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PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY WITH THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

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BlackCommentator.com & U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation

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

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for inviting me to participate in today's meeting and offering a presentation in connection with the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

My name is Bill Fletcher, Jr. I am the Executive Editor of the on-line magazine BlackCommentator.com and a member of the leadership committee of the coalition known as the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. I am the immediate past president of the advocacy group TransAfrica Forum which was the leading voice within the United States of America against South African apartheid and white minority rule in Africa. I am also a long-time trade union activist.

I sit before you today to discuss a contemporary apartheid: that practiced by the state of Israel against the Palestinian people.

As an African American in and from the United States, I am keenly aware of the similarities between the systems of Israeli apartheid, South African apartheid, and the home-grown apartheid in the United States of America once known as "Jim Crow segregation." Despite every effort of the Israeli state to wrap its actions in religious garments, to claim a God-given Judaic exclusive right for its actions, the description of the racial differential or national-ethnic differential that exists between the officially sanctioned Jewish citizens of Israel and the Palestinians within Israel, those in exile and those in the Occupied Territories sounds all too familiar. It is also far from Holy. Notwithstanding the efforts of heroic individuals such as William Patterson, Paul Robeson and Malcolm X to bring the case of African Americans before the United Nations, the international ramifications of the oppression suffered here were often and conveniently ignored by the great powers of the global North. The South African apartheid system was, to a great extent, modeled on the Jim Crow system in the United States, a fact noted by many people

in South Africa and in the global South. The United Nations failed to take up the challenge to racism in my own country a generation ago; it must not fail to take up the struggle against Israeli apartheid today.

The realities of the Israeli apartheid system, in contrast to South Africa, were often hidden from view, at least outside of Israel and, later, the Occupied Territories. It was, however, the close collaboration—including military and nuclear collaboration—between the Israeli regime and the South African apartheid regime at a point when the South African apartheid regime had become an international pariah state that raised more than a few eyebrows and encouraged many people to more closely examine the theory and workings of the two states.

The parallel between the Israeli apartheid system and the Jim Crow system under which African Americans suffered and died here in the United States of America also helps to explain a phenomenon that seems to puzzle many mainstream commentators. How is it that there exists such a relatively large reservoir of sympathy among African Americans in the United States of America for the cause of the Palestinians? It is a vicious slander to assert that such sympathy is based on anti-Jewish sentiment, though I would be naïve to ignore that such sentiment does exist in some isolated quarters. Rather, for African Americans, we can at one and the same time understand and stand with the Jewish victims of the Nazi's Holocaust, while at the same time reject the Israeli apartheid system and its victimization of the Palestinian people. The horrors of the Holocaust, as the great Martiniquan writer Aime Cesaire pointed out, were not unprecedented, but found their basis in the brutal holocausts committed against the peoples of the global South by the colonial powers and the settler states. It was based on that shared history that African Americans viscerally understood and, therefore, placed ourselves in opposition to the racist motivations that lay behind the actions of the German Nazis and later the Italian Fascists in their persecution and then attempts at annihilation of the Jewish people.

Yet none of this, that is, none of the reality of the Holocaust suffered by European Jews, excuses what has happened to the Palestinian people in the period since World War II, and especially since May 1948. And it is this that many people, in what is colloquially known as "Black America," understand so well. The Israeli apartheid system that expropriates land from the Palestinians; restricts mixed marriages; condemns Palestinians to separate AND inferior education; and repudiates their internationally recognized right to return to their land and their homes, simply carries the same stench of the decadent and oppressive system that we came to know as Jim Crow segregation.

The work of your committee and the attention that you devote the situation facing the Palestinian people receives insufficient notice in the mainstream media. As a result, the actual conditions of the Palestinian people are not fully understood in many quarters, most especially here within the United States of America.

This year's gathering comes at a critical moment. The release of the Goldstone Report, the international attention it has received and its adoption by the United Nations Human Rights Council and the General Assembly are representative of a shifting discourse on the conditions of the Palestinian people and their struggle for self-determination and full

human rights. While the Goldstone Report is critical of both Hamas and the Israeli Defense Forces, the report is very clear that the preponderance of both force and atrocities were those committed by the Israeli side. The situating of the Israeli atrocities within the larger context of collective punishment of the Palestinian people generally, and the Gazans in particular, as done in this report, reminds the world that there is no equivalent power relation when it comes to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Try as they may, the Israeli government cannot succeed in getting most of the world to forget that there is an illegal occupation of Palestinian territory that they have perpetrated since 1967.

The challenge of the Goldstone Report, however, is to move beyond discourse to a shift in actual policy - to make real the Report's commitment to accountability. That is a challenge for all of us, but most especially for you, the United Nations. Because so far, despite clear evidence of the flaunting of international law by the Israeli government, whether through the violation of the Hague conventions or Geneva conventions when it comes to the Occupation, few actual sanctions have been taken in defense of the Palestinian people or to punish the Occupiers for their transgressions. As a citizen of the United States of America I am reminded of this on a daily basis. As you are aware, the Congress of the United States of America voted to condemn the Goldstone Report. Distorting the findings of the report and declaring it to be biased with no concrete evidence to support such allegations not only disrespected Justice Goldstone, the Report, the United Nations Human Rights Council and indeed the United Nations as a whole, and the Palestinian people, but also disrespected the intelligence of the people of the United States of America. The actions by the Congress of the United States attempted to short-circuit any possibility for a timely and fair examination not only of the facts and implications of the Goldstone Report, but also attempted to eliminate the possibility of undertaking the sort of healthy debate on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and the role of the United States in it, that is so desperately needed. We in the U.S. and global civil society, however, have no intention of allowing the effort to bury the Goldstone Report to succeed. It is, therefore, my hope that the planned "Gaza Freedom March," scheduled for 1 January 2010 will be another opportunity to both call attention to the Goldstone Report, but also and more critically, re-raise the world's attention to the continuing violation of the human rights of the Palestinian people of Gaza at the hands of the forces of the Israeli State.

As important as is the Goldstone Report, the analysis of atrocities committed at the time of the Israeli aggression against Gaza represents only part of the overall picture. The Goldstone Report opens the door to a broader discussion of the Israeli Occupation and the question of the suppression of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, including the rights of the Palestinian refugees, and equally important the denial of full equality to the Palestinian minority who are citizens of the state of Israel.

The Israeli Occupation has come to be broadly understood as an apartheid arrangement. Civil society around the world, including the UN-accredited International Coordinating Network on Palestine, has been working for years to build and broaden public understanding of that concept. Within the United States of America, the U.S. Campaign to End Israeli Occupation has made the issue of apartheid a major part of our work. The courageous stand taken by former President Carter in his book—*Palestine: Peace, not Apartheid*—has dramatically helped to increase awareness of the dramatic similarities in the

situation faced by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and those faced by non-whites in apartheid-era South Africa. Whether one is discussing the illegal seizure of Palestinian land and its being granted to Israeli settlers (Note: UN reports indicate that 40% of the West Bank land is now inaccessible to Palestinians for residence, agriculture, transportation, commerce or any other human activity); roads that are restricted to Israelis alone; the creation of an internationally condemned separation wall; or the ethnic cleansing of Occupied East Jerusalem, again and again the situation and circumstances conform to the norms that the United Nations established more than thirty-five years ago in defining apartheid as a crime. What was particularly noteworthy, I might add, regarding the steps taken by the United Nations in the 1973 Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid was that it defined apartheid not as a crime limited to the South African context but, as was stated at the time: "... 'the crime of apartheid', which shall include similar policies and practices of racial segregation and discrimination as practiced in southern Africa..."

The plight of the Palestinian people is not limited to the actions taken in the Occupied Territories by the Israeli Defense Forces and other Israeli government agencies. While there are important distinctions to be made, the Palestinian citizens of Israel cannot be understood to be free and equal citizens of a country that denies them so many basic rights of citizenship. Rather, Palestinian citizens of Israel find themselves in a second-class status by comparison with those citizens officially recognized as being of Jewish background. The examples are shocking and, in another context, might be mind baffling. A report from the Institute for Palestine Studies noted that in 2007, for instance, the Knesset voted to extend and broaden a law that denies the Palestinian citizens of Israel a basic human right, namely to marry and raise a family which naturally shares the same citizenship rights as the citizen who marries. If Palestinian citizens of Israel take a spouse who lives in the Palestinian lands under military occupation, Israel denies citizenship to its own citizen's chosen spouse!

In the realm of education, Israel has operated what is, in effect, a racially segregated state school system since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. A recent and outrageous example demonstrates the logical conclusion of such a system. Writer Jonathan Cook reported that an Arab couple suffered the humiliation of the expulsion of their one year old daughter from an Israeli daycare center because six other Israeli parents, six parents of state-recognized Jewish background, complained that an Arab child was in the center. The course of action available to this couple is very limited due to the nature of Israeli law when it comes to racial or national/ethnic discrimination. Cook went on to point out that Israel spends approximately \$1100 on the education of each Israeli student who can demonstrate the requisite religious/ethnic credentials to the Israeli state compared with \$190 for each Israeli student marked as "Palestinian". The gap, Cook noted, was even wider when comparison is made to state-run religious schools. There Israeli students who belong to the requisite state religion receive nine times more funding than Palestinian Israeli students of Christian, Muslim or secular background. When it comes to teachers, 8000 Palestinian teachers are reportedly unemployed even though, as of the middle of 2009, the Israeli educational system was suffering from staff shortages.

With regard to land ownership, it was reported in the New York Times on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel's independence—or for the Palestinians, the anniversary of the *Nakba*—that Arabs occupy a tiny percentage of Israeli land despite the fact that they make up twenty percent of the population. In fact, in the article “Defining Apartheid: Israel’s record,” the author, Uri Strauss, noted that 93% of the land within Israel has been designated State land and, in effect, denied to Palestinians solely on the basis of their ethnicity, regardless of whether they hold Israeli citizenship. So, in order to be clear, we are talking about less than seven percent of the land even being available to one fifth of Israeli citizens WITHIN Israel. While even U.S. citizens who move to Israel and can be recognized by the Israeli state as being “Jewish” routinely receive permits to construct homes, nothing approaching such ease is true for Christian, Muslim or secular Palestinian citizens. Obviously, for Palestinians under the Occupation the situation goes beyond a matter of being denied permits to build; their homes are regularly being seized and demolished, often because of the military occupier’s claim that the home itself was illegally constructed.

In every major category, whether land and education—as noted earlier—or health and employment, a racial or national/ethnic differential exists between the officially recognized Jewish citizens vs. the Arab citizens of Israel. In fact, according to that same New York Times article, Arab families, whether Christian, Muslim or secular, are three times more likely to be below the poverty line than are officially recognized Jewish families. This racial or national/ethnic differential even extends to marriage, where the Israeli government only recognizes so-called “mixed marriages” when they have taken place in other countries.

The Israeli system of apartheid also includes the disparity regarding the rights of people to enter Israel. The Israeli law of return allows any officially recognized Jewish person, from anywhere in the world, regardless of whether that person has any actual tie to the state of Israel, to arrive in the country and receive immediate citizenship, with all the rights and privileges that follow. Palestinians who themselves were forcibly expelled from what is now Israel during the 1947-48 war or later, are prohibited from returning to their home; even if they still hold the key to their house, despite specific requirements of international law, including UN Resolution 194.

It is important to acknowledge both the situation in Israel as well as the Occupied Territories in order to emphasize that the Israeli apartheid system is not one limited to the occupied zones. The system of racial oppression or national/ethnic oppression that is so evident in the Occupied Territories is directly related to the manner in which Palestinian citizens of Israel are both viewed and treated. On this International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People this fact cannot be forgotten or glossed over. While the experience in Israel, for the refugees, and within the Occupied Territories for Palestinians is not identical, it *does* reflect the fundamental thinking of the racial-settler state of Israel that Palestinians, much like African Americans in the United States of America as described in an infamous court decision from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, do not have rights that Jewish Israelis are bound to respect.

I was recently sent a copy of a letter that was written in April 1948 in direct response to the news of the massacre of the Arab residents of Deir Yassin by Jewish terrorists. The letter, written by a naturalized American citizen of Jewish background, and sent to the executive director of an organization known as "American Friends of the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel" read in part:

*When a real and final catastrophe should befall us in Palestine the first responsible for it would be the British and the second responsible for it the Terrorist organizations build up from our own ranks.*

*I am not willing to see anybody associated with those misled and criminal people.*

You will have to forgive the typos and the grammar. The author was not known to be a fluid writer. His greatness lay elsewhere. His name was Albert Einstein.

It is worth quoting Einstein and calling attention to his letter on this, the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, for several reasons. One, to remind us that the terrorists condemned by Einstein later gained international legitimacy when the Israeli state was recognized and many of these same terrorists achieved positions in the military and in government. Thus, today's terrorist becomes tomorrow statesperson, or at least so it often seems when accountability is absent.

Two, that Einstein, someone who had fled the persecution of the Nazis and who understood the full horror and implications of the Holocaust, was not prepared to use that historical reality to countenance the ethnic cleansing that was taking place in Palestine at the hands of individuals who claimed that they did not want the world to forget what had happened to Jews. Einstein did not cower in the face of news of an atrocity committed by Zionist terrorists, nor did he attempt to explain it away by claiming that atrocities were committed by both sides.

Three, Einstein recognized that there could be, what he called a "...real and final catastrophe..." in Palestine. Though that catastrophe happened to the Palestinians in 1948 and not to the Zionist colonizers, the failure of the Israeli state to repudiate its apartheid system and to recognize the human rights of Palestinian people has set in motion events that could lead to a massive catastrophe for the people of the Middle East. With an Israel armed with 100 to 200 nuclear weapons and an escalating arms race throughout the region, a catastrophe could be beyond what even Einstein could have contemplated in 1948.

Einstein set an example, an example that many members of the Congress of the United States of America and alleged supporters of Israel, would benefit from both remembering and understanding. Common sense says that oppression, discrimination and, indeed, genocide, committed against one group never explains away or justifies crimes committed by that same group against another people. The flaunting of international law through an occupation lasting more than 40 years accompanied by clearly illegal colonial settlements, along with the institutionalization of a system of racial apartheid in order to guarantee that the subordinate group never exercises their human rights and instead disintegrates as a people into the dust of the Middle East, simply cannot be tolerated. Not only are the governments represented in these halls called upon to take action against such criminality,

but people of conscience around the world, including WITHIN Israel, must and are taking a stand. Whether through public statements in the mainstream media; petitions; resolutions; or through the boycotts, divestments and sanctions to bring non-violent pressure on the Occupying Power, the international desire for peace, equality and justice for the Jewish Israelis and for the Palestinians—including, Israeli citizens, the refugees and those under Occupation—must move beyond conferences and fine words and materialize ultimately as actions that those who have perpetrated this oppression and who profit from the suppression of the Palestinian people will not only hear, but will clearly understand.

I, again, am honored to have been offered these moments to address the General Assembly, and thank you for recognizing that there is a civil society voice on the matter of justice for the Palestinian people that must be heard.

Thank you very much.

