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TIME TO LEAVE CONFLICT BEHIND, PANELLISTS SAY AS INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE CONSIDERS VIABILITY OF TWO-STATE SOLUTION

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

BEIJING, 18 June – The United Nations Meeting in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace this afternoon heard appeals to leave perpetual conflict behind, as experts grappled with ways to revitalize the two-State solution and re-engage the international community in that effort, amid regional turmoil and, by some accounts, societal and political indifference within Israel.

Daniel Ben Simon, former Member of Knesset for Tel Aviv, said Israel's elections four months ago had nothing to do with the issue being discussed in Beijing, adding that, in fact, the "big winners are the people who never raise the issue of peace". Israelis had taken to the streets to demand equality – not a Palestinian State, not an end to the occupation, but the end of occupation by rich people. The mood in Israel today was about how to make society more fair and equal.

He said Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had been re-elected because his views on the peace process were not relevant to the elections. There had been no talk of the two-State solution, and there were those who said it was dead. But there was also no talk of a one-State solution, he noted. Describing the Prime Minister as "Mr. Status Quo", he said that fit the mood of Israelis today. The peace process that had been the jewel in the crown of Israeli policy was no longer there, he said. The Knesset had voted on the budget yesterday and there were cuts in all areas of Israeli life except one – settlements. They had not only been left intact, but some \$4 billion had been added to the relevant budget.

It seemed that Israelis and Palestinians were not eager to "divorce", and maybe living together peacefully would bring victory, he said. There were those in both camps who would like to live together. While there were questions to be answered, such as those concerning the right to vote, birth rate and citizenship, he said he did not see anyone "ready or able politically to cut this State in two". The status quo might be living together, but the question was how, he said.

Ahmad Tibi, Member of Knesset from the Arab Movement for Change in Jerusalem, said that for the past 17 years, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Government of Israel had been negotiating on and off about implementing a two-State solution. Ordinary Palestinian citizens felt their lives were worse off than before, and while Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to meet publicly with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to continue the years-long process, the truth was that it was only a "photo op".

The Prime Minister "definitely is not a partner for a two-State solution", he said, pointing out that Mr. Netanyahu had never used the words "independent" or "sovereign" when referring to a Palestinian State; he had said "Palestinian", and "demilitarized", but never "independent". There was also a motion to downgrade and not accept Arabic as an official language, he said, citing other "dangerous" trends, including military service and land confiscations.

Qais Abdel-Karim Khader, Chairman of the Committee for Social Affairs and Health in the Palestinian Legislative Council in Ramallah, said the Israelis needed to be reminded that there was a conflict to be solved. Palestinians “want to divorce” and tangible measures were therefore needed to create the appropriate environment for meaningful and credible negotiations. That meant respecting international resolutions and the diplomatic Quartet.

He said there was a growing awareness that it was no longer possible to deal with the chronic impasse in conventional ways, and that the international community must intervene in a more effective and creative way to revive the process and open a new horizon. One of the most evident expressions of that awareness had been the General Assembly vote in favour of granting Palestine the status of a non-member State, he said.

Bassam Al-Salhi, Secretary-General of the Palestinian People’s Party and Member of the Palestinian Legislative Council for Jerusalem, said the international community was witnessing Israel’s systematic destruction of the two-State solution, primarily through the separation of the West Bank and Gaza. Despite the resumption of negotiations at various times under different names, all such attempts had failed, he said, faulting the inability of the United States to force Israel to freeze settlement construction. Add to that “some modest European attempts” and in the end, the European position simply followed that of the United States, he added.

The stalemate was the result of a “structural defect” in the negotiation process itself, he continued. A new approach was needed that would expand international participation, with a greater reliance not just on the United States but also on China, the Russian Federation and the European Union to put together an alternative – defined by United Nations recognition of the State of Palestine, whose territory was no longer “disputed land”, but the land of a State.

Richard Wright, Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Representative Office in New York, said that “as time passes, things do not get any easier for Palestinian refugees”. However, the Agency was facing a “disturbing medley of man-made crises of varying intensity in all five fields of operation”. He described the situations in Gaza, the West Bank and Syria, saying the crisis in the latter country was unravelling the very fabric of Palestinian refugee life there.

The international community needed a strong UNRWA, he emphasized, warning that the alternative – a steady erosion through a process of “death by a thousand cuts” – would destabilize the Palestine refugee community at a time when renewed efforts were being made to re-launch the Middle East peace process. That would not only be politically unwise, it would also throw the burden of caring for the refugees on host countries, none of which was in a position to cope.

Li Lianhe, Deputy Director-General of the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs in China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said there had been major changes in the Middle East over the past two years, but the Palestinian issue remained at the core of peace and stability in the region. The international community had stepped up its efforts, and Palestine and Israel had expressed willingness to resume the long-stalled peace talks. But that process required a favourable environment, which called for practical measures on the part of both parties, he said. The construction and expansion of settlements as well as the destruction of Palestinian homes “must be stopped”, and the Palestinians should work towards reconciliation.

Panel I

BASSAM AL-SALHI, Secretary-General, Palestinian People’s Party, and Member of the Palestinian Legislative Council for Jerusalem, said the international community was monitoring Israel’s systematic destruction of the two-State solution, primarily through the separation of the West Bank and Gaza. Israel was adopting a policy of ethnic cleansing, especially in Jerusalem, in order to bring about a demographic change and daily urban transformations of archaeological and religious sites, he said, pointing out that the

“segregation wall” had been declared illegal by the International Court of Justice.

Unfortunately, efforts by the Secretary of State of the United States to resume direct bilateral negotiations had collided with the Israeli insistence on rejecting the commitment to stop settlement activity and release Palestinian prisoners, as per previous agreements. Israel also refused to recognize the 1967 borders, he noted, stressing that repeating negotiations on previously settled matters would not lead to peace.

Reviewing previous “negotiation experiences” in detail, he said that despite their resumption “in different names”, they had all failed. In particular, he condemned the inability of the United States to force Israel to freeze settlements. Add to that “some modest European attempts” and in the end the European position remained a follower of the United States position. All that was indicative of a structural defect in the negotiation process, including in its terms of reference and setup, he said. Israel’s broad changes on the ground and refusal to resolve some minor border issues called into significant question the possibility of territorial compromise.

A new approach required expanded international efforts, and care must be taken not to confine the process only to the efforts of the United States, he said. That meant relying also on the efforts of China, the Russian Federation and the European Union to put together an alternative – defined by United Nations recognition of the State of Palestine, with its land and borders “not a disputed land” but the land of a State. While the central issue was the immediate termination of the occupation, the success of such an approach would be reinforced by an end to Palestinian division and steady social and economic development.

RICHARD WRIGHT, Director, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Representative Office, New York, said that as time passed, things did not get any easier for Palestinian refugees. Citing in particular the suffering of the refugee community in Syria, where more than half, or 235,000 refugees, were now internally displaced, he said a much smaller percentage had fled to neighbouring countries. Still, Palestinian refugees continue to draw upon their “seemingly endless reserves of resilience, mutual support and kinship to weather turbulence, upheaval and violence”.

He went on to describe UNRWA’s tasks, its humanitarian effort first, saying its services to Palestine refugees could best be compared to those normally supplied by local authorities or national Governments. Through services delivered by the Agency’s 30,000 staff, most of whom were themselves Palestine refugees, more than 490,000 children went to UNRWA schools, he said, adding that the Agency’s 139 health centres across the region had received 10 million patients last year, and the poorest and most vulnerable refugees had received assistance, notably food aid.

“Today, our Agency is facing a disturbing medley of man-made crises of varying intensity in all five fields of operation,” he said, describing in detail the situation in Gaza, where last November’s violent conflict had aggravated the already dire situation. Driving his point home, he said two thirds of the Palestine refugee population of 1.2 million people in Gaza, or 827,000 people, required food aid, at a projected cost to the Agency of \$93 million in 2013 and \$122 million in 2020 if all needs were met. An immediate change was needed in Gaza to reverse those deteriorating trends.

As for the West Bank, restrictions and barriers imposed by the occupying Power were stifling economic activity, he said. Settlement expansion and growing settler violence were also seriously affecting some of the Agency’s more vulnerable beneficiaries. There were also Palestine refugees who had been displaced from their lands in the West Bank and impacted by checkpoints preventing them from reaching their workplaces, market areas, hospitals and schools.

Turning to Syria, he said the crisis was “unravelling the fabric” of the Palestine refugee community there and increasing their vulnerability. Seven out of 12 refugee camps had become “battlegrounds”, with most of their residents put to flight. UNRWA had repeatedly called on both sides in the conflict to respect humanitarian and human rights law and refrain from offensive operations in civilian areas, but those urgent appeals had not been heeded. In short, the needs of the Palestine refugees in Syria “are escalating fast”,

he stressed.

Additionally, there was heightened tension in Lebanon's already overcrowded refugee camps, while in Jordan, thus far the most stable field of operations, mounting political tensions and the massive influx of refugees risked creating negative spillover effects on the large population of Palestine refugees – approximately 2 million registered with UNRWA. Poverty was rampant in the camps, and more than 7,000 Palestine refugees from Syria had sought help from UNRWA, putting financial pressure on its operations there.

He said the Syrian crisis had also forced approximately 1,000 Palestine refugees to flee to Gaza and up to 10,000 to Egypt, where the Agency was working with the authorities and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assist them. Meeting its goals required that UNRWA receive the necessary support from Member States, which provided 97 per cent of its funds. The reality, however, was that the financial environment in which the Agency operated was worsening, thereby hampering its ability to meet its objectives.

“The international community needs a strong UNRWA,” he said in closing. The alternative – a steady erosion through a process of ‘death by a thousand cuts’ – would destabilize the Palestine refugee community at a time when renewed efforts were being made to re-launch the Middle East peace process. That would not only be politically unwise, but it would also throw the burden of caring for the refugees on to host countries, none of which was in a position to cope. It would also add to the multiplicity of other tensions in the region.

AHMAD TIBI, Member of Knesset, Arab Movement for Change, Jerusalem, highlighted a number of recent developments, including the statement by Israel's Deputy Minister for Defence that it would not agree to the two-State solution. He also highlighted the statement made yesterday by the Minister for the Economy, who had said the notion of a two-State solution was over, that there would be no Palestinian State, and that more and more settlements should be built.

Today, an Arab village inside Jerusalem had been attacked by Jews, he reported, pointing out that the attackers had not been called terrorists. Only Arabs were called terrorists, and when Jews attacked, it was considered a “price tag” – the price of revenge. Yet, Jewish settlers carried out systematic, daily attacks against Palestinian villages and towns and against Arab citizens of Israel.

For the past 17 years, the PLO and the Israeli Government had been negotiating on and off about implementing a two-State solution, he recalled. However, the ordinary Palestinian citizen felt that his or her life was worse than before. While Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to meet publicly with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas – to continue the process that had been going on for 17 years – the truth was that it was only a “photo op”.

The Prime Minister said the Palestinians were setting preconditions on negotiations, such as an Israeli freeze on settlement construction and the release of prisoners, but he was the one imposing preconditions by insisting that the PLO accept Israel as a Jewish State. “We're talking about a very strange precondition by Israel,” he said, noting that President Abbas was saying “no” to it because if he accepted it, there would be no chance even to put the refugee issue on the table. Defining Israel as a Jewish State would strengthen by law the “inferior” status of the Arab minority, he warned.

Emphasizing that Prime Minister Netanyahu “definitely is not a partner for a two-State solution”, Mr. Tibi pointed out that the Israeli leader had never uttered the words “independent” or “sovereign” in reference to a Palestinian State. He had said “Palestinian” and “demilitarized”, but never “independent”. There was a motion to downgrade the Arabic language and not accept it as an official language, he said, citing other “dangerous” trends, land confiscations among them.

He urged the international community, the United Nations and the Palestinian Rights Committee to pay attention to the Arab minority and demand that the Israeli Government explain its refusal to deal with

them as equal citizens. Israel was described as an island of democracy in the Middle East, yet it had two systems of law – military and civil. The double standard must stop, he stressed, saying Israel was not above international law.

LI LIANHE, Deputy Director-General, Department of West Asian and North African Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, said that 60 years since the establishment of the State of Israel the legitimate rights of the Palestinians had not been restored. That was the source of “acute conflict”, he said. To right the historical wrongs and grant Palestinians their rights was key to the solution and the expectation of the international community, he said, adding that the two-State solution was the ultimate goal.

He said there had been major changes in the Middle East over the past two years, but the Palestinian question remained at the core of peace and stability in the region. The international community had stepped up its efforts, and Palestine and Israel had expressed willingness to resume the long-stalled peace talks, but that would require a favourable environment, which called for practical measures on the part of both parties.

Reiterating that the construction and expansion of settlements, as well as the destruction of Palestinian homes, especially in East Jerusalem, “must be stopped”, he rejected such unilateral actions in East Jerusalem, where the religious and cultural heritage must be protected. In addition, the Gaza blockade must be lifted. He said his country would continue to work for reconciliation in Palestine. Solutions to such issues would create good conditions for the resumption of negotiations and the two-State solution. Israel should also remove obstacles for the early resumption of peace talks.

Calling attention to China’s four-point proposal, which emphasized practical measures for creating favourable conditions for peace negotiations, he said that more than 20 years since Oslo, there were many difficulties, but the goal was the same. Great success could bloom from hardship, and as long as both Palestinians and Israelis, alongside the international community, adhered to the goal of peace and made the necessary efforts, obstacles would be overcome.

DANIEL BEN SIMON, former Member of Knesset, Tel Aviv, described the mood in Israel today by saying that during the elections four months ago, and for the first time in history, the conflict had not been on the agenda, “as if we lived in Switzerland or in Norway or in France”. But in Israel, the words “peace process” were never spoken. The so-called left wanted a Palestinian State, while the right-wing wanted a greater Israel, but the issue did not presently exist. Israelis had gone to the polls on two issues: social equality, and military service for the 15 to 20 per cent ultra-orthodox population.

In sum, the elections had had nothing to do with the issue currently under discussion, he said, recalling that his party had lost its Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, because he had shaken hands with Yasser Arafat. Now, there was never a word mentioned about it, he said, adding that it was as if Mr. Rabin had been killed twice. The “big winners” were the people who never raised the issue of the peace process; it simply was not on the agenda.

He went on to note that Israelis had taken to the streets to demand equality, not a Palestinian State nor the end of occupation, but only the end of “occupation” by the rich, who had become the enemy. The mood in Israeli society was about making it more fair and equal, but regretfully, the issue of peace remained absent from the agenda four months after the elections. President Barack Obama of the United States had come and kissed everyone, but after his departure nothing had been left of his visit, he said. When Secretary of State Kerry visited, there was almost no mention of it in the newspapers, except perhaps on page 14.

Mr. Netanyahu had been re-elected because his views on the peace process were not relevant to the elections, he said. There had been no talk of the two-State solution, and there were those who said it was dead. However, there had also been no talk of a one-State solution. The Prime Minister was “Mr. Status Quo”, which fit the mood of Israelis today, he said. The peace process that had been the jewel in the crown of Israeli politics was no longer there. The Knesset had voted on the budget yesterday, and cuts had

been made in all areas of life except one – settlements. They had not only been left intact, but some \$4 billion more had been added to the settlements budget.

He said there was a sense of normality in Israel, where life was good and Israelis were turning to their internal problems. It seemed that Israelis and Palestinians were not really eager to “divorce” and maybe living together peacefully would bring progress. There was a growing tendency to stay together, but that raised questions, such as birth-rate disparities, citizenship and the right to vote. However, he said he did not see that anyone was ready or able politically to “cut this State in two”, so, in a way, the status quo had led to staying together; the question was how.

QAIS ABDEL-KARIM KHADER, Chairman, Committee for Social Affairs and Health, Palestinian Legislative Council, Ramallah, said there was a growing awareness that the chronic impasse could no longer be dealt with in the conventional ways, and that the international community must intervene in a more effective and creative way to revive the process and open a new horizon. One of the most evident expressions of that awareness had been the General Assembly vote in favour of granting Palestine the status of a non-member State.

It was no longer sufficient to urge the parties to return to the negotiating table, he said. The Israelis needed to be reminded that there was a conflict to be solved. The Palestinians wanted to “divorce” and tangible measures were therefore required to create the appropriate environment for meaningful and credible negotiations, mainly by ensuring respect for the obligations stipulated in the relevant international resolutions, including the decisions of the Quartet.

He said that the General Assembly’s recognition of Palestine as a non-member State provided the legal basis for activating instruments of international law, which would ensure that any party – in this case, Israel – disregarding its commitments would be held accountable, including for war crimes. A more realistic approach to Palestinian reconciliation might be formulated, but that was an internal Palestinian matter. However, regional and international factors impeding rapprochement must not be disregarded, he stressed.

The international community had a responsibility to protect the Palestinian reconciliation process against the negative effects of such factors, he continued, adding that reconciliation was necessary for the success of the peace process. On the one hand, it would enable the peace process to achieve its proclaimed final goal – implementation of the two-State solution on the basis of the pre-1967 borders – which would be impossible in the face of perpetual Palestinian division that was no longer a mere split between factions, but had developed into a separatist situation between Gaza and the West Bank, entailing a deepening differentiation between the two political situations.

In fact, the division only gave Israel the pretext that it was useless to negotiate with a Palestinian partner that could not guarantee the implementation of any agreements, he went on. The situation showed the inability of the Palestinian leadership to engage in a difficult and sensitive process, which depended largely on popular support and national consensus. Israel had a vested interest in perpetuating Palestinian division and was supported in that regard by the United States, he said.

Certainly, external factors were impeding Palestinian reconciliation, as alliances of regional Powers competed for influence in a hurricane of change, he said, adding that despite all that, the overwhelming majority of Palestinians looked forward to their day of reconciliation. It was up to the international community to encourage the process by putting the relevant resolutions into practice.

Discussion

In the ensuing brief exchange, Mr. Ben Simon elaborated on his view of the “occupation” in the minds of Israelis today, saying, “we’ve tried everything; it doesn’t work.”

A participant, identifying herself as being from Israel, said Jewish Israelis were frightened by the

idea of a bi-national State, and asked how there would be “enough for both” peoples. Perhaps opening the discussion of a one-State solution might get Israelis to return to a discussion of the two-State solution.

Mr. WRIGHT pointed out that when Mr. Ben Simon said things were going well in the West Bank, that might be the case for settlers, but according to recent World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports, the West Bank economy would remain severely constrained by the occupying Power unless the obstacles and restrictions were removed.

As for a one-State solution, Mr. Tibi said, if the Israelis did not agree to end the occupation and promote Palestinian self-determination, they would not accept a one-State solution. They would have an apartheid situation, which was not acceptable to the Palestinians.

Mr. Al-Salhi said the argument was often that there could be no real negotiation until the violence stopped, but when there were quiet periods between Israelis and Palestinians, the argument was that Israel did not need to deal with the issue. That was the situation of Israeli society in general, he said. However, unless the conflict was solved, they would have to pay the price in the final analysis. That was why a “real intervention” by the international community was needed.

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