



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

Southeast Asian Support for the Rights of the Palestinian People

28-29 February 2020

Kuala Lumpur

CHAIR SUMMARY

The **International Conference on the Question of Palestine “Southeast Asian Support for the Rights of the Palestinian People”** was convened in Kuala Lumpur on 28 and 29 February 2020 under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP), in cooperation with the Government of Malaysia and the Perdana Global Peace Foundation (PGPF). Ahead of the Opening Session, the Committee Delegation held a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mr. Mahathir Mohamad.

The Conference brought together Palestinian and international experts as well as civil society actors in Southeast Asia as a contribution towards the mobilization of efforts in support of the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. It addressed the difficulties of life for Palestinians under the Israeli occupation, emphasizing the need for concerted action aimed at halting negative trends on the ground and at promoting a comprehensive and just two-State solution long-endorsed by the international community.

At the opening, the **Chair of the Committee, Ambassador Cheikh Niang (Senegal)**, recognised the “long-standing, principled support for the quest of the Palestinian people to be free of oppression and occupation” among the peoples of Southeast Asia. The path to achieve a just solution was clear: the establishment of two States – Israel and Palestine – based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as Palestine’s capital, as set out by relevant United Nations resolutions and international law. The occupation prevented a just solution because it profited from the injustice of today’s reality, cementing a system of exploitation, expropriation and annexation. Many painted the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an ethnic or a religious one. Instead, it was a conflict between those on the side of truth and justice, and those who are benefiting from false narratives and oppression. There were Israelis who also seek a way towards a just solution, with freedom and dignity for all. They were allies.

In his opening statement, **Mr. Stefan Priesner**, UN Resident Coordinator in Malaysia, representing Secretary-General António Guterres, reiterated the United Nations’ commitment to

helping the parties to the conflict overcome the current impasse and return to meaningful negotiations to end the occupation and realize a two-State solution. Noting that the Committee had convened this conference in times of tensions in the Middle East, he underlined that a political solution was needed more than ever. He went on to underscore the United Nations' position that annexation of Palestinian territory in the occupied West Bank, if implemented, would not only be illegal under international law but would also close the door to negotiations and deal a devastating blow to prospects for a viable two-State solution. It would also have negative repercussions across the region, and severely undermine opportunities for peace. "The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Organization this year is an opportunity to uphold the values of the Charter to advance the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people," he said.

The representative of the State of Palestine, **Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations in New York Ambassador Riyad Mansour**, highlighted the historically strong relationship between Palestine and Malaysia. He strongly criticized the proposals presented by United States President Donald Trump, which he defined as a continuation of a policy that had already seen the recognition of Jerusalem as the sovereign capital of Israel, and the move of the US Embassy to the city. These actions were violations of international law and ran counter to Security Council resolutions. It was the collective responsibility of all to defend Jerusalem, he said, appealing to "brothers and sisters" in Malaysia for help. No single Palestinian would accept the proposals, which would divide Palestinian land. "We are not looking for a new plan," he stated, adding that "what we need is not a new plan but a mechanism to implement existing agreements and United Nations resolutions." He went on to point out the need for Palestinian unity. "We must put our house in order," he said, calling for the holding of elections across the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem.

In his keynote address, **Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamad** stated that powerful nations and self-proclaimed defenders of justice, freedom and democracy were keeping silent on the suffering of the Palestinian people or, worse, were party to the perpetrations of injustice and cruelty inflicted on the Palestinians. Noting that the theme of the conference was "Southeast Asian support for the rights of the Palestinian people," he said it aptly highlighted the key message on the "Rights of the Palestinian People" consistent and in line for what the United Nations stood. Drawing attention to the remarkable achievements of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), he urged the bloc's member states to continue their cooperation with the Palestinian people not only in political and economic affairs, but also in the pursuit of justice and peace for them. "Our collective voice should also extend a united front in supporting the rights of the Palestinians. This is the primary purpose of this peace Conference," he said.

Turning to the US proposals, he said that they endorsed and fomented Israel's position without any attempts for dialogue or negotiation with Palestinian representatives from the West Bank or Gaza. This was a mockery of international efforts to find a solution to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian crisis, contrary to a two-State solution, and did not respect previously signed agreements and commitments. If implemented, Israel would be allowed to annex all its illegal settlements, now littered across the West Bank, as well as the vast agricultural basin of the Jordan Valley. Malaysia stood by its position of support for the creation of an independent State of Palestine through a two-State solution based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

During the first panel, themed “*Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*”, speakers discussed how the announcement of the US proposal affected the situation on the ground and the international efforts to resolve the conflict. Ninety-four per cent of the Palestinians rejected the plan because it fell far short of their minimum expectations. Its implementation would deprive Palestinians of basic rights, confiscate more Palestinian land and ultimately serve the interests of Israel. The core of the plan was not an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians but, instead, one between Israel and the United States. This was proof that the United States had abandoned its role as a mediator. Yet, participants stated, what was needed was not only to understand the content of the more than 180 pages of the US proposal, but also to come up with a detailed counteroffer.

Within the United States, the plan had blown up a status quo where Israel could always count on bipartisan support. Now, all Democratic contenders for the presidency were opposed to the US proposal, emphasizing support for a two-State solution, which the plan would effectively destroy. Thus, the future of the plan, and of US policy toward the question of Palestine, rested on the outcome of the 2020 elections.

Within the international community, it would be important to focus on the tenets of international law. For example, the International Law Commission had offered just one illustration of the kind of act that States should refrain from: formally or informally recognizing as legal “attempted acquisition of sovereignty over territory through denial of the right of self-determination of peoples.” A more fitting characterization of Israel’s actions in the West Bank would be hard to come by, and such arguments should be used by the champions of the two-State solution. Other speakers argued for enhanced civil society initiatives like boycotts and divestment, as a complement to collective action by Governments, which should also include the imposition of sanctions on Israel.

The situation of UNRWA was a further focus of discussion. The agency had been surprised about the US decision to cut its funding because as recently as 2017 both had signed an agreement on the continuation of funding. In December 2019, the UNRWA’s mandate had been renewed for another three years but there was concern that in the runup to the next renewal, in 2022, there would be attempts to effect substantial changes to the mandate.

In the second panel, on “*Civil Society Action*”, speakers outlined various anti-occupation campaigns in the Palestinian territory. Among them were non-violent popular resistance to make the world aware of the segregation in which Palestinians live, campaigns to train Palestinians on how to document crimes committed by Israeli forces and publish them on media to counter soldiers and settlers who deny their violations, and projects to preserve olive groves. Representatives of Palestinian NGOs were looking forward to ongoing communication with counterparts in Southeast Asia.

Palestinian speakers called on the international community to help end Israeli impunity, apply international law and justice, help realize their rights to self-determination, and speak out against the Trump plan. “We are not asking for more human rights than others, but we are not accepting fewer human rights than others,” one of them said.

Another speaker shared her experience providing humanitarian support to the Palestinian people over the past four decades, from working with the Palestine Red Crescent Society as orthopaedic surgeon helping Palestinians in Lebanon to organising relief for the Gaza Strip.

Speakers acknowledged that the divisions between the Palestinian factions, and the separation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank, made it more difficult for civil society organizations to mobilize resources. Further, they pointed out that the occupation was profitable for Israel, while the Palestinian economy was suffering from the occupation. Addressing options of support in Southeast Asia, while it would be difficult for Malaysian civil society organizations to come and help Palestinians due to the restrictions under occupation, they could help educate the public in their country and the region on the question of Palestine.

The third panel on “*Regional Support for Palestinian Rights*” outlined how governments in the region had generally supported the Palestinian cause. At the civil society level, there was active support in some countries and at least passive backing in others. Since the heyday of support for the Palestinian people among the Global South in the 1960s and 1970s, Israel had consolidated power through its association with capitalist prosperity, whereas Southeast Asian support for Palestinians declined.

Local organisations, like PGPF, advocated for the Palestinian cause through holding fora and using media, as well as supporting projects in the occupied Palestinian territory including sewage pipes installation, desalination, and setting up computer laboratories at universities. It also built kindergartens and started a rehabilitation centre for Palestinians wounded during the "Great March of Return" protests in Gaza.

There were several initiatives that civil society could undertake, including measures to counter Israel’s “memoricide” – the destruction of individual and collective memory in an attempt to wipe out Palestinian civilization and identity – as well as counter the institutionalized impunity of Israel by holding tribunals, which could be an impetus for the International Criminal Court to take action. Collective efforts could lead to impactful outcomes for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Speakers argued that there was much to learn from European counterparts, including on the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Other groups, such as the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) were engaged in capacity building and forming national and regional alliances. These helped creating new narratives and were good at articulating the problems. The organisation started working with Palestinian youth in Australia and New Zealand, holding one-on-one webinars and boot camps, and also organised the visit of Australian parliamentarians to Palestine. Panellists also explored measures civil society organizations can take to influence government policy towards Palestine.

In the closing session **Ambassador Riyadh Mansour (Palestine)** said that the State of Palestine looked forward to more high-level exchanges with Malaysia. He urged States to shoulder responsibility to defeat the current US proposals and support the international consensus to end the occupation, based on the pre-1967 borders. As the United Nations

Secretary-General always said, there was no Plan B to a two-State solution. It was the collective responsibility of all, Palestinians and others, to implement the global plan.

The **Deputy Secretary General at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Malaysia Ms. Nadzirah Osman** expressed hope that the international community would find a lasting two-State solution that would allow both sides to live side-by-side in peace. Welcoming the list of companies doing business in settlements published by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, she urged all countries to take a closer look at the list. Settlements were illegal under international law. The International Criminal Court was prepared to open an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by Israel. The international community could not sit idle, watching Palestinians being killed and their land confiscated; it must galvanize efforts and ensure the question of Palestine remained high on the United Nations agenda.

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****Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the Conference. A detailed report, including specific questions that were addressed during the interactive discussions, will be published by the Division for Palestinian Rights in due course.*