



VIRTUAL EVENT

“International Parliamentarians and the Question of Palestine”

Convened by the
UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP)

12 November 2020

CHAIR SUMMARY

The virtual event “**International Parliamentarians and the Question of Palestine**” was convened on 12 November 2020 under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP). The event was moderated by Ambassador Cheikh Niang, Chair of the Committee and Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations. It consisted of an opening session with remarks by the Chair and Ambassador Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations. The panel comprised of Ms. María Arena, Member of the European Parliament and Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights; Mr. Mandla Mandela, Member of the National Assembly of South Africa; and Ms. Betty McCollum, Member of the United States Congress. Member States participated in the two-hour event on WebEx, which was also livestreamed on UNTV. Viewers watched the conference on UN WebTV and had an opportunity to make comments and pose questions to the panellists on the Committee’s social media pages and via WhatsApp.

At the opening, **Ambassador Niang** reiterated the important role played by national and regional parliaments as well as interparliamentary unions to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through shaping public opinion, formulating public policies and upholding international legitimacy in support of a comprehensive and just settlement of the question of Palestine. Parliamentarians promoted diplomatic recognition of the State of Palestine, pressed for the implementation of international law by the executive branches in their respective countries and built on the advocacy of civil society organizations to put forward draft bills. The Chair referred to the example of the United States grassroots movements advocating for the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and how recent open letters from members of the US parliament have served to sensitize on the looming *de jure* annexation of territory in the occupied West Bank and on the importance to reconsider the US military aid to Israel. He also mentioned efforts by the Members of the European Parliament to call on the European Union member states to pressure Israel to end the occupation and its settlement policy and to lift the Gaza blockade and those of South African parliamentarians in providing technical guidance to Palestinian civil

society organizations on advocating at the UN Human Rights Council for the revival of the UN Centre Against Apartheid to address the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

In his introductory remarks, **Ambassador Mansour** recalled the Committee's respect for the role of parliamentarians with whom special conferences had been held throughout the years, in addition Committee delegation meetings with parliamentarians in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. He lauded parliamentarians' efforts in advocating for the recognition of the State of Palestine, including in the European Union, and highlighted the importance for the Committee to continue engaging with all branches of governments in order to open meaningful doors for a political process leading to a peaceful settlement between Israel and Palestine on the basis of the two-State solution and 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Ambassador Mansour expressed his hope that the Committee would be given the opportunity to engage with the US Congress to seek an end to Israeli occupation.

María Arena considered making human rights a reality for the Palestinian people a collective challenge. As the Chair of the EU parliamentary Sub-Committee on Human Rights (DROI), the question of Palestine remained a priority. The human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) was planned to be discussed soon in the presence of Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territory Occupied Since 1967, Michael Lynk, and prominent civil society organizations such as B'Tselem and the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. She also underlined her responsibility as the Chair of DROI to follow up on individual human rights cases, brought to her by civil society, and the use of silent diplomacy to address them. Ms. Arena insisted that it was a responsibility for parliamentarians to keep the Palestinian issue on the global agenda, including: the status of refugees and assistance to UNRWA; administrative detentions without charges, particularly child detainees, by the Israeli authorities; the right to a fair trial based on international standards; the Gaza blockade exacerbated by the pandemic; as well as the Israeli disregard of international law and unilateral negotiations undermining multilateralism.

Addressing the differentiation policy of the European Union, she referred to the EU Commission's Interpretative Notice of 12 November 2015 on the indication of origins of goods from the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967. These guidelines were not about the prohibition of importing Israeli settlement products into the EU but about labelling Israeli products in line with the EU legislation on consumer protection and about implementing EU tariff agreements on Israeli products made in Israel and not those originating from the illegal settlements. As the former Rapporteur for the Trade Committee on the Relations with Israel she had followed up on the implementation on these guidelines, which proved to be challenging because customs authorities cannot verify the origin of products and there was no political will from Member States to do so. Technical agreements on postal codes from Israel to locate these products proved inefficient.

As the main clause in the Association Agreement between the EU and Israel stipulated that relations of the EU with other states were to be based on the respect of human rights and democratic principles, Ms. Arena had to consequently call for the suspension of such an agreement following Israel's disregard for UN Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), adding that there was no support for such a measure from EU Member States as a whole. She concluded

with recommending the recognition of the State of Palestine by all EU Member States, and other countries as a first step in the peace process as well as the respect for UN SCR 2334 (2016), which includes the differentiation policy for settlement products. She welcomed the publication of the UN database on business settlements, which should encourage Member States to adopt due diligence laws on the issue and recommended its annual update as means to fight human rights violations and grave breaches of international law in the OPT. Lastly, she called for partnerships between the EU parliamentary committees working on the question of Palestine and the UN Palestinian Rights Committee.

Mandla Mandela spoke of the opportune moment for a United Nations panel event on international parliamentarians and the question of Palestine following the US elections as the prospects of a return to multilateralism would strengthen the UN in its role of bringing a just world order and universal rights as envisioned in its founding Charter. He criticized the policy of unilateralism advocated by the US administration on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the past four years, particularly the unilateral declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, sending shockwaves to all parliaments in the world, and applauded the initiative of the Committee to condemn such a decision and have it declared illegal. He also criticized the drastic budget cuts undergone by UNRWA, because of the loss of US funding, and their devastating impact on the over 5 million Palestine refugees relying on its schools, health care and social services, while the US administration was increasing its military aid to Israel. Parliamentarians across the world had also condemned the 2020 US proposal because it called for the permanent annexation of Palestinian territory in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Referring to the situation of South Africa in the apartheid era, he highlighted the unwavering support received at the time from neighbouring countries, and criticised recent Member State decisions to normalise relationships with Israel calling instead for the isolation of Israel – akin to the isolation of South Africa in the late apartheid era – until it met the conditions conducive to a just and fair settlement.

In line with his grandfather Nelson Mandela’s saying that “only free men can negotiate”, he called for the release of all political prisoners, the right of return of Palestine refugees and diaspora, the freeze of all illegal settlements and the return of lands to their rightful owners. He called on the Arab countries, who had stood by South Africa in its struggle against the apartheid regime including through a boycott, to return to the same principled stand vis-à-vis Israel. He also called on his fellow parliamentarians to rally around the Palestinian cause, as they have the power to translate policies into concrete initiatives by their respective governments and inform regional blocs in support of the Palestinian struggle and concluded with Nelson Mandela’s quote that “The greatest moral issue of our time is the struggle of the Palestinian people.”

Betty McCollum spoke about her work in the US House of Representatives as part of a small group of Members of Congress who vocally support Palestinian rights. She criticized that the current US administration had abandoned the Palestinian people and inflicted hardship on them through the expulsion of their diplomats from Washington, D.C., and cutting off economic assistance to the OPT. The US government had also abandoned universal values and the international consensus on advancing a just Middle East peace and with these actions caused significant damage to long standing relationships. She believed that with the upcoming Biden administration a change for the better was possible but it would require a prioritization of a

respectful and substantive diplomatic re-engagement with the Palestinian Government and civil society, as well as addressing questions like the Israeli Government's level of interest in a just peace, following decades of military occupation and settlement expansion, and the prospect of self-determination for the Palestinian people.

She shared how her interest in promoting Palestinian rights in the Congress had been triggered by a UNICEF report on children in Israeli military detention, highlighting the ill-treatment of Palestinian children in the Israeli military detention system as widespread, systematic and institutionalized. Learning about this system of child detention as a weapon of military occupation imposing collective trauma and control over Palestinian families led her to introduce the legislation "Promoting Human Rights for Palestinian Children Living Under Israeli Military Occupation" (H.R. 2407) in 2019 as the first bill ever introduced in the US Congress to promote or protect Palestinian rights. The legislation, which is unlikely to pass Congress, would place human rights conditions on US security assistance to any country, including Israel, and prohibits US tax dollars from being used to support or enable the military detention of Palestinian children.

As another issue of great concern she mentioned the threat of further Israeli annexation of Palestinian lands and for which in August 2020 she had introduced the "Israeli Annexation Non-recognition Act" (H.R. 8050) aimed to prohibit any US government or department from extending assistance or legitimacy to any area in the OPT annexed by Israel. While her actions remained limited, nonetheless these two bills send a clear message to her colleagues and the American and Palestinian peoples that there were American political leaders in the US Congress, where Palestinian rights were generally ignored, who did respect the rights and dignity of the Palestinian people. As parliamentarians had the power to shift the discourse and promote rights-respecting policies and foster constructive dialogues, she welcomed the opportunity to collaborate and work with parliamentary colleagues and the UN Palestinian Rights Committee.

During the **Question and Answer** session, **Alia Bouran**, President Emeritus of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), introduced her organization as an assembly of 34 parliamentarians with a unique balance of representation from the two sides of the Mediterranean, giving it credibility in terms of its work, messaging and narrative. Referring to a meeting in Malta in 2010, she proposed a future joint effort between PAM and the Committee to bring together parliamentarians from the Euro-Mediterranean region and the wider Arab world to signal strong unity and support to peaceful negotiations.

In the ensuing discussion, **Ambassador Pedro Luis Pedros Cuesta**, Permanent Representative of Cuba to the United Nations, spoke of the relevance of the event and interventions of the three panellists in contributing to raise awareness on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, which remain the only way to a lasting Middle East peace. He reiterated the condemnation of the Israeli annexation plan by the Foreign Relations Commission of the National Assembly of the People's Power of the Republic of Cuba and the need for a just, comprehensive and peaceful resolution based on the two-State solution and UN resolutions. The Deputy Permanent Representative of Egypt also shared the same position of his country's House of Representatives at the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union and asked about existing initiatives between the panellists and the latter and potential for synergy of

efforts. A representative of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in Geneva raised the issue of Palestinian parliamentarians detained in Israeli prisons and asked international parliamentarians to address it within their respective constituencies.

The panellists emphasized the importance of collaboration between the European parliament and interparliamentary unions, for example with the Pan-African Parliament. Such a collaboration would serve a joint implementation of international law and UN resolutions on the question of Palestine. The panellists also spoke of mobilizing support through different structures including civil society organizations, interfaith groups and regional parliamentary structures, to better engage with Arab States and mobilize action.

Ambassador Niang closed the event.

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****Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the virtual Event. A video of the Event can be found on the webpage of the CEIRPP, www.un.unispal.org as well as in its official Facebook page and YouTube account.*

****Note: The views and opinions expressed in this summary are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.*