



General Assembly

GAPAL/1259

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

SPEAKERS AT ROME SEMINAR CITE STRONG, STABLE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

AS PREREQUISITE TO SOVEREIGN, INDEPENDENT STATE OF PALESTINE

Urging Europe to 'Take the Lead', Observer of the State of Palestine Calls For New Approach that Compels Israel to Enter into Meaningful Political Process

ROME, 28 February — A robust, financially stable Palestinian Authority was vital to ensuring enhanced international engagement, a viable Palestinian economy and sustainable human development in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, speakers said this afternoon as the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People wrapped up its work.

Despite the pace of progress on the political track, James W. Rawley, Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, said that safeguarding the financial and political stability of the Palestinian Authority was an essential step towards bolstering development and improving socio-economic conditions on the ground.

He set out three actions in that regard: Israel must stop withholding tax revenues; the Authority itself should present a more balanced budget; and donors should increase their support.

He also highlighted the need for enhancing the role of the donor community and mobilizing assistance to strengthen the Palestinian Authority and its institutions. Building national capacity, he said, was among the key objectives of United Nations agencies working in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in the relevant architecture of the Palestinian Authority. However, there was an additional challenge to coordinating aid, namely, the Israeli occupation, which imposed a range of complex restrictions that manifested themselves in many ways.

“As a consequence, we need to engage with the Israelis on a variety of fronts,” he said, citing political and operational objectives of such engagement.

Further, he added, the ground must be laid for the creation of a vibrant private sector, which would require that Palestinians attained enhanced access to “Area C” for economic activity, that trade was permitted between Gaza and the West Bank, and that they were allowed to expand exports to the rest of the world. “Progress that benefits Palestinians throughout Palestine helps to enable an environment conducive to development and creates conditions for a final status agreement to take root,” he said, and thus paved the way for accelerated progress on sustainable human development.

In the Seminar’s final panel discussion, Mr. Rawley’s statement was delivered by Ramesh Rajasingham, Head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. He was joined by John Gatt-Rutter, who is the European Union Representative to the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA); Charles Silva, Country Director of Action against Hunger, which currently chairs the Association of International Development Agencies in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; and discussant Chantal Meloni, teacher of International Criminal Law at the University of Milan.

Mr. Gatt-Rutter said that the European Union had been working in coordination with the Palestinian Authority to bolster State institutions, and its assistance was provided in a transparent manner. Still, it was concerned about the worrying impasse in the peace process and the steady deterioration of the situation on the ground, which had eroded some development gains and was perhaps putting into question efforts to achieve the two-State solution. In that light, the Union considered the stabilization of the Palestinian Authority a major priority.

A clear political perspective was needed for the European Union’s continued successful work, as its engagement and development assistance was based on a strategic political consideration: the ultimate goal of achieving a functioning, independent Palestinian State. With that in mind, he said that everyone knew that the economic situation in the euro zone was troubling at the moment, just as everyone knew that the Arab world was going through major socio-political challenges. All of which placed huge and competing demands “on the

European Union's limited resources".

Yet without economic strength, it would be very difficult for the Palestinians to make good on the promise envisioned following the General Assembly's 2012 resolution, he said. Shoring up the Palestinian Authority would mean rescuing it from its current "hand to mouth" existence, largely by ensuring regular and predictable transfer of finances. That would mean addressing the recent moves by Israel to withhold taxes from the Palestinian economy.

Continuing, he said that along with bolstering the Palestinian Authority, the European Union believed it was necessary to try to achieve progress on easing the restrictions on movement and people. Indeed, there was virtually no way to create a sustainable Palestinian economy with the current restrictions and closures. One way to address the economic issues that arose from the closures would be to revisit the Paris Protocol to ensure, among others, more automaticity of transfers, less leakage and clearer references to international law. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee was set to meet in Brussels shortly, and such issues could be discussed then.

Finally, he said it was very important to remember that the Palestinian Authority, despite the criticism it often received, remained the most credible and important vehicle for building a Palestinian State. European countries had long said that they would recognize an independent Palestinian State when the conditions were right. It would be easier to reach that point if European stakeholders saw the Palestinian Authority and its institutions as credible and stable.

Highlighting the work of non-governmental organizations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory under the umbrella of the Association of International Development Agencies, Mr. Silva said such groups added value to, or filled gaps in, the work being carried out by intergovernmental bodies in emergency response, providing a protective presence in "Area C", capacity-building of local civil society, and global advocacy. Noting some specifics, he said his organization assisted with responses to evictions and demolitions, natural disasters, settler violence and slow onset disasters.

On the group's protection-related work, he said that Palestinians in "Area C", especially herder and Bedouin communities, often needed legal assistance or help with food security initiatives. In addition, Palestinian children in the area often needed to be accompanied to schools as a protection against settler violence. Farmers needed unique forms of support, and his group worked with local partners to, among others, improve their access to water — which he said was an expensive commodity for Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory — or find innovative solutions to challenges posed to herding and livestock rearing by restrictions put in place by Israel.

In conclusion, he said that while his organization carried out essential work to fill gaps in that being done by larger organizations, it could not replace those efforts, especially in raising international awareness about human rights violations in the region. He called for stakeholders to insist that all parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention ensure that those carrying out grave violations be held accountable.

Briefly commenting on the discussion, Ms. Meloni said that the current situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was dire and was only getting worse. Echoing the statement made during the Seminar's opening session by Palestinian Finance Minister Nabil Kassis, she said that development under occupation was impossible unless it was targeted at ending the occupation. She also recalled that one speaker had stressed that the issues in Palestine were not economic but political. Against that background, she challenged the international community to change its practical engagement in the region.

Indeed, the goal of investing in Palestine or providing development assistance to shore up Palestinian institutions "is not to pay for an occupation but to put an end to it". The Palestinian people were not beggars but they were treated as such, and that attitude must change. Moreover, she said, there must be accountability for actions on the ground, both those carried out by Israel as well as by the Palestinian side.

She also expressed deep frustration with European and international engagement with Israel. There never seemed to be any accountability. In fact, despite calls of support for the Palestinian cause, Israel seemed to be continuously rewarded for intensifying its occupation. "Assistance to the Palestinian people will only be sustainable if it is targeted at ending the occupation and ending illegal Israeli practices," she reiterated.

Many of Ms. Meloni's concerns were repeated by the audience, with some participants seeking clarification on what political or substantive response would end the ongoing violations of international humanitarian law. Another speaker said that Europe, because of its past, had a very complicated relationship with Israel, which was clouded by a sense of guilt. At the same time, the speaker agreed with Ms. Meloni that the condemnation of Israeli activities and reports about humanitarian law violations were "piling up" without action. But, she said, the time was coming when those reports would "come down in an avalanche" and Israel would wonder why. Another audience member said that while she appreciated the work of the European Union, "it's time to say enough is enough".

Responding to some of those issues, Mr. Gatt-Rutter agreed that action was sometimes difficult "where we are weak", but statements made were of value. For example, what Europe said had value and reports of

investigations had value. “Perhaps what Europe does best is words,” he said, and in that light, it had put “Area C”, settlements and other issues on the international agenda.

Further, he said that his office continued to raise the issue of demolitions and evictions in its discussions with Israel. He acknowledged that sanctions were a very difficult issue for the Europeans. In that regard, he said that the European Union operated by consensus and getting agreement on certain issues was challenging. One panellist stressed that there was a humanitarian imperative to assist Palestinians in “Area C” and elsewhere, and not to absolve Israel of its obligations, because the Palestinian Authority was often prevented from taking such action on its own.

Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, expressed gratitude to all the participants in the Seminar, which was the first such gathering following the General Assembly’s historic resolution of 29 November 2012. That decision had set a new culture in motion, and while it would not be easy for some to shift from an old culture to a new one, all could be assured that Palestinians would be actively promoting their cause, both at home and in the international arena. Indeed, Palestinians were “very creative people” and were continually seeking innovative ways to peacefully bring an end to Israel’s ruthless occupation.

He said that while he was grateful for principled expressions of support, it was up to the Palestinian people to help the international community “embark on something different”. Repeating failed processes was useless; there was a need to do something different after 20 years of off and on negotiations. In the period since the Oslo Accord, rather than seeing improvements, there had actually been a worsening of the situation and an intensification of Israel’s settlement expansion policies.

Four years ago, he said, the Palestinian people and their partners in the international community had agreed on a plan that included institution-building on the Palestinian side, and recognition of an independent State and ending the Israeli occupation on the other. The Palestinian side had achieved its half of that agreement by fortifying its Government institutions, while the other half remained unfulfilled.

For that reason, the Palestinian leadership had taken its case to the United Nations and, with the Assembly’s decision, the time had come for Palestine’s partners to back up their heartfelt words and overwhelming support with action. After the Assembly’s decision, none could say that Palestinians must wait to claim Statehood until after Israel ended the occupation. The vote taken on 29 November 2012 had answered that question: there was a State of Palestine.

He urged Palestine’s development partners to support in a constructive way efforts to end the occupation. It was time to put Israel in a position where it could no longer evade or deny its international obligations. “If we do not find a way to stop settlement activities then we will not open the door to a new political process in 2013,” he said. Frankly speaking, Europe had the best relationship with all the parties — the Palestinians, Israel and the United States — and so it was Europe that must present ideas on how to move forward.

Moreover, Europe must “wake up and do things differently” and ensure that Israel ended its illegal activities so that negotiations could begin. Palestine was not going to continue to let Israel steal its land and resources “because we can now go to the International Criminal Court”. But, before such a course was taken, he hoped that Europe took the lead, first and foremost, through imposing sanctions on Israel.

“We need a new course in 2013,” he said, emphasizing that the Assembly’s action had been an investment in peace and an effort to save the two-State solution. Palestinians were frustrated that the occupation had lasted too long and because Palestine’s partners were refusing to try a different track with Israel. “So, you have a tall order before you,” he said, again underscoring the daily suffering of the Palestinian people under occupation. He also drew attention to the recent death in Israeli custody of young Palestinian prisoner Arafat Jaradat and the months-long hunger strike by other prisoners as sources of “boiling” frustration. If all that anger and frustration could not be channelled through a meaningful political process, what were the Palestinian people to do but launch a massive, peaceful revolt? Finally, he urged Palestine’s partners to do all they could to ensure that the Palestinian people achieved their goal of living with freedom, dignity and independence, “hopefully very soon”.

Closing the Seminar, Zahir Tanin, Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, which had convened the two-day gathering, said that throughout, participants had hailed the remarkable multi-sectoral achievements of the Palestinian Government. They had also appreciated the vital efforts of the United Nations, the donor community, Palestinian and international civil society organizations and the private sector. Participants had also been presented with creative ideas that would fully bloom the day Palestine acquired its full independence.

“However, we have been warned by several experts and participants that the capacity of the State of Palestine to carry out its important task is at risk, particularly due to the strain on its financial situation, and because of the growing challenges faced by field practitioners to secure their technical support to the Palestinian Government,” he said. Further, the current deterioration of the situation on the ground was a dramatic reminder that the potential of Palestine could only be maximized with a just, equitable and lasting peace with Israel. “It is

now more than ever the time to invest in this prospect,” he said.

Echoing the Chairman of the Committee, who had yesterday said that “a small but vital window of opportunity” was opening on the political front following last year’s General Assembly vote and the international community mobilization against the treatment of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons and detention centres, he said: “We ought to be fast”. Past experience had shown that when neglected, hope could turn into frustration, despair, and even extremism.

“That’s the reason why I opt for optimism — an engine for progress,” he said, adding that he was convinced that the Seminar, which followed the recent Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development, organized by the Japanese Government, was opportune to foster support to the Government of Palestine, its institutions and action. That was an absolute priority, just as was the pursuit of a negotiated political solution.

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