his life to the struggle against the occupation and for the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

Yasser Arafat's life had been closely connected with the very reason for which all had gathered today, he continued. Although the State of Israel had been proclaimed without delay following the termination of the mandate for Palestine, the Arab State — meant for the Palestinians -- had yet to come into existence. The Palestinian people had endured long years of warfare, expulsion and occupation, and it was Yasser Arafat who had given the Palestinian people an identity that the world could no longer ignore.

The reality on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories, he stressed, had given no sign of improvement over the past year. The Government of Israel had intensified its military raids, particularly in the Gaza Strip, which had resulted in unprecedented destruction of homes, infrastructure and a rapidly rising number of civilian deaths and injuries. Palestinian civilians continued to face harassment, violence and deprivation on a daily basis. The death toll since the start of the intifada now reached more than 4,000. Most of those killed had been Palestinian, but hundreds of Israelis had also lost their lives. Tragically, the number of victims among Palestinian women and children — the most vulnerable segments of society — were increasing. More than 670 children had been killed over the past four years.

The Palestinian economy remained in a dismal state, he continued, and food security, health standards, quality of water and sanitation and education standards had all deteriorated. The expansion of settlements had continued, and the construction of the wall remained ongoing. The wall had asphyxiated and divided Palestinian communities; the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice — which had found that the wall's construction was contrary to international law and seriously impeded the self-determination of the Palestinian people — was therefore welcomed.

He stressed the hope that the Quartet and the international community would intensify their engagement to help the parties commence implementation of their obligations under the Road Map peace plan. Welcoming those participating in today's observance, he concluded by urging all to find the strength and encouragement to persevere in efforts to bring about a peaceful, just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine, on the basis of international law.

JEAN PING (Gabon), President of the General Assembly, said the Day was particularly important as the Palestinian people mourned the passing of Yasser Arafat, to whom the General Assembly had paid homage on 11 November. It was incumbent upon the Palestinian people and the international community to create an independent Palestinian State in accordance with the requirements set forth in the 1993 Oslo Peace Agreement.

Quoting Mr. Arafat, he said that the "choice of peace", was the only viable solution to the conflict, which had continued to destabilize the entire Middle East region, with a heavy toll of innocent victims on each side. The Road Map, based on relevant United Nations resolutions and calling for a two-State solution with both States having secure and internationally recognized borders, was the only way to break the current impasse.

Noting that the General Assembly had continued to encourage both sides to fulfil their obligations to the Road Map, he commended the Committee for its tireless efforts to promote the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and to find a just resolution to the question of Palestine. The Assembly reaffirmed that the United Nations and the international community should continue to support dialogue and ensure that the objective of peace became reality. Doing so would be the best way to pay tribute to President Arafat.

Statement by Secretary-General

KOFI ANNAN, Secretary-General of the United Nations, reiterated his sympathy to the Palestinian people, saying that President Arafat's memory should serve as an inspiration, so that they might remain united and strengthened in their efforts to realize their national aspirations for statehood and self-determination through peaceful means.

The Palestinian people had endured a dismal existence of grinding poverty and dispossession during the past four years of bloodshed and chaos, he noted. Yet the people of Israel too had borne great losses. The experience of those four years demonstrated all too clearly that violence beget only violence, pushing the prospect of a peaceful solution to the conflict farther away. However, the international community must not give way to despair and pessimism. Throughout the world, people hoped that a new chance for peace might be just around the corner. The international community must gather its strength and renew its commitment to work for a reinvigorated peace process.

He said that the Quartet's Road Map continued to embody a path to peace accepted by both Palestinians and Israelis and that the international community remained strongly supportive of it. The Road Map must be given the chance to succeed and the parties must begin to live up to their commitments under it. Thus, it was to be hoped that Israel's disengagement plan would revive peace efforts based on that plan. It should lead to the end of the occupation of the West Bank — including East Jerusalem — and the Gaza Strip, as well as the establishment of a sovereign, democratic and contiguous Palestinian State, living side-by-side in peace with a secure Israel.

NASSER AL-KIDWA, observer for Palestine, read a message from Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which said that the commemoration was particularly poignant and significant as Palestinians experienced widespread sadness at the passing of their leader and symbol of their fight for national independence, President Yasser Arafat. The Palestinian people and leadership had demonstrated their ability to respond to that tragic loss in a civilized and orderly manner, through the smooth and peaceful transition of power and authority according to basic laws.

He stressed that international support was necessary to enable the Palestinians to reconstruct vital institutions, resuscitate the national economy, attain their inalienable and legitimate right to self-determination and implement the 1988 Declaration of Independence in the free, sovereign and viable State of Palestine. In that regard, the Palestinian people welcomed assistance in ensuring an appropriate environment for holding transparent, honest and fair presidential elections on 9 January 2005, with the participation of all registered voters, including those in occupied Jerusalem.

Rejecting and calling for an end to all unilateral measures, including the unilateral plan to withdraw from Gaza, the continued construction of the separation Wall and the colonial settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, he said they affected the final status as well as militarily and unilaterally predetermining the final outcome of the question of Palestine. All such policies violated international law and undermined the peace process. The Palestinian People also rejected the judaization of Al-Quds Al-Sharif and its isolation from its surroundings. The United Nations played an important role in advocating Palestinian rights, as manifested by the advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice of 9 July 2004 Advisory Opinion and the General Assembly's subsequent resolution ES-10/15.

JOHN DANFORTH (United States), President of the Security Council, described the Day as one of remembering and compassion for all those who had suffered due to the terrible conflict in the Middle East. It was also a day to renew efforts towards a comprehensive settlement of the issue, with the hope that peace would prevail and the vision of two States, living side by side in peace and security, would be realized.

Over the past year, he said, the Security Council had continued to support a comprehensive and just settlement in the Middle East on the basis of relevant Security Council resolutions, the foundations of the Madrid Conference and the principle of land-for-peace, as well as the agreements arrived at by both parties. The Council had followed the work of the Quartet, and had advocated implementation of the Road Map. On 19 November 2003, it had adopted resolution 1515 (2003), endorsing the permanent two-State solution and calling upon both parties to comply with their obligations pursuant to the Road Map, and in cooperation with the Quartet.

The Security Council had noted with concern ongoing terrorism, violence and destruction, which had resulted in loss of life on both sides, he said. The deterioration in the security situation,

particularly due to suicide bombings in Israel and military operations in the Palestinian territory, remained one of the Council's main preoccupations. That body also remained fully aware of the seriousness of the humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories and reiterated that easing the current restrictions on movement would enable humanitarian assistance to reach those desperately in need. Moreover, the donor community should be as generous as possible.

The complexity of achieving a lasting and just settlement to the decades-old conflict in the Middle East was fully understood, he concluded. The Security Council would continue to support the Secretary-General's efforts in that regard, as well as the work of the Quartet, the international community, and as a quiet bilateral diplomacy. However, it maintained that the primary responsibility for resolving the conflict lay, above all, with the parties concerned. The Government of Israel and the Palestinian Cabinet must work together.

Also noting the passing of President Arafat, he welcomed the commitment to hold elections in January 2005 and expressed the Security Council's continued support for efforts to advance the democratic process. The Council would continue to shoulder its responsibilities under the United Nations Charter, and to further a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, as well as the fulfilment of the just aspirations of the Palestinian people.

BERNARD GOONATILLEKE (Sri Lanka), Chairman of the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories, expressed his condolences to the Palestinian people over the passing of President Arafat as well as the hope that the Palestinians and their leadership would commit to peaceful negotiations to achieve their objectives. Israel had not allowed the Committee to visit the occupied territories this past year to observe the human rights situation there and have direct contact with Israeli authorities. However, the Committee had undertaken its annual field mission to Lebanon, Egypt and Syria in late May, meeting with 84 witnesses and visiting Lebanon for the first time with a view to broadening its knowledge and the understanding of Palestinian refugees' problems. It had gathered sufficient evidence of the seriously deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation, and the unprecedented destruction in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Witnesses had highlighted the appalling living conditions resulting from Israeli military incursions and construction of the separation wall, he said. Their land had been confiscated, their homes razed to the ground and their families and communities split. Farmers were denied access to their land, workers to their jobs, children to their schools and women and children to basic health and social services. In Gaza, some 29,000 people had allegedly been forced to take refuge in temporary housing, while in the occupied Syrian Golan, 20,000 inhabitants lived in 44 Jewish settlements and another 15,000 were expected in the next three years. The Committee was also concerned over Israel's alleged storage of nuclear waste on land close to the Syrian border. However, it had noted three positive developments: the international media's renewed interest in reporting on Israel's harsh military occupation, public opinion's influence in bringing attention to the complexity of the issue, the combined effects of the Advisory Opinion and Israel's decision to withdraw from Gaza in 2005.

RASTAM MOHD ISA (Malaysia), reading a message from Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in his capacity as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, expressed condolences over the passing of President Arafat, which should motivate the Palestinian people to continue his struggle and fulfil the dreams and aspirations of all Palestinians. He also welcomed Mahmoud Abbas as the new Chairman of the PLO and expressed the Movement's unwavering support for the new Palestinian leadership. The 9 January 2005 presidential election should provide a new beginning for Palestine and a new momentum toward achieving a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the region.

He reaffirmed his call for Israel to cease its targeting of innocent civilians, destruction of Palestinian homes and property, and impeding of the freedom of movement in the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly as they prepared for elections. In addition, Israel and all other MemberStates must respect the July advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which declared the separation wall illegal, as well as General Assembly's subsequent resolution ES-10/15. The Security Council should seriously consider that matter.

The United Nations, as a member of the Quartet, which also comprised the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United States, was well poised to play a pivotal role in achieving a just, comprehensive and lasting peace. The other Quartet members should seize the opportunity to revive the Road Map. The Palestinian people had suffered too long and the world must maintain solidarity with them. The Palestinian question merited the international community's continued attention in the right context and proper perspective.

ERSIN ERCIN (Turkey), reading out a message from Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, in his capacity as Chairman of the Thirty-first Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, expressed heartfelt condolences to the Palestinian people upon the loss of President Arafat, who had guided the Palestinian nation in the struggle for freedom through long years, and played a unique role in bringing the Palestinian people's just cause to the forefront of international attention.

Noting that the past four years had brought only agony and devastation to both sides, he stressed that the only solution to the conflict lay in a political process resulting in a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement based on two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace within secure and recognized borders. The Quartet's Road Map constituted a unique opportunity in that regard and the parties must take all necessary steps to revive the dialogue and cooperation leading to the resumption of negotiations.

Also welcoming the Palestinian decision to hold presidential elections in January 2005, he said the people of Palestine deserved the chance to organize their elections in a proper atmosphere and in all Palestinian territories. Moreover, it was high time the parties acted consistently with their obligations, and for the Quartet directly to engage and expedite that process. Priority must be attached to assistance for the reform process and to build the future Palestinian States, as well as to generous economic and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people. Turkey had launched an action plan to increase and diversify its assistance to Palestine, and stood ready to assist the peace process in all aspects. Turkey also pledged, as a facilitator, to continue extending its support to the process of achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine, based on relevant Security Council resolutions and the principle of land-for-peace.

AMINU BASHIR WALI (Nigeria), reading a message from President Olusegun Obasanjo, in his capacity as Chairman of the African Union, expressed his condolences on the passing of President Arafat, who would be remembered for his bold step of signing the 1993 Oslo Accord. It was regrettable that the situation in the Middle East, particularly as it related to the issue of Palestine, had deteriorated appreciably since African Heads of State and Government reaffirmed, during their July 2001 Lusaka Summit, the inalienable rights of Palestinians to self-determination and to an independent State. Various reports by relevant United Nations agencies, including United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had documented the Palestinians' deteriorating socio-economic situation.

The international community must take urgent steps to ameliorate the situation by fulfilling commitments outlined in past General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, he said. The Africa Union would continue to support the Quartet's efforts, particularly toward implementing the Road Map. The window of opportunity created by Israel's and Palestine's acceptance of the Road Map in 2003, and its subsequent endorsement by the Security Council, should be kept open. The forthcoming election for a new President of the Palestinian Authority should provide the opportunity to demonstrate both parties' commitment to peace and security. The African Union was also committed to a comprehensive peace between Israel and Lebanon, as well as Israel and Syria, based on relevant Security Council resolutions, the Madrid Terms of Reference and the principle of land for peace.

YAHYA A. MAHMASSANI, observer for the League of Arab States, reading out a message from Secretary-General Amre Moussa, expressed the League's condolences to the Palestinian people upon the loss of their President, who had devoted his life to the struggle to establish an independent Palestinian State, and to realize the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

Amid the unprecedented destruction wrought by its policies, including the construction of the

separation wall, Israel's Government had continued upon its course, he said. Despite the advisory opinion rendered by the International Court of Justice, construction of the wall had continued and the international community had reached a deadlock. Israel was now proceeding with its unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. That withdrawal should be comprehensive and include also a withdrawal from the West Bank. If the withdrawal was used to strengthen Israel's hold over the West Bank, that could lead to serious consequences.

The international community must make every effort to assist the Palestinian people, who were working to reform their political structures, he said. The League of Arab States thus called upon the United States to continue to play its role as mediator of the conflict and to end the partiality that had been shown towards Israel. The Palestinian people had agreed to the Road Map and Israel should start to honour its obligations to dismantle its settlements. It was absurd to consider any Israeli withdrawal as a concession, as that remained apart of relevant international resolutions.

JENNIFER BUTLER, Co-Chair of the Non-Governmental Organization Working Group on Israel Palestine, spoke on behalf of the International Coordinating Network on Palestine, noting that the World Bank had reported that at least 60 per cent of Palestinians lived in poverty and were unemployed, the highest rate ever. Polls in the region revealed that children described their lives as full of fear, violence and hopelessness. Despite the belief that divisions between the two parties to the conflict were too deep for any hope of reconciliation, individuals and serious organizations were more than ever dedicated to finding common ground. Such movements were alive and growing in Israel and Palestine.

Time was of the essence, she continued, stressing the importance of implementing the timeline and the Road Map. In a historic meeting earlier this month, non-governmental organization representatives had met with members of the General Assembly's Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices in the Occupied Territories to exchange vital information. They had agreed to investigate human rights violations in communities on the ground and to monitor realistic expectations. The Working Group condemned all forms of violence in the territories. Peace would take a long time, but the process must begin now. The Working Group stood in solidarity with those suffering from the conflict and would continue working for a true and just solution.

FAROUK KADDOUMI, Head of the Political Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization, thanked all those who had extended their condolences and expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people. Their support had strengthened the Palestinian hope for a brighter future and for the realization of their national aspirations to self-determination and an independent Palestinian State. President Arafat had been a true hero and courageous leader of his people. He had stood against his enemy, who, in the last years of his life, had completely done away with its agreements and commitments, besieging the Palestinian leader for three years.

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