

Statement by Mr. Ammar Hijazi, First Secretary, Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations at the Opening of the Seventeen Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-17), New York , Monday 4 May 2009

Allow me to start by thanking you for the opportunity to participate in our important discussion today.

Madam Chairperson,

My people bear the overwhelming daily duress of being under occupation, deprived of all control over their resources, commercial activity, land, which are all vital components of economic development. Undoubtedly, this has a direct and devastating effect on the Palestinian people's ability to overcome challenges in areas like agriculture, rural development, land development, and the growing threat of drought and desertification. Oppression, restrictions, land and water grab Madam Chairperson are all actions that run counter to economic development or sustainability. In fact, they negate those important goals.

As CSD-17 aims at finding ways to address the challenges identified in the review year with regard to the six themes policy options, we invite the CSD to ensure that the recommendations take into account the special needs of peoples living under foreign occupation. This would send the positive and important message that peoples like the Palestinian People shall not be abandoned, left alone to face the impossible task of overcoming these challenges alone.

Madam Chairperson,

Many countries in our region face water shortage problems during the summer season. For Palestinians, the problem is chronic and only getting worse but theirs is a problem not limited to the elements and diminishing resources. Instead, Palestinians are thirsty, their crops are dying, and their once-green fields are turning into arid deserts primarily because of Israel's illegal use of Palestinian water resources.

Israel employs an intricate regime of checkpoints, walls, roadblocks, and illegal settlements, which form the cornerstones of the occupation, while also confiscating the occupied Territory's most valuable water resources. Effectively, Palestinians are cut off from their own water, reducing official Palestinian efforts to water crisis management, rather than water resource management. And while this ban on access is maintained, Palestinians in Gaza are drinking contaminated water that is unsuitable for human consumption because Israel continues to ban them from drilling water wells and more urgently, treating the thousands of metric tons of raw sewage now seeping into their underground water.

Madam Chairperson,

These measures compound an already existing problem, namely scant resources and droughts – most recently in 2006 and 2008. The FAO drought update report of February 2009 highlights, “Drought is now becoming a chronic event and the response needs to be comprehensive and focused on developing a sustainable solution.”

Allow me to share another telling statistic. Palestinian per capita consumption of water has dropped to one third of what it was in 1967, when Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territory began. The reason is tragically simple; since 1967, Israel, the Occupying Power, has refused to change the amount of water allocated for Palestinian consumption to meet the demands of a growing population. It now stands at barely 60 liters a day, in comparison with the Israeli average of 330 liters per day. That's five and a half times the Palestinian water consumption average. Let me remind you that the World Health Organization and the United States Agency for International Development recommend a minimum of 100 liters of water per person, per day.

Finally on the issue of water, the latest World Bank report determines that Israel's current measures in relations to water are not only untenable and must change; they also pose a threat to the prospects of peace. We strongly agree with this assessment.

Madam Chairperson,

As the world battles to ensure recovery from a global recession while still coping with crises relating to food and hunger, agriculture is once again taking center stage as an important avenue to economic recovery. In Palestine, agriculture plays a critical role in protecting and promoting livelihoods, especially in rural areas, which constitute the majority of population centers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Yet, this vital sector has suffered immensely from a concerted and systematic effort by the Occupying Power that employs siege, razing of fields, cutting off access to planted fields as a devastatingly effective tool of collective punishment against Palestinians.

The situation is worst in the Gaza Strip, where all vital sectors of the economy have all but collapsed as a direct result of Israel's brutal war and continuing siege regime. In a recent joint report, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO] and the Palestine National Authority [PNA] summarize the outcome of the war as follows, "Twenty-three days of airstrikes and large-scale incursions resulted in an estimated losses of USD 268 million to the agriculture community as a result of the Operation. The recent attacks on the Gaza Strip came at a time when the sector was struggling to cope with an eighteen-month blockade on imports and exports that continues to cause acute productivity losses and reduce the population's access to affordable fresh foods."

The UNDP also recently reported, "Agriculture suffered tremendous damage, with much of the agricultural infrastructure shattered, threatening the food security of Gazan residents. The military operation resulted in widespread razing of cultivated lands (18 percent), as well as the destruction of greenhouses, livestock (8 percent) and poultry farms, registered groundwater wells (13 percent), irrigation networks and other productive agricultural assets". Allow me here to put these alarming figures in their correct, yet shocking perspective. Before this war, Israel's siege and repeated military attacks on Gaza had rendered approximately 75% of agricultural land in the northern Gaza Strip parched deserts. Before that, they served as Gaza's food basket.

And aside from the death and destruction the war wrought on Gaza's civilian population, the siege, crippling the agriculture sector. I refer you back to the same joint report, which states, "As a result of the closure, the sector has witnessed extensive set-backs, including a complete ban on agricultural exports; a severe shortage of agricultural inputs and supplies that have driven up production prices; and restricted access to sea areas for fishing. The end result is sluggish production, major economic losses, a rise in unemployment, and a threat to food security among the local population, as food imports have been severely limited by the blockade."

Madam Chairperson,

The Israeli siege on Gaza has made 85% of the population dependant on outside food assistance for survival. It has also turned over 70% of the Strip's workforce into unemployed workers living on handouts. Gaza's finishing production has all but stopped, adding approximately 27 thousand people whose income was tied to this traditional sector, to the growing list of the needy.

Madam Chairperson, given these glaring facts, the conclusion is stunning, but clear. Hunger, food insecurity, and their related long-term consequences are not just a threat; they are a reality the occupation Power is working hard to make permanent.

Madam Chairperson,

In the occupied West Bank, agriculture and food security are being cornered and eliminated silently and without bombs. The results however are equally devastating.

The continued construction of the illegal Wall has isolated thousands of dunums of planted fields, which serve as the primary sources of income for thousands of families in the West Bank. In addition, the occupation's regime of walls, checkpoints, and illegal settlements de facto annex 40% of the Territory for settlement infrastructure purposes, leaving Palestinians cornered into their inhabited and crowded population centers, with nothing but God's mercy for income.

But even Palestinian farmers who manage to escape the occupation's illegal confiscation of their land or ban from accessing their fields, have no guarantees their hard work will yield any profit – or more importantly, put food on their families' tables. A regime of over 600 military roadblocks and checkpoints continues to deny many farmers their right to access markets and sell their produce at a profit, no matter how marginal.

Madam Chairperson,

This restrictive and unbearable reality translates into food insecurity. The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office [ACTED] estimates that as much as 25% of Palestinian households in the West Bank are food insecure and that many more households are only marginally food secure. But ACTED's report goes on, "Among those most vulnerable are households in marginalized rural areas which are affected by the drought and conflicts. The livelihoods of small-scale herders in particular are severely threatened by the combined impact of ongoing drought, high input prices and tightening administrative and military measures."

Madam Chairperson,

Women play a traditionally vital role in maintaining and increasing food security for rural households in Palestine. From crop cultivation to sheep-herding, female family members are centrally involved in most livelihood subsistence activities. Thus, the PA has endeavored with developing partners on better involving women in all economic activities including agricultural activities. To that effect, we are happy to report that several women small-businesses have sprung and flourished.

Madam Chairperson,

For forty-two years, the Palestinian people have been held down by the claws of a ruthless military occupation; one that has adopted a very clear and consistent policy towards the people it occupies – one of resource theft, economic degradation and subservience, exploitation, and the denial of hope in a tomorrow that carries freedom, dignity, and prosperity. That is why the Palestinian people know beyond a shadow of doubt that development cannot and will not coexist with oppression and hegemony, whose worst manifestation is foreign occupation and its oppressive practices. Just take a look at this year's economic performance numbers. Despite the economic reform and concerted efforts by the PNA, private businesses, and generous donors, the Palestinian economy registered a growth of 0% because the oppressive conditions of occupation remain.

In this regard, we wish to express our confidence in the CSD 17 as we trust it will ensure the people of Palestine are lifted from this man-made economic abyss by way of including them in the urgently needed international efforts in the area of sustainable development.

The Palestinian People's rightful struggle to achieve their inalienable and long-recognized right to self-determination continues. In the meantime, we count on this august assembly to extend Palestinians its full support in overcoming the awesome challenges confronting developing nations of the world. As we build the future State of Palestine brick by brick, let there be no doubt that providing the Palestinian People

with this assistance would contribute to their equally vital battle – to reach sustainable development and liberation from a life of need and deprivation.

Thank you Madam Chair.