

Presentation to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the
Palestinian People

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE ON THE EXERCISE OF THE INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF THE
PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY WITH THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

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Remarks by Rev. Erica N. Williams

Black Christians for Palestine

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. President, Excellencies, and to each of you.

I would like to extend my deep appreciation to the General Assembly's Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for inviting civil society to participate in today's solemn commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

I will never forget Wednesday, July 28, 2018. I was traveling on the public bus from Bethlehem to East Jerusalem and we came to a checkpoint where all Palestinians had to exit off the bus to be searched before they could "enter Israel" -- even though the bus went from one Palestinian destination to another -- from occupied Bethlehem to occupied East Jerusalem. There was a mother on the bus with two small children and she was rushed off the bus by an Israeli officer who had a large gun around his chest and pointed it towards her. I could see the fear and terror in the woman's eyes. She was searched and allowed back on the bus, but she held her children tight the remainder of the ride. I could stay on the bus because I had an American passport. This experience caused me to have nightmares for weeks.

I come to you today in the spirit of the Brown Skinned Palestinian Jew Jesus Christ who grew up in Nazareth, a town which was poor, marginalized, occupied, and militarized by the Roman Empire. When he started his public ministry, he came with a clear message concerning what he was sent to the Earth to do. His purpose can be found in the gospel passage of **Luke 4:18-19 (MSG)**

God's Spirit is on me;

he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and

recovery of sight to the blind,

To set the burdened and battered free,

to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

We are calling for you to ACT and to do it NOW.... And I want to be very clear that the fight for the liberation of the Palestinians is not only being waged by Christians but people of all faith traditions -- including Jews, Muslims and more -- all people who hold the belief that all people are born free and deserve dignity.

For forty-three years the UN General Assembly and most of its member states have commemorated the INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY WITH THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE. Palestinians have indeed seen changes in their lives during that time, but those changes have made their lives worse, and not better. The Apartheid Wall in the West Bank was built as the International Day of Solidarity was solemnly proclaimed each year.

The International Court of Justice ruled that the Wall violated international law and should be removed from Palestinian territory, and yet the Wall remains. In 2008, 2012 and 2014 the Israeli military launched wars against the occupied and besieged Gaza Strip while the International Day of Solidarity remained an annual event, and yet thousands of Palestinians, as well as 15 Israeli civilians were killed in those wars.

Commemorating international solidarity is not enough. It is not enough to cite the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when the obligation of the United Nations and its member states is to uphold and implement and defend those rights. Palestinians are still being denied their rights, and the UN must go beyond words to a new priority of action.

Therefore, I come here today with a heavy heart not to give a great speech for people to clap and then go back to business as usual but to remind you, as Member States of the United Nations. You, excellencies, hold a grave responsibility. The protection of those languishing under military occupations lies in your hands. The restoration of human rights to those illegally denied such rights is your obligation. The defense of those

unable to protect themselves is your burden. And I am sad to report to you today, as Dr. King once said, that you have written a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.”

I am from Saginaw, MI which is next door to Flint, MI. Many of you may have heard of the water crisis in Flint, where a brave Palestinian pediatrician refused to remain silent about the impact on children drinking poisoned water that resulted from a political decision. Six years after Dr Mona Hanna-Atisha told the world about the Flint water crisis, I still have family members drinking bottled water because the problems from the poisoning of the water have not been solved. The water crisis proved once again that if you are a person of color or poor your life does not matter to those in power.

One of the things that really angered me during my time visiting refugee camps in Palestine was there were no green spaces for children. However, I saw children in Israeli settlements, with sparkling swimming pools, parks and schoolyards filled with grass and flowers. Yet many Palestinian children in villages just below those hilltop settlements don't even have enough water to bathe or to drink. It reminded me of the fight that the Poor People's Campaign and so many others have been waging here in the United States against the issues of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation.

The United States Government with all its power and wealth continues to allow for more than 140- million people in the country to remain poor or low wealth. Yet Washington continues to send its \$3.8 billion of our tax money every year directly to the Israeli military.

Since last year's solemn commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, the world has seen unprecedented transformations and faces new dangers. According to the World Health Organization as of November 2020 a total of 91,464 cases of COVID 19 have been diagnosed in the occupied Palestinian territory and 767 deaths have been reported. This is compounded by poor public health conditions: water and electricity crisis, rampant poverty, and a high population density.

The Palestinian people were living in a pandemic of racism long before COVID-19 hit. On June 23rd, 2020 the Israeli military murdered Ahmed Erekat, a deeply loved 27-year-old son, brother, and fiancé. He was shot and killed as he was running errands for his sister on her wedding day. His mother and father simply want to say goodbye to their child and lay their son to rest but the Israeli government is refusing to return him to his family unless they promise not to bring a legal case against the Israeli soldier who murdered their boy. Israel's practice to withhold the Palestinian dead is in grave violation of international humanitarian law stipulations with The Geneva Convention, that upholds the respect for the dead and their burial.

Five days after George Floyd was murdered in the United States Iyad Halak a 32-year old severely autistic man was shot and killed by Israeli Border Police. Iyad was walking along a path he took to his special school every day when the police yelled at him to stop. He did not understand what they were asking of him and he continued to walk. The police chased him and began firing shots at him. Iyad was terrified and hid in a garbage room at the school. The police found him and shot him dead. This story is parallel to the stories in the United States of slave patrols, Jim Crow segregation and mass incarceration; it is parallel to stories of apartheid in South Africa. The fight against racism, income equality and domination are global and interconnected.

Malcolm X, speaking at a Methodist Church in Rochester, New York, (February 16, 1965) challenged any narrow view of rights: "As long as you call it 'civil rights,' your only allies can be the people in the next community, many of whom are responsible for your grievance. But when you call it 'human rights,' it becomes international. And then you can take your troubles...before the world. And anybody anywhere on this earth can become your ally."

Our movements today call as well for Palestinians to be free. Too many Palestinians have already died while you all wait to decide which side you will be on. We cannot wait... We will not wait... PALESTINIAN LIVES MATTER and we the global civil society are organizing and building power together around the world.

The UN and almost all its member states have for decades stated its opposition to Israel's illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, yet settlements continue to expand, including plans for 1200 new illegal housing units announced just in the last few weeks. The UN and almost all its member states have for decades rejected Israel's claim to sole control of Jerusalem as its capital, but Palestinians whose families in Jerusalem go back centuries continue to be denied the right to live in their own city.

General Assembly and Ambassadors from Member State. I ask you today-

How much longer will the Palestinian people die from the knee of the Israeli government on their necks from racism, income inequality, and domination?

How much longer will Palestinian activists and human rights defenders like Khitam Saffin being arrested to silence the movement against the Israeli occupation?

How much longer will the United States remain one of the biggest purveyors of violence against the Palestinians? How much longer? How much longer? That is the question I leave with you today. A universal truth reminds us that you reap what you sow. What will you sow on behalf of the Palestinian people? Thank you.