

occupied Palestinian territory: “Systematic human rights violations continue in the occupied territories,” says UN Committee

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AMMAN (28 July 2011)– The Special Committee to investigate Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people and other Arabs of the territories occupied since 1967* following visits to Gaza and Amman expressed dismay at Israel’s continuing disregard of its obligations under international law.

For the first time since it was established in 1968 the Special Committee was able to visit Gaza. The Government of Egypt facilitated the visit via the border crossing at Rafah. “Unfortunately, what we found was that the oppressive restrictions imposed on Gaza by Israel have the effect of collectively punishing the population,” noted the Committee. It continued, “With around 35% of Gaza’s land area excluded from agriculture due to Israel’s vague ‘buffer zone’ along the border, and its fishing areas limited to only three nautical miles from the coast (85% of fisheries), the people of Gaza could hardly feed themselves, much less revive a decimated economy through exports. We were alarmed by allegations that Israel enforces these policies employing live fire, including in some instances against children and the elderly.”

“Israel’s continuing blockade of Gaza contravenes the human rights of the people of Gaza and international humanitarian law and standards,” said Ambassador Palitha T.B. Kohona, Chairman of the Committee. “It is oppressive and diminishes the lives of the people of Gaza and must be ended now,” he stressed.

In Gaza, the Committee listened to victims, witnesses and United Nations officials who underlined the dire impact on human rights of the Israeli blockade. Homes, schools and other infrastructure that were destroyed by Israeli attacks in December 2008 and January 2009 could not be rebuilt due to restrictions on the import of building material. The economy declined significantly and is sustained by illegal imports through tunnels. “It would be the occupying power’s responsibility to assist with the reconstruction of Gaza,” noted the Committee. “Beyond homes, schools, businesses that were destroyed, there is an urgent need for water treatment facilities, road, sewage treatment and the restoration of power.” The valuable services provided by local and international nongovernmental organizations, and especially UNRWA, were noted by the Committee.

“For many of Gaza’s children, life is difficult and the future is hopeless,” the Committee noted, referring to testimony concerning worrying health, psychological and social problems, increasing school drop out rates, and an increasing incidence of child labor. The Committee continued, “We hope the Government of Israel will seriously consider the potential consequences of a generation of Gazan children being raised in an environment of near-total deprivation and a lack of opportunities to lead a productive and hopeful life.”

The policies and practices of the Government of Israel which violate the rights of Palestinian children was a constant theme throughout the Committee’s hearings. Witnesses and officials reported that Palestinian children’s access to education is being impeded through, among other things, restrictions on freedom of movement, constraints on access due to the Wall, a lack of schools – especially in East Jerusalem and Gaza, and threats and actual violence by Israeli settlers. The Committee’s attention was drawn to the large number children detained, and in this regard a range of practices of serious concern, including harsh interrogation techniques, torture, and expulsion from their villages.

The Committee underlined its “deep concern regarding reports that Israeli security forces are raiding Palestinian homes in the middle hours of the night to detain children, allegedly as young as seven years old.” “Even more distressing are reports that children are being subjected to ill-treatments, taken before military courts, and often made to sign confessions under duress,” the Committee noted. The Committee referred to the expulsion of children from their homes, by Israeli courts, as “profoundly worrying and impermissible under international law.”

The Special Committee’s 9-day investigative visit to the region also included meetings in Amman, where it met with victims, witnesses and officials working on human rights in the West Bank and the Syrian Golan Heights. A frequent concern communicated throughout the visit related to the situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israel. In this regard, Israel’s restrictions on family visits; denial of the right to education as of recent months; poor conditions of detention; lack of appropriate medical

attention; extended detention without charges; and patterns of ill-treatment and torture while in detention comprise the main concerns.

“The fact that the Government of Israel continues to hold around 6,000 Palestinians in prisons inside Israel, some for over twenty years, merits closer attention from the international community,” said the Committee. The members continued, “These prisoners and their families are suffering deeply. The ill-treatment of women at border crossings and in Israeli prisons raises serious concerns.”

Witnesses updated the Committee regarding ongoing, systematic and widespread Israeli policies and practices in the West Bank, in particular East Jerusalem, such as the confiscation of Palestinian land, the arbitrary demolition of Palestinian homes and properties, restrictions on freedom of movement for Palestinians, and the expansion of Israeli settlements. Several witnesses provided testimony regarding increasingly frequent acts of violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians and their lands and crops. The Committee noted that “The violence by Israel settlers against Palestinians, especially against children, and their lands, in particular the destruction of crops, is appalling. It is plainly criminal behavior and the Israeli authorities must take measures to prevent and punish such behavior.”

Witnesses from the Golan Heights emphasized that Israel has continued its illegal policies and practices. Poor conditions of detention and a lack of family visits for prisoners, discriminatory access to water, especially for agricultural purposes, and the separation of families were highlighted as persistent concerns. Several witnesses raised concerns regarding the Israeli Defense Forces’ excessive use of force in response to protests on Nakba Day and on 5 June 2011, which resulted in deaths and injuries. They also noted with regret that Israel is currently confiscating land to build an eight meter separation wall between the Golan Heights and the rest of Syria.

The Committee expresses its regret that the Government of Israel would not respond to its request to visit the occupied territories. In its report to the sixty-sixth session of the United Nations General Assembly in November 2011, the Special Committee will provide an in-depth review of its main observations following the mission, and will make detailed recommendations to improve respect for human rights in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967.

The Special Committee was established by the UN General Assembly in 1968 to investigate Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people and other Arabs of the territories occupied since 1967. Its mandate was renewed in January 2011.

(* The Special Committee is composed of three Member States: Sri Lanka (Chairman), Malaysia and Senegal. This year the Member States are represented by: Ambassador Palitha T.B. Kohona, Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the UN in New York; Ambassador Hussein Haniff, Permanent Representative of Malaysia to the UN in New York; and Ambassador Fodé Seck, Permanent Representative of Senegal to the UN in Geneva.

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