

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE ON THE EXERCISE OF THE INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF THE
PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

SOLEMN COMMEMORATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY
WITH THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

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Remarks by Peter Miller

President, Americans United for Palestinian Human Rights
Co-Chair, US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. President, Excellencies:

I am honored to speak to you today on this solemn commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. I am but one voice among many from global civil society who are deeply concerned about the plight of Palestinians resulting from Israel's policies of occupation, settlement, siege and the denial of Palestinian rights. Many civil society activists around the world have dedicated their lives seeking a just resolution to the Palestine-Israel conflict. Some have paid a huge price for their efforts. And why must civil society pay such a high price? It is because of the failure, your excellencies, of the United Nations and governments to implement international law.

As an American, I am deeply disturbed, as are many Americans, by the role ^{of} the my government plays in preventing Palestinians from achieving their aspirations and their human rights. The U.S. unconditionally gives Israel \$3 billion every year in military aid and ignores Israel's many systematic and continuing human rights violations. Those include the illegal use of military weapons against civilian populations ~~and~~ the ever expanding Israeli settlements, the expansion of its separation wall on Palestinian lands, the treatment of its Palestinian citizens as second class human beings and the denial of the rights of Palestinian refugees. One of the challenges to the UN and the international community, if you truly are committed to upholding the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, is to confront the deeply negative role of the U.S. in perpetuating injustice and enabling Israel to continue to violate international law and destroy the possibility of realizing Palestinian aspirations.

The admission of Palestine into the UN Organization UNESCO is a great victory for the UN and the voice of people around the world. 107 countries, representing over 75% of the world's population voted to include Palestine, truly "We the Peoples of the United

Nations.” Unfortunately, the Obama administration was eager to enforce archaic U.S. laws, and cut off U.S. dues to UNESCO. Also unfortunate is the fact that the Obama, and earlier U.S. administrations, have failed to uphold other U.S. laws conditioning military aid to countries, such as Israel, which use U.S. supplied weapons against civilian populations. The UN is challenged to uphold its Charter in the face of all the various anti-democratic pressures the US brings to bear, whether it is spying on UN officials, pressuring independent countries economically and politically, or threatening the UN itself with economic sanctions. The UN must defend its founding principles despite these pressures and the global community must be ready to increase economic and diplomatic support for the UN and UNESCO.

One of the great advancements of civilization has been the development of the concept of the rule of law, that human beings have universal rights, and that there should be international institutions that work to safeguard these rights, especially in times of conflict and military occupation. The principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, and other laws lay out this framework. The challenge for the UN is not to develop new laws or to express new sentiments, but to implement these existing universal principles and its existing resolutions to protect Palestinian human rights. The whole concept of universal rights and protection of civilians is endangered when powerful nations can pick and choose, in defiance of international bodies and global opinion, to whom these laws apply and for whom they are ignored. The law should be universal.

For Palestinians,
So far, the UN and other established institutions have failed to implement these universal principles, and have been unable to hold the powerful accountable for their oppression of the weak. So it has become necessary for global civil society to step into the void. This is what is happening around the world, including in the United States, on behalf of Palestinian human rights. This is why there is a growing movement of boycott, divestment, and sanctions to bring non-violent pressure on the State of Israel to end its systematic violations.

The Russell Tribunal is yet another expression of global civil society responding to the failure of the UN and governments to uphold the law. One of Bertrand Russell's last accomplishments was the establishment, with French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, of the Russell Tribunal to investigate the role of the United States in the war in Vietnam. The tribunal was established as a means for civil society to bring to the light the evidence of war crimes ignored by the United States government and by other nations and international institutions. Russell declared “May this Tribunal prevent the crime of silence.”

A new Russell Tribunal on Palestine has been reconvened with three sessions to date to examine Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. The most recent session was held November of this year in South Africa, with judges including Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Corrigan Maguire, emeritus judge of Spain's Supreme Court José Antonio Martín Pallín, African-American poet Alice Walker and South African writer and activist Ronald Kasrils. They examined the question of whether Israel is engaged in the crime of

Apartheid. Israeli human rights activist Jeff Halper, director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions said,

Quote "States, along with the United Nations, are obligated to enforce international law and human rights conventions. When they don't, as in their failure to apply to Israel and its Occupation the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, the people themselves must rise up and demand that they do. Civil society forums such as the Russell Tribunal may not carry formal authority, but they represent millions of people the world over who believe that simply leaving governments free to pursue their narrow agendas driven by power, sectarian ideology, militarism and the profits of a few is to doom us all to continued war, bloodshed and injustice."

The Tribunal concluded that Israel does indeed engage in the crime of Apartheid:

Quote "Israel subjects the Palestinian people to an institutionalized regime of domination amounting to apartheid as defined under international law... The Palestinians living under colonial military rule in the occupied Palestinian territory are subject to a particularly aggravated form of apartheid. Palestinian citizens of Israel, while entitled to vote, are not part of the Jewish nation as defined by Israeli law and are therefore excluded from the benefits of Jewish nationality and subject to systematic discrimination across the broad spectrum of recognized human rights. Irrespective of such differences, the Tribunal concludes that Israel's rule over the Palestinian people, wherever they reside, collectively amounts to a single integrated regime of apartheid."

The Russell Tribunal is not the first time Israeli apartheid has been identified. In 1961 Hendrik Verwoerd, then president of South Africa and considered the architect of the system of apartheid, stated, "Israel, like South Africa, is an apartheid state." Both Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela have expressed concerns that Israel's behavior was similar to what they experienced under South African apartheid. Mandela remarked that

Quote "The UN took a strong stand against apartheid; and over the years, an international consensus was built, which helped to bring an end to this iniquitous system. But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."

In 2009, the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa issued a report concluding that Israel practices both Apartheid and colonialism. In 2010, Henry Siegman, former national director of the American Jewish Congress said, "Israel has crossed the threshold from 'the only democracy in the Middle East' to the only apartheid regime in the Western world." Now in 2011, we can add the conclusions of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine.

Palestinian rights must no longer be held hostage to the domestic politics of the United States. Israel should not escape UN censure simply because it refuses to cooperate with international institutions. International law demands condemnation of Israel's violations and crucially, Your Excellencies, decisive action to reverse them. Palestinian dignity is assaulted on a daily basis. Both the Palestinian and Israeli people are diminished each passing day as you allow these Israeli policies to continue. Every day, a tree is destroyed or a home is demolished. Every day, a Bedouin village inside Israel is ground down by bulldozers or Palestinians in the West Bank are attacked by settler pogroms that turn their

lives into lives of fear. Every day, critical medicines go lacking in Gaza, and Gazans are forced to drink brackish water unfit for human consumption.

The so-called "Quartet" has failed. But while many question whether the UN should have ever agreed to participate in such sham diplomacy, you can still play a constructive role by moving quickly to implement the necessary pre-conditions for serious and honest negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians based on the enforcement of international law. Excellencies, you must separate Israel's legitimate security concerns from its illegitimate political agenda. The International Court of Justice ruling on the illegality of Israel's wall made just this sort of distinction: determining that Israel may build its wall on Israeli land, but Israel cannot build its wall on Palestinian land, destroying Palestinian farms and homes, and separating Palestinian villages and towns from each other. It is illegal, not simply "unhelpful," for Israel to build settlements on Palestinian lands. Israel violates international law when it imposes collective punishment on the people of Gaza. UN-based solutions must be found to mitigate all of these issues. The international community must demand that Israel end its assaults on Gaza that kill and injure civilians, and destroy civilian infrastructure in an endless cycle of international development assistance repeatedly destroyed by Israel's U.S. supplied bombs and missiles and Israel's U.S. supplied Caterpillar bulldozers. All that is lacking is your will to impose solutions rooted in international law.

One of the great privileges of working within civil society for Palestinian justice is witnessing the coming together of people from many origins working together for justice. In my own small group, we have Jewish Americans, Palestinian Americans, Christians, Muslims, and secular people who recognize in each other our common humanity. This is replicated around the world. We in global civil society seek to rise above narrow national and tribal self interest and truly believe that peace is possible when our common humanity is recognized and justice is implemented. We honor the efforts of those Israelis who recognize that peace for Israel comes through justice for Palestinians, we honor the efforts of activists and UN workers from around the world, many who have risked their comfort and sometimes their lives in the name of justice. Though there are wide ranges of opinion about what the various solutions might be, we are united in the recognition of our common humanity and our dreams of living together, as equals, on this small blue planet.

Thank you.

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