Israel, US decry rights monitor’s remarks as ‘antisemitic’

July 28, 2022

By Jamey Keaten

AP News

<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-israel-geneva-race-and-ethnicity-92d888b43d685e65d82952980a032e6f>

Israel, the United States and Britain on Thursday criticized an expert commissioned by the U.N. human rights body to examine the situation in the Middle East, accusing him of antisemitic remarks.

Miloon Kothari was quoted in the media as questioning Israel’s right to be a U.N. member state and alluding to a “Jewish lobby.” The comments stoked longtime accusations by Israel, the U.S. and others that the rights body is biased against Israel.

Kothari, from India, is one of three members of the Commission of Inquiry on occupied Palestinian territory, created by the U.N.-backed Human Rights Council last year. The commission quickly countered that his comments had been deliberately misquoted.

The commission, headed by former U.N. human rights chief Navi Pillay, was set up after the 11-day war last year between Israel and the militant Hamas group in Gaza. The fighting killed at least 261 people in Gaza and 14 people in Israel, according to the U.N. rights office.

Israel’s policies in the Palestinian territories have long faced international scrutiny. Last year, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court launched an investigation into alleged Israeli crimes there, focusing on Israel’s repeated military operations in Gaza and the expansion of Jewish settlements in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank.

The commission is the first to have an open-ended mandate from the U.N. rights body, and critics say such permanent scrutiny shows anti-Israel bias in the 47-member-state council. Proponents support the commission as a way to keep tabs on injustices faced by Palestinians under decades of Israeli rule.

In an interview published Monday by Mondoweiss, an online publication critical of Israel’s policies toward Palestinians, Kothari spoke about the commission’s work and mandate. He cited a lack of cooperation from Israel’s government.

Asked about criticism by some governments, including that of Canada, he replied that he was “very disheartened by the social media that is controlled largely by — whether it’s the Jewish lobby or it’s specific NGOs — a lot of money is being thrown into trying to discredit us.”

The commission’s role, Kothari said, was to look into humanitarian law, human rights law, and criminal law. “On all three counts, Israel is in systematic violation of all the legislation,” he said.

“I would go as far as to raise the question as why are they even a member of the United Nations, because they don’t respect — the Israeli government does not respect — its own obligations as a U.N. member state,” he added.

Pillay, in a letter to the rights council’s president that was made public Thursday, said Kothari’s comments “seem to have been taken out of context” and that the commission “feels it necessary to clarify certain issues given the seriousness of the accusations.”

“The commission does not question the status or United Nations membership of either of the concerned states of its mandate,” Pillay wrote.

She maintained Kothari’s comments on efforts to discredit the commission members were “deliberately misquoted to imply that ‘social media’ was controlled by the Jewish lobby.”

Reached by email, Kothari referred to Pillay’s letter and declined to comment.

Keren Hajioff, a spokeswoman for Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, said the international community should be “outraged” over Kothari’s comments.

“His racist remarks about ‘the Jewish Lobby’ that controls the media and his questioning Israel’s right to exist as a member of the family of nations echo the darkest days of antisemitism,” she said.

In a statement, the U.S. ambassador to the rights council, Michele Taylor, and the State Department’s special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, Deborah Lipstadt, called antisemitism and anti-Israel bias a “poisonous venom” that has affected international discourse for too long — including at U.N. institutions.

They said Kothari’s comments were “outrageous, inappropriate, and corrosive” and echoed “age-old antisemitic tropes.” Britain’s ambassador in Geneva, Simon Manley, called them “unacceptable and offensive.”

Council spokesman Rolando Gomez cited the Human Rights Council’s “long track record speaking out against all forms of discrimination and racism and vehemently condemns such abhorrent acts.”