UNITED NATIONS SEMINAR ON ASSISTANCE TO THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

Agenda 2030: Paving the Way toward a Peaceful, Independent and Sustainable State of Palestine

Stockholm, 19 and 20 May 2016

CHAIRMAN’S SUMMARY

The Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, entitled “Agenda 2030: Paving the Way toward a Peaceful, Independent and Sustainable State of Palestine”, was organized in Stockholm, Sweden, on 19-20 May, by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP). The Seminar examined the challenges and constraints of the implementation of the Agenda 2030 by the State of Palestine under occupation, including how the Palestinian decision-makers and partners could use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as “accelerators” for transitioning from dependence on humanitarian assistance to a sustainable, peaceful and independent State.

During the Seminar, representatives of Member States, intergovernmental organizations, UN system entities, civil society organizations, together with expert speakers from Palestine, other countries and the United Nations, explored ways of building resilient and sustainable economic growth in Palestine within the larger political context of the occupation and liberation struggle. The proceedings of the Seminar were open to the public and covered by media.

At the opening session, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his message to the Seminar delivered by Mr. Robert Piper, Assistant Secretary-General, United Nations Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory, underscored that connecting development efforts to humanitarian action, human rights and the advancement of the peace process was critical for progress. It was incumbent upon the international community to do everything possible to re-establish a political horizon that would lead to a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Director of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Mr. Mats Karlsson, representing the host country Sweden, noted that Palestine had a right to self-determination and the ability to shape its future. Unfortunately, recent developments, including settlement expansion and demolition of unprecedented numbers of Palestinian homes by Israel, increasingly put the two-State solution – the only path to security and stability for the Middle East – at risk. The situation in Gaza remained particularly critical.
He announced that Sweden’s Government planned to increase bilateral support to Palestine by 50 per cent over the next four years, including support to Palestinian refugees through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, to total of US$100 million per year.

The Vice-Chairman of the Committee, H.E. Ambassador Rodolfo Reyes Rodriguez, recalling the mandate of the Committee to raise awareness and garner support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people through a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, noted that the Agenda 2030 would need to be implemented while the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, in particular, continued to require humanitarian assistance. The best humanitarian assistance would be that which seamlessly segued into sustainable development and provided a bright outlook into the future.

The Minister for Social Development of the State of Palestine, H.E. Mr. Ibrahim Alshaer, avowed that the Palestinian people had the will and determination to take the bold and transformative steps that were urgently needed to shift towards a sustainable and resilient path. He reported that the Government of Palestine was working on its National Policy Agenda 2017-2022 and had formed a National Team which was committed to achieving the SDGs as a means to strengthening ‘peace in larger freedom’. However, he questioned how the Palestinian people could holistically pursue the ambitious development agenda without sovereignty, respect for human and economic rights, or the ability to control their own natural resources and lands.

In the ensuing sessions, participants reiterated support for the two-state solution and the 2030 Agenda with its promise to “leave no one behind”. It was underscored that the latter placed an onus on the international community to support nationally-owned socio-economic development of the Palestinian people and their efforts to establish a free Palestinian state.

Examining various models to address challenges and constraints of implementation of SDGs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, some participants considered it simply “inconceivable” that Palestine would be able to achieve the SDGs while under Israeli occupation; ending the occupation would be a prerequisite for any meaningful development. While acknowledging the resiliency of the Palestinian people and progress made in social areas, it was noted that the economic situation in Palestine lagged far behind social development achievements, and given the continued occupation of the Territory, there was a real risk that even those gains would be lost. The State of Palestine was committed to Agenda 2030 but the international community had to be realistic about what could and could not be achieved in terms of the implementation of the SDGs that were inherently political in nature. The situation on the ground demanded that development in Palestine be based on an economic, political and social process of resistance to Israel’s occupation, which was the leading cause of the development challenges, and aimed at building a productive Palestinian State that was less reliant on Israel and foreign assistance.
The Seminar then considered the role of youth and women as key to enabling sustainable solutions for a dignified future. Participants observed that although the reality of Palestine was full of violence, repressive policies, collective punishment and restrictions on movement, young Palestinians were keen to acquire knowledge in every possible way. However, job opportunities for graduates inside and outside Palestine were limited. The percentage of females in Palestinian universities had reached about 58 per cent but women’s participation in the labour force was at 19.4 per cent, the lowest in the Arab world. It was emphasized that economic, environmental and social issues viewed through the lens of gender would present serious challenges to Palestine’s sustainable development objectives. Concern was expressed that many media organizations, particularly in the United States, portrayed female Palestinians as a homogenous group of oppressed women and Palestinian men as tyrants and religious extremists, possibly as part of a strategy to support problematic foreign policy interventions in the region. The stereotypes of Palestinians could be broken down through positive messaging in documentaries and other media efforts rooted in a long-term vision of the everyday struggles of life in Palestine. Moving forward, policy priorities should include ending the occupation, providing compensation for economic losses, increasing the availability of psycho-social support and enhancing opportunities for decent work and education that emphasized non-violence and trust-building.

In the final plenary session on 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 continue. The year 2017 would mark 50 years of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and “crime of aggression”. The blockade had created a state of siege in Gaza, unprecedented social and economic suffering for millions of people, and dependence on international aid. SDG Goal 16 related to access to justice and it was illogical to think that development objective could be achieved while under occupation. The key pre-condition to effective partnerships and support to Palestine was political intervention to end the occupation and secure the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, under international conventions, Israel as the occupying power was obliged to ensure the welfare of the occupied population and the development of the occupied territory. Expressing concern about other situations of injustice around the world, participants stressed that there could be no double standards whereby the international community felt it acceptable to ignore the plight of the Palestinian people. It was also noted that while it was much appreciated and needed, the provision of aid could not become a substitute for a clear stance against Israeli occupation of Palestine. In this context, it was recalled that Sweden had committed to the achievement of a democratic, independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian State and ensuring that the rights and needs of Palestinians were met.

In closing remarks, the Minister for Social Development of the State of Palestine, H.E. Mr. Ibrahim Alshaer, said that the discussions at the Seminar showed 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 SDGs, 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.

The Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, H.E. Ambassador Riyad Mansour, reiterated that it would not be possible for Palestine to achieve sustainable development while under occupation. Referring to the speakers from Palestine, he noted that they 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”.

***Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the Conference. A detailed report will be published by the Division for Palestinian Rights in due course.