



SPECIAL MEETING TO MARK SIXTY YEARS OF DISPOSSESSION OF PALESTINE REFUGEES

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by

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of the Palestinian People

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I have the honour to welcome you to the Special meeting of the Committee convened to mark sixty years of dispossession of Palestine refugees.

Sixty long years have passed since hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes and property as a result of the Arab-Israeli hostilities of 1948. By the time armistice agreements were signed in 1949, Israeli forces had ended up controlling large parts of British Mandate Palestine, areas that became the new State of Israel. The remaining area of the land – the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – was under the control of Jordan and Egypt, respectively. Even worse, the conflict resulted in the mass flight of some 800,000 Palestine refugees leaving behind their homes, land and property. The outcome of the war was mourned as a disaster by the Palestinians, the Nakba.

The United Nations has been involved with the conflict over Palestine from the outset and probably no issue has received as much attention from the Organization. Since 1947, every phase in the unfolding crisis has been addressed in reports of the General Assembly, the Security Council, and other organs, not only marking the events, but in some cases shaping them. The issue of Palestine refugees became and continued to be a core aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict. On 11 December 1948, the General Assembly, in resolution 194 (III), resolved that “the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.” For six decades, the Palestinian people who fled their homes in 1948 have remained refugees, whose status has been passed from generation to generation. No other refugees in modern history have remained refugees for such a long time, yet their predicament and long-lost justice have received little attention of the international community.

The issue of Palestine refugees is central to achieving the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. In 1974, the General Assembly adopted resolution 3236 (XXIV), reaffirming the inalienable rights of the Palestinians people, namely the right to self-determination without external interference, the right to national independence and sovereignty, and the right to return to their homes and property from which they had been displaced or uprooted. Our Committee, which was established the following year, 1975, was mandated to promote the exercise by the Palestinian people of its inalienable rights.

Where are Palestine refugees today? Nowadays, the original Palestine refugees and their descendants are estimated to number more than 7 million and constitute the world’s oldest and largest refugee population. They include 4.5 million 1948 refugees who are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA); 1.5 million 1948 refugees not registered with UNRWA either because they did not register or did not need assistance at the time they became refugees; 950,000 displaced persons from the 1967 war; and 350,000 internally displaced in Israel.

About a third of the refugees still live in refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. While the life of a Palestine refugee is difficult, it is particularly deplorable in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, refugees have been subjected to the demolition of their homes and confiscation of their land. Confiscated Palestinian land has been set aside for the exclusive use of some 480,000 settlers. Of the homes demolished in the last six months, more than half belonged to refugees. Some 38 per cent of the West Bank is inaccessible to Palestinians.

This land was once meant to form part of a Palestinian State. Over 600 checkpoints or obstacles impede freedom of movement, negatively impacting socio-economic activity and development. The separation wall, illegally built in large parts on Palestinian land, now extends over 57 per cent of its planned 723-kilometre route, confining thousands of Palestinians, and preventing thousands more from entering East Jerusalem. The continuing settlement activity is contrary to international law and Security Council resolutions. The construction of the wall deviates from the Green Line and is contrary to the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice.

The severe isolation of the Gaza Strip has brought misery and destitution to the 1.5 million Palestinians living there. Two thirds of them are refugees, many continue to live in UNRWA camps. The humanitarian condition of Gaza residents has become increasingly grave. They are caught between the closure of crossings and Israeli measures amounting to collective punishment. Basic commodities for the population, like food, fuel, medical supplies and equipment, school books, construction materials, farming inputs, and other have barely trickled in. UNRWA had to temporarily suspend its operations for lack of fuel. The typical monthly traffic of 11,000 trucks laden with goods has shrunk to about 2,000. The blockage of the Gaza Strip has worsened poverty, unemployment and longer-term effects such as child malnutrition. At least 80 per cent of Gazans are now fully dependent on food aid and humanitarian assistance. Unrelenting Israeli incursions have resulted in the high number of deaths and injuries among civilians, including women and children. The international community should hold Israel fully responsible for the welfare and protection of the refugees in the Palestinian Territory it continues to occupy, including the Gaza Strip.

The United Nations has been involved with assisting Palestine refugees since 1948. UNRWA's main purpose is the direct provision of essential public services to Palestine refugees in the Middle East. It provides primary education to some half a million children annually and primary health care to the entire refugee population. Through its hard work, it has eliminated communicable diseases among refugees. UNRWA offers social services, particularly to those rendered vulnerable by poverty, disability and social exclusion. Building homes and replacing those damaged by Israeli forces and a microfinance programme are among other services by UNRWA.

On a personal note, I would like to share with you that I was able to witness the work of UNRWA when a delegation of the Committee visited two refugee camps in northern Jordan during its stay in the country in connection with the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People held in Amman last February. This experience, very moving and emotional at times, helped us better understand and appreciate the work done by UNRWA and the important role of the host countries, namely Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. UNRWA cannot operate without their full cooperation.

On behalf of the Committee, allow me to thank Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Ms. Karen Abu-Zayd, and the dedicated and hard-working staff of the Agency for their important work of alleviating the hardship of millions of Palestine refugees in the region. This important work of the Agency, however, is often restrained by underfinancing. I would also like to use this occasion to appeal to all donors, through their representatives present here, to continue to support UNRWA and be generous in their contributions.

As most of you know, last April, our Committee convened at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, the United Nations International Conference on Palestine Refugees, in order to help assess the situation of the refugees and examine the role of the United Nations in alleviating their plight. The Conference also discussed international efforts at finding an agreed, just and fair solution to the Palestine refugee problem. The final document of that Conference has been distributed by the Secretariat.

Clearly, a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is overdue. Our Committee continues to support the Middle East peace process based on Security Council resolutions 242 and 338. It fully supports the objective of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side within secure and recognized borders, as endorsed by Security Council resolution 1515. We have welcomed the Arab Peace Initiative and the Quartet's Road Map, calling on the parties to implement them. The Committee has also supported the holding of the Annapolis Conference and welcomed the Joint Understanding reached by the parties.

The Committee has continuously urged both parties to intensify political negotiations and action to improve conditions for both Israelis and Palestinians on the ground, notwithstanding the domestic challenges on both sides. We commend the active role of regional partners for finding political solutions on several fronts, in support of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the region. It is important that in the permanent status negotiations the parties seriously focus on all the core issues - borders, settlements, Jerusalem and refugees.

Palestine refugees, by sheer numbers, constitute a significant presence in the region. The resolution of their tragic plight should therefore be paramount in any peace settlement. They have gone through suffering, humiliation and dispossession for far too long – too long to be paralleled with any other refugee situations in the world. At the start of my statement I said that this special meeting was convened to mark sixty years of dispossession of Palestine refugees. But, in fact, when Palestinians talk about the tragedy of *Al-Nakba* they always mean the dispossession and deprivation of the entire Palestinian people of their homeland, their property and their identity. Under international law and also on a moral ground, all of us have a responsibility to continue to work toward bringing about a just solution to this problem.

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