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389TH MEETING (PM)

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The Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine today urged States to guard against the “creeping danger” of a one-State reality, as the Palestinian Rights Committee considered the situation on the ground in the territory occupied by Israel and the “destabilizing” impact of sharp humanitarian cuts by the United States.

Riyad Mansour, briefing the Committee — known formally as the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People — recalled that the international community had stood united following the United States provocative decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem and recognize the city as the capital of Israel. In the Security Council, 14 out of 15 members had voted in defence of past resolutions deeming any changes in Jerusalem’s legal status to be illegal, null and void. In response to a subsequent General Assembly vote, the United States had cut its support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) by more than 50 per cent, while also eliminating a $48 million food programme for the people of the Gaza Strip.

Noting that the United States Administration had recently decided to expedite its embassy move — now planned for 14 May — he emphasized that all those actions would compound the outrage of the Palestinian people. Donors at a conference recently held in Rome had pledged some $100 million to try to bridge the Agency’s $446 million funding gap. That was a first step, but UNRWA would need more funds to fulfil its mandate through the end of 2018. Other recent meetings included one in Egypt and another in Brussels, both convened to address the Palestinians’ dire humanitarian situation, and had collected some $550 million to fund critical water and sanitation projects.

Meanwhile, a meeting — characterized by its conveners as a humanitarian “brainstorming session” — was held in Washington, D.C., he said. However, actions spoke louder than words, and slashing funding was not congruent with the stated goal of supporting the Palestinian people. The Palestinian leadership refused to engage with the United States against such a backdrop.

Recalling the proposal by Mahmoud Abbas, President of the State of Palestine, to convene an international summit in mid-2018, as well to create a mechanism to salvage the two-State solution and end the Israeli occupation, he said Arab ministers were meeting with Security Council members to push forward his nation’s 2011 application for full admission to the Organization. Warning against the “creeping danger” of the one-State reality, he said such efforts were a way to help protect the two-State solution. Engagement was also under way on the implementation of Council resolution 2334 (2016), which upheld the illegality of the Israeli settlements and the principle of differentiation between “Israel proper” and the Occupied Territory.

Expressing concern that “14 May is looming”, he called on all States to brainstorm ways to prevent — or respond to — the United States embassy’s move. Regarding Israel’s efforts to take up a seat on the Security Council, he said the recent briefing by the United Nations Special Coordinator for Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov, had revealed accelerated settlement efforts and a refusal of the idea of differentiation, as well as violations of other resolutions. Such actions disqualified Israel from having a seat on the Council, he stressed, urging all States who supported the principles enshrined in international law to prevent Israel’s bid “from day one”.

The representative of Cuba, following that briefing, voiced support for the cause of the Palestinian people and described the United States decision to move its embassy as a “serious step backward”. “Our Committee cannot just stand still while this happens,” she stressed, calling for the Committee to prepare a firm statement on the matter. Regarding the Arab Group’s meetings following the Jerusalem decision, she said the Committee should actively support those actions and pledged Cuba’s commitment to do the same.

The representative of Indonesia, echoing concern about those recent developments and the sharp reduction in UNRWA funding, said women and children bore the brunt of those cuts. While the prospect for the two-State solution was becoming increasingly remote, Indonesia continued to support it as the only way forward for the Palestinian people.

Also briefing the Committee, Peter Mulrean, Director of the UNRWA New York Office, recalled that the Agency had a mandate from the General Assembly to provide humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees as long as the Assembly deemed necessary. UNRWA had no political agenda or place in the political process, he stressed, adding that the Agency upheld United Nations values and standards and would continue to pursue its work until the Assembly said otherwise. “UNRWA is currently facing an existential crisis” that would require a collective international solution, he said. In addition to providing access to food and primary education, the Agency — by offering hope and dignity to Palestinian refugees — also contributed much-needed stability and helped mitigate extremism in the Middle East.

Noting that UNRWA had never anticipated that its largest single donor would decide to reduce its funding by more than 80 per cent, he described accelerated efforts to build up funding from other countries and sources. Those included a campaign called “dignity is priceless”, he said, thanking those States that had advanced future funding and provided the Agency with the “breathing room” needed to continue its current work. Also recalling the extraordinary display of solidarity with UNRWA at the recent Rome meeting — which had resulted in about $100 million in new funding pledges — he nevertheless warned that “our reality remains stark” with a $173 million shortfall in its overall operations budget and humanitarian appeals that remained woefully underfunded.

Indeed, he said, without addition 2018 funds, UNRWA would be forced to eliminate several of its activities, putting undue burdens on host countries and communities. Expressing particular concern over the increasingly fragile situation in the Gaza Strip, where 1.2 million Palestinian refugees lived, he said the Agency provided food to thousands there and had created much-needed mental health clinics. The largest humanitarian agency in Gaza could not continue to function “with its hands tied behind its back”, he stressed.

In other business, Committee Rapporteur Mahmoud Saikal (Afghanistan) provided a briefing on the Committee’s recent visit to Uganda, from 26 to 28 February. Recalling that the mission’s objectives had included enhancing that country’s political and diplomatic ties and support for the two-State solution, as well as sharing information about the conditions of life for Palestinians living under occupation and the Committee’s mandate, he said another imperative had been to explore the evolving position of African countries on the question of Palestine and their support for its people. Among other activities, the Committee had met with high-level officials, including the President and the Prime Minister, as well as academics, students and civil society representatives.

The Committee also approved a proposal to visit Panama from 9 to 10 April, the modalities of a two-day forum to take place in New York on 17 and 18 May — titled “70 Years after 1948: Lessons to achieve a sustainable peace” — as well as the draft programme of the fifth International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem, to be convened in Rabat, Morocco from 26-28 June.

Also delivering statements, including descriptions of their own activities in support of the Palestinian people, were the representatives of Morocco, Venezuela and Senegal.