Speakers Stress Situation in Palestine Must Change, as Seminar on Assistance to Palestinian People Concludes

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The situation in Palestine must change, including bringing an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory, speakers emphasized today, as the two-day Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People concluded in Stockholm, Sweden.

In the Session’s third and final plenary session entitled, “strengthening global partnerships for reconstruction and sustainable development”, participants stressed that Palestine was nearing the breaking point and the current state of affairs could not carry on.

There could be no status quo in Palestine — things would either get worse or get better, said the representative of Bolivia, continuing that, in his view, the situation in Palestine was in fact worsening.

While expressing concern about other situations of injustice around the world, he stressed that there could not be double standards whereby the international community felt it acceptable to ignore the plight of the people of Palestine.  Furthermore, while it was much appreciated and needed, the provision of aid should not be a substitute for a clear stance against Israeli occupation of Palestine.

The crisis in Palestine could be “fixed” rather quickly with greater political will, noted the representative of Fiji, who said that without such action, it remained unclear whether the situation in Palestine would ever improve.

Palestine was a serious, responsible State that was participating in shaping issues of worldwide concern, including the development agenda, said the Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine.  He went on to tell participants that he carried a message and request from Palestine to the rest of the world:  “Deal with our issue in a very practical and realistic manner.”

Calling the occupation both “criminal and belligerent”, an expert from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights noted that that next year would mark 50 years since the start of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Israel’s message to the people of Gaza was clear, he said:  “You have no tomorrow.  You have nothing to live for,” adding that the Palestinians would not forgive or forget the crimes that had been committed against them.

Also speaking today were the representatives of Indonesia, Spain and Cyprus.

Plenary III

The third plenary session of the Seminar featured presentations by Peter Thomson, Permanent Representative of Fiji to the United Nations; Sacha Sergio Llorentty Soliz, Permanent Representative of Bolivia to the United Nations; Tove Myhrman, Programme Manager Specialist of the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency; and Raji Sourani, Director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights.

Mr. THOMSON said that from the discussions that had taken place over the course of the Seminar, it was clear that attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals would not be possible under occupation.  He pointed specifically to Goal 16 related to access to justice, saying it was illogical to think that development objective could be achieved while under occupation.  However, progress was being made in the Sustainable Development Goals related to health, education and gender, a testament to the efforts of the Government of Palestine and other actors.

Change was the one constant in life, he said, and the situation in Palestine obviously needed to change.  Yet, the question remained whether that change would be for the better or the worse.  He voiced his belief that the question of Palestine could be “fixed” rather quickly with greater political will.  By comparison, the issue of climate change was a long-term challenge that would require a great deal of effort over a prolonged period of time to effectively address.  The work of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People was an example of the dogged resilience that would be needed to improve the lives of those in Palestine.

Mr. SOLIZ said there could be no status quo in Palestine — things would either get worse, or get better.  In his view, the situation in Palestine was in fact getting worse.  Israel’s aggression against Palestine was nothing short of terrorism.  The international community had failed the Palestinian people and the principles of the United Nations Charter were not being upheld in the case of Palestine.  The “Group of 77” Developing Countries and China, which Bolivia chaired in 2014, was a powerful actor within the United Nations.  Nevertheless, the Group was disappointed that the issue of Palestine did not figure more prominently in the negotiations for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

One could not talk about the achievement of the 2030 Agenda or the fulfilment of human rights while under occupation, he went on to say.  The economic, social and cultural rights of the Palestinian people were being violated by Israel.  The question that remained to be addressed was what could be done to mobilize international solidarity for sustainable development in Palestine.  There could not be double standards whereby the international community felt it acceptable to ignore the plight of the people of Palestine, while expressing concern about other situations of injustice around the world.  While it was much appreciated and needed, the provision of aid should not be a substitute for a clear stance against Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Ms. MYHRMAN said that Sweden was committed to the achievement of a democratic, independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian State and ensuring that the rights and needs of Palestinians were met.  The greatest impediment to development in Palestine was the Israeli occupation, which presented an obstacle that could not be overcome through development cooperation.  Swedish support for Palestine was geared towards strengthened democracy, improved gender equality and greater respect for human rights.  Other priorities included, greater freedom of expression, including a free and independent media, more effective accountability mechanisms, increased political influence, greater enjoyment of human rights for women and children, improved basic health services and increased access to clean water and sanitation.

It was hoped that Sweden’s support for Palestine would result in an increased number of small business start-ups, as well as woman-run businesses, he said.  Increased knowledge and better service capacity at trade organizations and financial institutions, as well as improved conditions for local economic development were other key areas of emphasis.  Sweden was also a major humanitarian donor in Palestine based on humanitarian principles and needs and a global approach that focused primarily on the protection and promotion of human dignity.

Mr. SOURANI, calling the occupation both “criminal and belligerent”, noted that next year would mark 50 years since the start of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine.  The naked reality on the ground was a state of siege in Gaza and unprecedented social and economic suffering for millions of people.  The vast majority of people in Gaza lived far below the poverty line and was dependent on international aid.  The blockade had effectively turned the people of Gaza into a “nation of beggars”.  Israel’s actions had perpetuated the biggest manmade disaster in modern history.  Family members were cut off from one another and civilians had become targets of Israeli military aggression.  During the last Israeli offensive, more than 80 families had been completely wiped out and entire parts of Gaza completely destroyed.  Hospitals were not spared, but rather, were targeted by Israel.

He also pointed out that many schools, including those operated by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) were targeted over the 51-day offensive, which left not one single safe haven for the people of Gaza.  At the conclusion of the hostilities, the Israelis struck a deal whereby they controlled every aspect of reconstruction and the provision of even the most basic commodities.  Israel’s message to the people of Gaza was clear: “You have no tomorrow.  You have nothing to live for,” he said.  Occupation was a crime of aggression.  The Palestinians would not forgive or forget the crimes that had been committed against them.  More than 7,000 Palestinians were in Israeli prisons, including many that were being under administrative detention, without being charged with any crime.

Discussion

In the ensuing interactive discussion, speakers examined the role of development aid, including steps that could be taken to ensure that it was used most effectively in Palestine.  Participants also shared ideas about the role of civil society in Gaza.

Ms. MYHRMAN, responding to a question from an expert from Drew University in the United States about Sweden’s aid model and whether it actually supported occupation, stated that Sweden had thoroughly analysed that possible dynamic and had concluded the best position would be to continue support.  The greatest challenge to development in Palestine was the occupation, which would not be remedied by development cooperation.  She emphasized that Sweden was striving to not only provide aid, but to work in partnership with Palestinian recipients.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine, followed up on that point, saying that in Palestine, international aid was directed towards plans and programmes that had been put into place in close coordination with donors, taking into account all the difficulties of occupation.

Mr. SOURANI responded to a question from a representative of the Palestine Solidarity Association of Sweden regarding the role of civil society, highlighting the important role of non-governmental actors to bring attention to the issue of Palestine.

The representative of Indonesia asked for more information about the Group of 77’s position on Palestine.  In response, Mr. SOLIZ said that the Group was now extremely diverse, consisting of more than 130 Member States.  There was not always agreement within the Group, yet, when it came to Palestine, the Group’s position was very clear.

The representative of Spain took the floor to stress that the Middle East peace process was a priority for his country and that Spain supported the idea of a peace conference taking place before the end of the year.

The representative of Cyprus shared a similar view, noting that his country had recognized the State of Palestine back in 1988.

Closing Remarks

IBRAHIM AL-SHAER, Minister for Social Development of the State of Palestine, said that after two days of intensive discussions it was reassuring that there was almost universal international agreement that Israel’s continued occupation was the major obstacle to Palestine’s quest for sustainable development.  He called for concrete, action-oriented measures that would deliver confidence and trust in the sustainable development process in Palestine.  The Government of Palestine was committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, which presented huge challenges not just for Palestine, but for the whole of the international community.  Robust, effective and transparent follow up support was needed to ensure that no one was left behind.

Mr. MANSOUR reiterated that, as had been stated many times during the Seminar, it would not be possible for Palestine to achieve sustainable development while under occupation.  Several of the Seminar participants were “shining examples” of the spirit of the Palestinian people, particularly the women that had taken part.  However, the discussions had also reflected the high degree of frustration that was being felt by the Palestinian people.  He warned that the situation in Palestine teetered on the verge of a very critical moment that could lead to a series of unpredictable consequences.  Palestine was a serious, responsible State that was participating in shaping issues of worldwide concern, including the global development agenda.  He carried a message and request from Palestine to the rest of the world: “Deal with our issue in a very practical and realistic manner.