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UNITED NATIONS

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**Message of H.E. Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, President of the Palestinian National Authority, to the Meeting of the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People in observance of the 60<sup>th</sup> Year of the Dispossession of the Palestinian People – Al-Nakba – 20 June 2008:**

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor for me, on behalf of the Palestinian people and their leadership to address this solemn occasion marking the passage of the 60<sup>th</sup> year since Al-Nakba – the catastrophe that befell the Palestinian people in 1948, whereby the majority of Palestinians were forcibly expelled or fled in fear from their homes and villages as war raged around them, uprooted, dispossessed and displaced, becoming refugees and a stateless people whose tragedy continues to this day.

As we have reflected this past year on other solemn occasions, including the 40<sup>th</sup> year of the occupation by Israel of the Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and other Arab territories since 1967, the Palestinian people once again reflect on their past and their present with deep sorrow as they continue to struggle for the realization of their inalienable human rights, including their right to self-determination and right to return. They remember decades of enduring oppression, loss and misery and look with uncertainty towards the future, as their national rights and aspirations for freedom and peace remain unfulfilled.

Yet, the Palestinian people, in remembering the long years of struggle, also reflect upon their steadfastness and resilience as a people over the decades. Despite waves of crisis and upheaval, the Palestinian people have never given up on their legitimate and inalienable rights. They have remained steadfast in their struggle to achieve justice and to live free, in peace and security, in their homeland. They have remained committed, under the leadership of their sole, legitimate representative - the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) - to their goal of establishing their independent State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, in the Palestinian Territory that has remained under Israeli foreign military occupation since 1967.

Over the generations, the Palestinian people and their leadership have kept the name of Palestine alive; the Palestinian struggle for national liberation remains at the forefront of issues on the regional and international agendas and the just cause of Palestine continues to receive wide international support. This solidarity has been vital for our people's resilience over the years of dispossession and oppression, and for this support we reiterate our deepest gratitude, and reiterate also the need at this critical time for the international community to redouble its commitment towards the realization by the Palestinian people of their inalienable rights and the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, which will allow the peoples of our region to enjoy the freedom, prosperity and security to which all peoples are entitled.

P R E S S R E L E A S E 1

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

After the passage of so many decades, the Palestinian people tragically remain a stateless and oppressed people. The injustice inflicted on the Palestinian people in the 1948 Al-Nakba not only entailed the loss and destruction of their homes, properties, villages and heritage, but also the loss of their homeland in a calamitous war, whose reverberations continue to be felt today.

More than half of the Palestinian people live in exile as refugees, dispersed throughout the Diaspora, with millions still in refugee camps, denied their inalienable right to return to their homes to live at peace with their neighbors; while the remainder of the Palestinian people, also including millions of refugees, live under Israel's occupation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, forced to endure the constant violation of their human rights and mounting hardships and loss. Each passing year has witnessed the deepening of this injustice, the continued trampling of the human dignity of the Palestinian people, the further shredding of the fabric of their society and the compounding of this tragic conflict.

The Palestine refugees - now three generations of families numbering more than 4.5 million people - continue to await fulfillment of their right to return, a right to which all refugees and displaced persons around the world are entitled; to await just compensation for their losses and suffering; and to await justice; while at the same time they continue to endure serious hardships, including poverty, repeated displacement, instability and conflict. Sixty years later, the Palestine refugee question is the largest and longest-standing refugee question in the world.

The plight of the Palestine refugees is due directly to Israel's intransigence and its disrespect for international law and U.N. resolutions, particularly General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948. If Israel had chosen to abide by international law and comply with United Nations resolutions, as it is obligated to do by the Charter, the tragedy of the Palestine refugees would have long ago been justly resolved and the international community would not continue to face the many humanitarian and political challenges arising from this ongoing crisis. Yet, Israel continues to deny the Palestine refugees the right to return to their ancestral homeland - even while actively implementing a "law of return" permitting the immigration of any Jewish person from anywhere in the world - and continues to deny responsibility for their plight and suffering.

In this regard, I must refer to the indispensable role that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has played in alleviating the suffering of the Palestine refugees. The Agency has been providing essential assistance to the refugees and has also helped preserve their rights and protect them in times of conflict, serving as a constant and stabilizing presence in the lives of the refugees, young and old. We reiterate our sincere gratitude to UNRWA's Commissioner-General and staff for their tireless efforts on behalf of the Palestine refugees. We also reiterate our deep appreciation for the support of the international community, including in particular the host governments of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and the donor community, for the refugees and UNRWA's efforts to assist them. This support reflects both the international humanitarian commitment to the welfare of the Palestine refugees as well as the political commitment to the ultimate just resolution of their plight.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Regrettably, despite numerous international initiatives and countless U.N. resolutions, the Palestinian people continue to be denied their national rights because of Israel's flagrant disrespect

for international law. Even while purporting to pursue peace, Israel has acted with impunity, carrying out repressive policies against the Palestinian people and committing systematic human rights violations and war crimes against them by killing, injuring, imprisoning, displacing and collectively punishing Palestinian civilians; destroying their properties, institutions, infrastructure and lands; and inflicting on them vast losses and humanitarian suffering. As time and the evolution of the situation on the ground has shown us, all of this has been done by Israel with the intent to perpetuate its unlawful occupation of the Palestinian land - now the longest occupation in contemporary history - in order to *de facto* annex as much of that land as possible.

This desire for expansionism has been at the core of Israel's illegal policies against the Palestinian people. Not only did Israel, in violation of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force, seize more land in 1948 than was allotted to it by General Assembly resolution 181 (II) of 29 November 1947, which partitioned historic Palestine and led to Israel's establishment, but it has continued to pursue illegal policies directly aimed at acquiring and *de facto* annexing large areas of the Palestinian land it has occupied since 1967.

Before the eyes of the international community and in contravention of international law, U.N. resolutions and the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion, Israel has been carrying out a massive colonization campaign in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. The occupying Power is doing so via the illegal construction and expansion of settlements and of the Wall, which is intricately linked to the settlements and intended to entrench and protect them, and various other unlawful measures. Settlement colonization has been especially intense in and around Occupied East Jerusalem, which is the heart of the Palestinian Territory, and Israel is actively pursuing additional policies to further obstruct Palestinian access to the city and physically sever it from the rest of the Territory.

Hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers have been illegally transferred to settlements and settlement "outposts" in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in grave breach of the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention and Additional Protocol 1. Moreover, for the direct purpose of this illegal colonial campaign Israel has never ceased its confiscation of Palestinian land and destruction of Palestinian homes and properties, which, in addition to the imposition of a permit regime and hundreds of checkpoints intended to completely restrict Palestinian movement, have resulted in the displacement of more civilians, the separation and walling-in of Palestinian cities and towns, the destruction of entire communities and socio-economic devastation.

All such illegal Israeli practices are altering the demographic composition, character and nature of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and destroying its contiguity, integrity and unity, gravely undermining the prospects for achieving the two-State solution on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), and 1397 (2002), the Arab Peace Initiative and the Quartet Road Map. It is this unlawful colonization campaign that constitutes the core obstruction to the achievement of a just and lasting peace settlement and the achievement of Palestinian national rights in their independent State of Palestine, living side by side with Israel in peace and security on the basis of the pre-1967 borders.

These illegal Israeli actions must be rejected and condemned, and the international community must undertake real measures to bring about a complete and immediate cessation of illegal Israeli practices, including all settlement activities, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. It is the collective duty of the international community, including the Security Council, to uphold the law and implement the relevant U.N. resolutions and to act urgently to compel Israel to abide by all of its

legal obligations and truly pursue peace. This will be the only means of salvaging the peace process and the two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this occasion of remembrance of the 60<sup>th</sup> year of Al-Nakba and the steadfastness of the Palestinian people for the realization of their rights and freedom, I call upon the international community to intensify its efforts at all levels to address these serious issues that are preventing us from advancing the peace process towards the achievement of its stated goals - an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and the establishment of the independent State of Palestine; a just and agreed solution to the Palestine refugee question in accordance with resolution 194 (III); and the establishment of a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace in the region.

After sixty long years, during which both peoples have lived in conflict, no effort should be spared to bring an end to this tragedy and the suffering and loss on both sides. Continuation of the current situation is untenable and unacceptable, and there can never be peace or security in the Middle East as long as the question of Palestine, the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, remains unresolved. Only a just settlement based on international law and U.N. resolutions can bring an end to this conflict and bring the peace and stability we are all searching for. The Palestinian people and their leadership remain committed to the peace process to achieve their legitimate national rights and aspirations, and we urge all concerned parties, including the Quartet, to seize the moment to promote the process renewed at Annapolis, as well as the opportunity created by the Arab Peace Initiative, to support the parties to advance negotiations towards the achievement of a final peace settlement.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Palestinian cause is a just cause that resonates deeply with all those who believe in justice, peace and freedom for all peoples. International support, including political, moral, financial and humanitarian support, has been vital for the Palestinian people over the decades that they have struggled to end the occupation and to realize their rights and it remains essential for maintaining their hope in the face of so much adversity. I thus express the immense gratitude of the Palestinian people and their leadership for the support and solidarity extended to them by the international community, including at the U.N., over the years.

In this regard, we give special recognition to the U.N. - which has a permanent responsibility towards the question of Palestine until it is justly resolved in all its aspects, including the question of the Palestine refugees - for its assistance to the Palestinian people, including, *inter alia*, through UNRWA and many other U.N. Agencies. We also express our appreciation for the efforts of this Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the Division for Palestinian Rights and other U.N. bodies that have worked to draw attention to the plight of the Palestinian people and to promote the realization of their inalienable rights and a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine. Our belief in the purposes and principles of the U.N. and in international law is firm, and we will continue to seek international support to achieve a peaceful settlement, with the hope that one day soon we shall gather here to celebrate the inclusion of the free and independent Palestine among the family of nations.