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United Nations Seminar on Assistance to Palestinian People Concludes, as Speakers Explore Ways to Bolster Efforts to Provide Relief, Reignite Economic Development

General Assembly

Press Release

Permanent Observer for State of Palestine, Rights Committee Chair Deliver Closing Remarks

VIENNA, 1 April — The United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People this afternoon commenced its third plenary on strengthening cooperation by all parties to provide relief, promote reconstruction and reignite economic development, and concluded the session with statements by the Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine to the United Nations and the Chairperson of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

During the meeting, participants discussed the role of the Government of the State of Palestine, ways of empowering it on the ground and the National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza. Some speakers drew attention to the pledges made at the Cairo Conference and challenges related to donor coordination. The role of the United Nations and its entities was also discussed, as was that of intergovernmental organizations, key donors, civil society, aid organizations and the private sector.

Mohammad Shtayyeh, President of the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, said the situation in the Gaza Strip was catastrophic and that the figures spoke for themselves. With each of its consecutive wars, Israel targeted a certain aspect of Gaza's infrastructure. The destruction was, as usual, followed by a donor conference to raise money to pay for the reconstruction, but the \$5.4 billion pledged at the Cairo Conference was an inflated figure whereas the real amount pledged was no more than \$2.7 billion.

Dana Erekat, Head of the Aid Management and Coordination Directorate, Ministry of Planning and Administration Development, State of Palestine, spoke about the differences between budget, development and humanitarian support. Similarly, she said that of the \$5 billion announced at the Cairo Conference, only \$2.5 billion was new funding earmarked specifically for Gaza.

Frode Muring, United Nations Development Programme, Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People, spoke about reconstruction in Gaza for non-refugees and related infrastructure. Long-term development hinged on the ability of the Government of National Consensus to take control in Gaza, he said.

Nasser Qatami, Deputy Minister of Labour of the State of Palestine, said the best case scenario was that it would take 10 years to rebuild everything that had been destroyed, but at the current rate of progress, that reconstruction would take 100 years. Financial support and freedom of movement were essential to enable the reconstruction and the implementation of the National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza.

Rachid Bencherif, of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Fund for International Development, said strengthening resilience in Gaza should be a clear objective of the donor community, particularly to develop a diversified energy mix to produce electricity via both renewable energy sources and natural gas or diesel. Youth employment also was of paramount importance, as was the need to foster synergies with all parties. Capacity-building was a key enabler of development.

In the ensuing discussion, representatives of the League of Arab States, Ecuador and Egypt, as well as a number of other participants, including representatives of United Nations and civil society organizations took the floor to make comments and put questions to the speakers.

In concluding remarks, Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine to the United Nations, said the tragedy in Gaza was not just humanitarian; it was political. The blockade was immoral, illegal and a crime against humanity: 1.8 million Palestinians were held in a huge prison and told to provide for themselves, and then every few years, everything that they had achieved was destroyed. Today, States unanimously supported the two-State solution. If the international community did not have the will to say yes to the independence of the State of Palestine the alternative would be one State in which the majority were Palestinians, not Jews. The Palestinians were not going away.

In concluding remarks Fodé Seck (Senegal), Committee Chairperson, said the United Nations Seminar had provided a very personal insight into the dire situation in Gaza following the war in mid-2014. Although the appalling situation endured, signs of progress had been described during the session and the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism was said to be making a difference. The people of Gaza needed our support, now more than ever, he concluded.

This afternoon's meeting concluded the United Nations Seminar, which had taken place from Tuesday, 31 March, to Wednesday, 1 April, at the United Nations Office at Vienna. Copies of statements and presentations delivered, meetings coverage, and press releases relating to the Seminar are available on the [UNISPAL website](#), where the outcome document of the Seminar would also be published.

Plenary III - Strengthening cooperation by all parties to provide relief, promote reconstruction and reignite economic development

MOHAMMAD SHTAYYEH, President, Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, said that history and international experience had taught the need for links between relief, reconstruction and development frameworks. The situation in the Gaza Strip was catastrophic and the figures spoke for themselves. With each of its consecutive wars, Israel targeted a certain aspect of Gaza's infrastructure. As usual, the destruction was followed by a donor conference to raise money to pay for the reconstruction, but the \$5.4 billion pledged at the Cairo Conference was an inflated figure; the real figure was no more than \$2.7 billion. He spoke about the dynamics of the delivery of donor money, which was always slow and never equal to the amount pledged, and said although Palestine was grateful for generous donations from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Algeria, the European Union and many others, it was not enough. He also highlighted the prerequisites that accompanied donor money, such as the conclusion of Palestinian reconciliation and the need for civil administration and effective governance. He gave the example of a bag of cement given to a family to help them rebuild their home, but who had no food to eat that day. The family would be obliged to sell the cement to buy food, but the next time a bag of cement would not be given because there was no proof it was used for reconstruction.

The main players in the reconstruction were the people of Gaza; Hamas, who wished to replicate Hizbullah's model in Lebanon; and Fatah, who genuinely wanted reconciliation. The other players were Israel and the donors. Certain countries which repeatedly linked Quartet conditions to their donations were being unfair and perpetuating the division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Palestinian reconciliation was essential for reconstruction, and it was also important to engage the private sector and civil society in the matter. Unfortunately, the Minister in charge of reconstruction in Gaza resigned yesterday, he noted, expressing hope that his successor would be announced as soon as possible, so donors had a focal point. He called for better coordination among donors and a follow-up to the Cairo Conference, but most importantly, for the international community to put pressure on Israel to lift its siege on Gaza.

DANA EREKAT, Head of Aid Management and Coordination Directorate, Ministry of Planning and Administration Development, State of Palestine, said the three main types of support for Palestine concerned budget, development and humanitarian support, the latter most prominently through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). While all budgetary support went through the Ministry of Finance, only about 25 per cent of development support did, which meant it was difficult to gain an accurate picture of aid going into Gaza, particularly that given to non-governmental organizations, about which the Government was not aware. Focusing on sums pledged at the Cairo Conference, the commitments made and the disbursements given, she said that of the \$5 billion announced, only \$2.5 billion was new funding pledged specifically for Gaza.

Many donors, she continued, saw the Cairo Conference as an opportunity to announce their regular pledges to Palestine, some of which were spread across three years. So far, \$350 million had been disbursed since the Conference and there were signed agreements for \$270 million — including the recent \$200 million given by Kuwait. Of the new funding, 81.4 per cent was pledged by the Arab countries and Turkey. Around \$400 million had been re-allocated from existing commitments to Gaza without replenishment. Less than 50 per cent of the pledges were ready for disbursement; so far, only 14 per cent of the \$2.5 billion of new pledges had been

disbursed, or 7 per cent of the \$5 billion announced. Education and health were the least funded sectors, she noted, calling on the donor community to meet their pledges for Gaza and maintain their support to the State of Palestine as a whole.

FRODE MAURING, Head of the Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), spoke about UNDP's role in Gaza's reconstruction, which covered non-refugees, while UNRWA dealt with the refugees. Referring to the National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza, he said that UNDP had been strongly involved in coordinating the removal of the 2 million tons of rubble generated during the war in Gaza, including schools and homes which were so badly damaged that they could not be repaired. During the 2014 conflict, 31,000 non-refugee homes were damaged. To date, 145,000 tons of rubble had been removed and 55,000 had been crushed; that could be used for road repairs. So far, UNDP had provided \$5.3 million to help make repairs to water infrastructure, but it was very frustrating to spend money that could have paid for new developments on repairs to infrastructure damaged by war. Over 5,519 private-sector facilities were damaged during the war. The UNDP was focused on assisting the economic recovery and creating jobs, he said, emphasizing that long-term development hinged on the ability of the Government of National Consensus to take control in Gaza.

The blockade, he said, was the primary cause of the problems, but it was not the only cause: the Palestinian split was an impediment to effective governance there. He reiterated the need to honour the pledges made at the Cairo Conference.

NASSER QATAMI, Deputy Minister of Labour of the State of Palestine, spoke about the team of experts established by the Ministry to oversee Gaza's reconstruction. He said that the best case scenario was that it would take 10 years to rebuild everything that had been destroyed, but at the current rate of progress, that reconstruction would take 100 years. The situation was dire, he said, citing, for example, that at any time, a Palestinian could step on a landmine and suffer the amputation of his or her limbs as a result. Today, 80 per cent of the productive manpower in Gaza was not engaged in productive activity and instead was forced to depend on aid. Despite that, Palestinians had provided support in fields such as education and development in countries other than their own, he noted, while stressing that financial support and freedom of movement were essential to enable the reconstruction. He added that implementation of the National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza had to be conducted in line with national priorities. The main problems were the ongoing blockade and the lack of resources, he concluded.

RACHID BENCHERIF, Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)'s Fund for International Development, said the Fund's main objective was to support, on a South-South solidarity basis, non-OPEC developing countries, particularly the poorer low-income countries, in pursuit of their social and economic advancement. On a cumulative basis, the Fund, known as OFID, had extended close to \$18 billion in financial assistance to more than 100 countries. Strengthening resilience in Gaza should be a clear objective of the donor community, particularly to develop a diversified energy mix to produce electricity of both renewable energy sources and natural gas or diesel, he said. Concerning development, he said youth employment was of paramount importance to the Fund, which believed that a key

development initiative would be to increase the employability of young Palestinians through capacity-building and microfinance for economic empowerment. He spoke about the need to foster synergies with all parties, including the Palestinian Authority, and noted that capacity-building was a key enabler of development. Interventions from donors should not be limited to technical capacity-building alone, but should also be targeted at assisting the Government and officials of the Palestinian Authority in establishing an environment conducive to sustainable development.

When the floor was opened for discussion, a representative of the League of Arab States said the State of Palestine had been occupied by Israel for more than half a century. Israel's allegations that it had withdrawn from Gaza in 2005 were unsubstantiated: there might not be Israeli forces within the Gaza Strip, but Israel surrounded Gaza by land, air and sea. In the West Bank, there were increasing numbers of settlements and the confiscation of houses, while Palestinians in Jerusalem suffered daily abuse from extremist groups. The international community had a responsibility to Palestine which went beyond aid and should encompass protection, guarantees of non-recurrence of conflict, and an end to the Israeli aggression. The League of Arab States provided \$100 million every month to the State of Palestine, he noted.

MICHAEL NEUWIRTH, Coordination Officer with the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Jerusalem, said the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism was now functioning and producing concrete results. As of today, 95,000 housing requests had been processed, and of those, 60,000 had been cleared to receive construction materials. So far, 56 construction projects had been approved and material had been received for five. The phenomenon of people selling construction materials in order to buy food was an issue that must be addressed, he said, although it only highlighted the need to provide financial support to the most destitute families in Gaza. The blockade must be lifted, but falling short of doing everything possible in the meantime to assist reconstruction was not an option.

A representative of Ecuador emphasized that a political solution was the only answer to meeting humanitarian needs in Gaza, and called on the international community to urge the Security Council to adopt all necessary measures to prompt Israel to end its illegal activities, which contravened both human rights and international humanitarian law. The recognition of Palestine as an Observer State at the General Assembly had helped its cause, as would its application to the United Nations for recognition as a fully fledged Member State.

The representative of Egypt said that Israel, the occupying Power, was responsible for meeting all the needs of all living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and for Gaza's reconstruction. The six checkpoints between Israel and Gaza should be opened to lift the siege and allow for freedom of movement between Gaza and the West Bank. The Rafah crossing point had a very limited capacity of a maximum of 400 persons per day, and due to exceptional circumstances, especially terrorism in northern Sinai, as well as military activities and the curfew, its opening had been hampered. The speaker noted that during the 2014 conflict, Egypt had opened the Rafah crossing to allow humanitarian relief and injured persons to pass through. The representative said that the enabling of terrorist activity inside Egypt under the cover of humanitarian aid must cease, and said the tunnels, used to smuggle arms and people, must be demolished. Egypt had been forced to take difficult decisions, such as the establishment

of a buffer zone to eliminate the risks posed by the tunnels. Despite the fact Egypt had no legal commitments towards the Gaza Strip, it spared no efforts to help Palestinians; Egypt had played an important role in achieving the ceasefire last year, after which it organized the Cairo Conference, which resulted in pledges of more than \$5 billion.

AHMED SOURANI, Resilience Development Expert, Gaza, highlighted the need for capacity-building of specific actors to help them participate in the reconstruction and take a more facilitative role at different community levels.

A representative of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) commented on the transition from relief to resilient recovery and longer-term sustainable development. UNEP underscored the importance of including environmental safeguards and incorporating them into the design, cost and monitoring of the reconstruction of Gaza. It was important to rebuild the enclave in a strategic way that was both climate-proof and disaster-resilient, bearing in mind the issue of CO2 emissions. UNEP welcomed the innovative approaches taken by organizations such as Sunshine4Palestine.

A member of civil society from Egypt commented that the Palestinian Authority had the primary responsibility for Gaza's reconstruction. The donors had not made good on their pledges because Hamas had been unable to carry out its role in Gaza. Additionally, Israel had prevented certain building materials, such as cement and steel, from being imported into Gaza.

A member of civil society from Austria raised the issue of boycott and sanctions, saying that Governments could do more to promote boycotts of Israel, which was the only non-violent way to shame that Government and its people about the crimes it was committing through its brutal occupation. It might not be a solution, but it was a way forward, she said.

Responding, Mr. BENCHERIF of OFID said the need for institutional capacity-building was a very real one. Regarding comments made by UNEP's representative, he noted there were two issues: local pollution and the contribution to global warming. He added that it was not for Palestine to seek to reduce CO2 emissions accumulated in the atmosphere for so many years by other countries.

Mr. MAURING said UNDP was carrying out a number of capacity-building programmes, including on resilience, in both Gaza and the West Bank. The main requirements to foster sustainable development in Palestinian were the lifting of the blockade, unity among Palestinians in terms of governance, and the fulfilment of donor pledges.

Ms. EREKAT of MOPAD, also responding to the comments made by UNEP, said that all projects underwent an environmental impact assessment. However, Israel had bombed the pipelines in Gaza, which polluted the sea with sewage, and Israel's destruction of solid waste plants had forced Palestinians to burn their waste, which also had a very visible environmental impact. Israel should be held accountable for the damage to the environment. CO2 emissions were not the responsibility of Palestine, but rather of the international community, she added.

In closing remarks, RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine, said the tragedy in Gaza was not just humanitarian, it was political. The blockade was immoral, illegal and a crime against humanity. He referred to the estimated \$7 billion per year that the occupation cost the Palestinian economy, which was almost equivalent to its gross domestic product (GDP). With independence, Palestine would be a viable, remarkable and successful State that might even, in time, be able to assist its neighbours with economic aid. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had correctly said that the international community could not be summoned time and again to make donations for Gaza to be rebuilt only for Israel to destroy it again. Mr. Mansour recalled the history of the Palestine question, saying that the United Nations had decided to get involved, and so today, it had no choice but to continue that involvement. That was why there were so many United Nations agencies and bodies, including UNRWA, and more than 20 in Gaza, dedicated to assisting Palestine.

Mr. Mansour spoke of the steadfast heroism of the Palestinian people and recalled President Yasser Arafat's famous address to the United Nations in 1974. Palestine would not ask anybody's permission to be a State. Israel had not negotiated with anyone when it became a State, nor had the United States in 1776 asked permission of the United Kingdom. The State of Palestine was acting as a responsible and civilized State by signing international treaties on the rights of women, children, and persons with disabilities, and joining the International

Criminal Court. At the same time, certain States condoned Israel's illegal behaviour in blockading the Gaza Strip, building settlements and committing crimes against Palestinian people. If the international community did not have the will to say yes to the independence of the State of Palestine, the alternative would be one State in which the majority were Palestinians, not Jews.

FODÉ SECK (Senegal), Chairperson of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that the Seminar had provided a very personal insight into the dire situation in Gaza following last year's war. Although the appalling situation in Gaza endured, signs of progress had also been reported at the Seminar. Colleagues from the United Nations offices on the ground, for example, had confirmed that the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism was making a difference and was ready to facilitate large-scale reconstruction. He noted that the specific proposals put forward would be summarized in a Chairman's summary to be published on the UNISPAL website.

The Committee, meanwhile, called on the international donors to honour their pledges so that Gaza could be rebuilt, this time for good, he said. The international community should continue to take practical steps to ensure that the blockade was lifted, that the border crossings, including Rafah, were permanently opened, that its harbours could receive ships and that its fishermen could go about their daily work without hindrance.

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