



UNITED NATIONS SEMINAR ON ASSISTANCE TO THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

Speeding up relief, recovery and reconstruction in post-war Gaza

United Nations Office at Vienna, 31 March and 1 April 2015

CHAIRMAN'S SUMMARY

The **United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People**, hosted at UNOV and organized under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, reviewed the pressing immediate and longer-term humanitarian and development needs in the Gaza Strip. During the Seminar representatives of Governments, intergovernmental organizations, including various United Nations bodies, and civil society, together with expert speakers from Palestine, other countries and the United Nations, shared their expertise while examining Gaza's severe housing, fuel, power, environmental and water crises.

In his message to the Seminar at the opening session, the **Secretary-General of the United Nations** noted the progress represented by the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism in moving forward with reconstruction. He warned, however, that the suffering of the people and the slow pace of reconstruction in Gaza persisted in the aftermath of last summer's brutal conflict. The Secretary-General urged donors to fulfil their commitments emphasizing the need to break the cycle of "build-destroy, build-destroy, build-destroy". He further called upon the Palestinians to overcome their divisions, noting that long-term stability and sustained reconstruction would only be achieved through the end to the occupation, a full lifting of the blockade on the Gaza Strip and by addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns. That would require "a comprehensive peace agreement leading to a viable and independent Palestinian State".

The **Director-General of the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria**, said the international community had to help civilians, who continued to pay the highest price. Reconstruction and development in the Gaza Strip depended upon efficient aid but also on a political process and freedom of movement, a pre-requisite to access to Gaza. Austria's assistance to the Palestinian people focused on the water sector, UNRWA and the ICRC. Austria stood ready to continue to assist Palestinians to find tailored solutions to their problems. Realizing the aspiration of all the peoples in the region would entail negotiating a lasting peace between two democratic States living side by side.

The Chairman of the Committee said that Gaza's already serious housing, fuel, power, environmental and water crises had intensified greatly in the aftermath of the war in 2014, becoming "a near catastrophe". Although there had been encouraging first steps, many obstacles remained on the road to full recovery. The Committee welcomed the formation of the National Consensus Government in the State of Palestine and the start of its activities in Gaza. Another encouraging development was the fact that an increasing number of States were recognizing the State of Palestine.

The Representative of the State of Palestine reminded that following years of cumulative destruction Gaza was only receiving "relief, not reconstruction assistance". The blockade of Gaza had to be removed if serious rebuilding were to take place. The Government likely to emerge in Israel was openly opposed to the formation of a Palestinian State. Israel wanted to annex 45 per cent of the West Bank "to its settlement paradigm" and keep Gaza isolated from the rest of Palestine. The Palestinian journey to self-determination had gone from armed struggle to accepting all Security Council resolutions promoting a lasting peaceful solution based on the two-State solution, but the occupation had not ended. The Palestinian leadership, now united under a National Consensus Government, would continue the same struggle through legal and peaceful means in its quest of further international recognition (138 States had already recognized Palestine), by seeking justice through additional Security Council resolutions and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Israel wanted to maintain the status quo while Palestinians wanted to change it; the international community had a responsibility to induce a change of behaviour in Israel. Demographic realities meant that Israel would have the choice between a two- or a one-State solution. The latter would become a de jure Apartheid State if Israel maintained current policies.

In the **ensuing sessions**, participants recalled statistics describing the human toll from the 2014 war, including the number of dead, wounded, orphans and the devastation to Gaza's physical and economic infrastructure. The number of victims in 2014 had increased dramatically compared to previous conflicts. The destruction of tunnels prevented the only communication with the outside world, and 80 per cent of the Gaza population had become dependent on assistance. Poverty had increased exponentially, requiring psychological support in addition to infrastructure rehabilitation. The last war had a major demoralizing effect as it showed that "there were no red lines"; about 60 per cent of the population in Gaza were children and youth and many were traumatized as they had lived through three wars in a very short time-span. The 2014 war left a sense of pessimism among the population which had to be reverted. The October 2014 Cairo donor conference, coupled with the UN Secretary-General's visit to Gaza, provided a degree of optimism but the population had turned angry and frustrated because of the slow pace of reconstruction and a clear trend towards de-development.

The **housing shortage** existed before the 2014 war, and three wars in the last six years had increased the sense of vulnerability and insecurity as the majority of the victims of the latest war were civilians, including children. **Local capacities** were exhausted after 7 years of blockade. Statistics showed that 28 per cent of the Gaza population was displaced at one point; 20,000 homes were uninhabitable, 144,000 required repairs. Hundreds of facilities, including Gaza's power plant, sewage treatment plant, schools and 75 health facilities had been damaged.

Municipalities were unable to provide water to some 270,000 persons and 90 per cent of wells and desalination plants could not operate.

Participants emphasized that the **majority of the population** was **excluded** from any **economic activity and in need of social protection**; creating permanent or temporary jobs were the only way to pull out Gaza from the current situation. International assistance programmes were useful but only the agricultural, industrial and fishing sectors could give back to people access to a dignified and sustainable livelihood. However, shrinking arable land and scarcity of water presented serious challenges. An integrated reconstruction strategy had to be based on public and private partnerships, capacity-building at the local level, environmental awareness, community-based strategies, strengthening the role of women in the productive sector, special assistance to small and micro enterprises, particularly for sharing knowledge for innovative technologies including recycling, careful water management and alternative energy sources. Respect for sovereignty - ending the occupation, freedom of movement, including the freedom to export and import goods and services – was paramount.

In the discussion it was underlined that “the crisis in Gaza was man-made”. As long as the root causes of the conflict remained unaddressed, the potential for recurring conflict was dangerously present – a fact also recognized by the UN Secretary-General and the US Secretary of State. However, no tangible progress had been made to end the occupation and the blockade. Some participants pointed to the need to expedite Palestinian reconciliation efforts in order to give the population additional hope.

Extensive discussions took place regarding the **need to re-establish reliable power supplies in Gaza**, through repairing the existing plant damaged during the 2014 war but also through innovative alternative energy projects. The possibilities and challenges regarding exploitation of **Gaza gas resources** were also discussed. Similarly, experts debated the challenges facing the construction of a large-scale desalination plant as Gaza’s **water resources** were compromised and fast diminishing. Non-governmental organizations also presented creative alternatives regarding water collection and energy generation as small-scale solutions for communities. A **sea-port was described as a necessary option** not only for Gaza but for Palestine as a whole; in past times, a port in Gaza had provided a sea outlet to its hinterland. Such a facility could be operated through modalities which took into consideration security concerns in Israel.

Regarding the level of **international donor support**, Palestinian representatives warned that the figures were misleading. The 4.5 billion dollars pledged in October 2014 in the Cairo donor conference included funds already used as bilateral contribution to UN agencies as well as budget support for the Palestinian Government; perhaps only half of those funds were actually “new money” for Gaza’s reconstruction. There was a general consensus urging donors to honour their financial commitments, including funding for United Nations agencies that carried out vital operations in Gaza. Representatives of Member States took the floor to inform the audience about the level of assistance provided by their respective Governments, and non-governmental organizations.

Representatives of the Palestinian Government expressed gratitude for the international community's generosity. They encouraged coordination among donors and with the Palestinian Government, which should be the ultimate authority on allocating funds for reconstruction. Existing challenges were acknowledged but Palestinians were working to maintain unity between the West Bank and Gaza so that Palestinians could "get out of their cage and fulfil their basic needs". The temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism was a positive step but the Palestinian Government expressed opposition to the fact that Israel continued to have veto power on what could be imported or exported from Gaza; therefore, the limited duration of this mechanism had to be emphasized as "Israel had no right" to determine Gaza's reconstruction needs.

In the closing session, the Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations provided a historical overview of Palestinians' ordeal during the 20th Century, and reaffirmed his country's attachment to peaceful means to realize its right to self-determination. He celebrated the fact that on that very same day the State of Palestine had joined the International Criminal Court. He further called on the international community to adopt resolutions to stop illegal Israeli behaviour and achieve the two-State solution.

The Chairman of the Committee summarized the results of the meeting, acknowledging progress in the level of assistance provided but urging international partners and donors to fully engage in Gaza's reconstruction. He further called upon international donors to honour their generous pledges and to promote practical steps to end Gaza's blockade, to open its border crossing including with Egypt as well as to ensure that Gaza's harbours received ships and that its fishermen continued to work without hindrance.

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Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the Seminar. A detailed report summarizing each statement and presentation will be published by the Division for Palestinian Rights in due course.