



## **VIRTUAL MEETING**

### ***Closed Consultations with Civil Society Organizations***

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

**3 August 2021**

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#### **CHAIR SUMMARY**

The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP) held closed consultations with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) on 3 August 2021, as a virtual meeting under Chatham House rule. Participants included CSO representatives from Palestine, Israel and the United States, as well as from members and observers of the Committee: Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Cuba, Egypt, India, Madagascar, Namibia, Nicaragua, Qatar, South Africa, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the State of Palestine.

The session was chaired by H.E. Ambassador Cheikh Niang, Permanent Representative of Senegal and Chair of the Committee. The session was divided into two panels respectively addressing recent developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Israel as well as informing civil society action in the international community, with a focus on advocacy towards the United States administration and Congress. In their interventions and during floor discussions, the participating organizations raised the following issues: (1) the forcible displacement of Palestinians carried out by Jewish settlers and Israeli forces in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was ongoing; (2) hopes among Gaza residents for international involvement after the May 2021 conflict had not been met with adequate Member States action; (3) the change in governments in Israel and the United States provided options for engagement; (4) US-based CSOs were shifting from a focus on the two-State solution to one on “justice and equality”, emphasizing a human rights approach; and (5) the ‘apartheid’ framework to look at Israeli policies and practices was gaining traction.

In his introductory remarks, the Chair welcomed the participants and reiterated that the Committee mandate was to promote an end to the Israeli occupation, seek a just and peaceful settlement and support the realization of the two-State solution on the pre-1967 borders and the exercise of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people including self-determination, sovereignty and right to return. He underlined that the objective of the Committee’s engagement with civil society was to harness their potential in the OPT, Israel and elsewhere to promote the

exercise by the Palestinian people of their inalienable rights through strengthened cooperation, including joint activities and exchange of information.

Addressing recent developments in the OPT, participants highlighted the continued expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The most prominent case mentioned was the threat of eviction of Palestinian residents from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. In addition, houses in other neighbourhoods in Jerusalem, such as Silwan, continued to be subjected to demolition orders. A further case was that of the Palestinian Bedouin community of Humsa Al-Bqai'a in the Jordan Valley facing the displacement of its residents and destruction of its homes. Also highlighted were a rise in arbitrary arrests and the excessive use of force against Palestinians, including children, provocations against community activists in Sheikh Jarrah, as well as the collective punishment of residents through the closing-off of their neighbourhood by Israeli forces.

Participants reported that, during and shortly after the 11-day military confrontation between Israel and Palestinian groups in May, Gaza residents had begun to hope for a solution of their long-standing plight because of the international community's revived focus on the conflict. Specifically, numerous statements by US parliamentarians had questioned unqualified US support and military aid to Israel while also backing US Congresswoman Betty McCollum's draft law "Defending the Human Rights of Palestinian Children and Families Living under Israeli Military Occupation Act". Most importantly, the military escalation had seemed to underpin growing recognition of Israel as an "apartheid state". However, two months after the end of the violence, the international community had not addressed the worsening human rights and humanitarian conditions, leading to disillusionment and a feeling of having been let down. As an example, the border crossings to Israel remained all-but-closed and only humanitarian relief materials were allowed to enter Gaza.

A participant pointed out that even after the recent Israeli elections and the ouster of former Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel's occupation policies remained in place. This was because "occupation was not a policy but an identity" of the Israeli government, as reflected by recent security developments in Jerusalem: the large-scale displacement of Palestinians, the violation of the Holy Sites' status quo, the "crushing" of Palestinian political activities, and the increasing behaviour of the Israeli police as a "rogue militia" in the City. All these actions called for the international community to engage the new Israeli government with the aim of alleviating some of the more aggressive forms of occupation. In this regard, the inauguration of a new US administration under President Biden had also brought possibilities of engagement on the question of Palestine that were non-existent under President Trump. In addition, but in the same context, the case of Sheikh Jarrah had shifted from being perceived as "a real estate issue" to an international *cause célèbre*, reflecting the core issues of the Palestine question, mobilizing public opinion and foreign governments, garnering strong support also in the United States.

In connection with the mobilization for support on the question of Palestine in the United States, participants quoted a recent article by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that had argued for a new approach to the conflict as "statements in support of equal rights, security and prosperity for both Israelis and Palestinians ring hollow in the face of policies and actions that actively undermine these principles." It was underlined that 'people of conscience' from all

backgrounds in the United States, including a large and growing number of Jewish Americans, were increasingly appreciating the realities in the OPT, such as Israel's use of violence to displace East Jerusalemites, the collusion of Israeli police and "settler lynch mobs" in attacking Palestinians, as well as the reasons and dynamics of the recent escalation in Gaza.

Nonetheless, it was noted, following four years marked by the "Trump-Netanyahu alliance", during which the US public had witnessed Israel appropriating even more Palestinian land and water resources, enforcing racist and discriminatory laws and cementing a "one-State apartheid" reality – including the tightening of the Gaza blockade, massive settlement expansion and the largest scale of Palestinians' displacement in a decade, and open pursuit of annexation – the Biden administration had not significantly changed US policy and action, approaching these issues with avoidance and de-prioritization. A participant noted that the failure to reverse former President Trump's radical policies had now made them "Biden policies", including the recognition of Jerusalem as the sole and undivided capital of Israel in violation of international law and UN resolutions and maintaining the false claim that settlements were not illegal, which could pave the way for Israeli annexation of huge swaths of West Bank territory.

At the same time, there were growing numbers of US parliamentarians in support of and working for Palestinian rights, moving from hollow condemnation to attempts to promote accountability. The 2018 and 2020 legislative elections had seen landslide victories of representatives putting forward progressive legislation such as the "Palestinian Children and Families Act". These parliamentarians could be considered as representing the outcome of a massive shift in public opinion within constituencies including young Democrats, African Americans, and Jewish Americans. Recent opinion polls had shown that the latter increasingly understood that Israel was behaving like an "apartheid" state and therefore they supported Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions movements. Jewish activism for justice and equality was also increasing in US campuses and city councils.

It had become challenging for many key organizations in the United States to dissociate working on justice and equality at home from working on Palestinian rights in the OPT – weakening the notion of "Israel's exceptionalism". Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, Israel's military escalation in Gaza and attacks in East Jerusalem had triggered large demonstrations in US cities in support of Palestinian rights. The highest number of people to date were now engaged in online "Contact US Congress" actions, with over 160 organizations – including those supporting Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights groups and faith-based ones – having endorsed the Bill introduced by US Congresswoman McCollum referenced above.

The grassroots pressure demanding change in US policy vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine also stemmed from the publication of op-eds by Palestinians describing their decades-long experience of living under Israeli occupation and denial of their rights. Photos of Palestinian children killed by the Israeli forces were featured on the front pages of publications previously less keen to highlight such stories, such as the New York Times.

Against this noticeable shift in public opinion, in the United States and elsewhere, meeting participants called on Committee Members and Observers to recognize the case of Israel's treatment of Palestinians in the OPT as one of "apartheid". To this end, participants

appealed to just use the definition of ‘apartheid’ included in international covenants: a universal legal term of a crime against humanity, not limited to the South African example, referring to severe abuses known as inhumane acts when committed in a context of systematic oppression by one racial group over another. By now, leading human rights CSOs had reached the conclusion that Israel was committing the crime of apartheid because of its policies and practices in the OPT, intended to control Palestinian demographics and lands for the exclusive benefit of Jewish Israelis and to maximize the acquisition of land for Jewish Israelis at the expense of the Palestinian inhabitants, confined to living in densely populated enclaves.

The participating CSOs formulated several key recommendations to the Committee, such as re-establishing the UN Centre against Apartheid, whose mandate would include promoting anti-apartheid actions by governmental and non-governmental organizations, instituting an arms embargo and supporting an oil embargo against Israel as well as legitimizing popular resistance. Participants also asked to appoint a global envoy on the crimes of apartheid and persecution. Furthermore, the creation of a global coalition, as a Member States-led process, to galvanize cross-regional support was mentioned.

Participants argued that a more than 50-year occupation could no longer be seen as “temporary”, and a 30-year stalled peace process alone was not sufficient to dismantle systematic repression; therefore, the first step would be to diagnose the problem correctly. For millions of Palestinians in the OPT, ‘apartheid’ should no longer be considered a hypothetical scenario but the present-day reality. Whether Member States were striving for a two-State or a one-State solution, it was recommended they use the term ‘apartheid’ as it was important to recognize the reality “for what it was” and bring to bear the measures needed to tackle that reality. More importantly, Member States needed to focus on human rights abuses on the ground as a first step to a political solution. Accountability was stressed as imperative.

Participants pointed to US polls showing increasing support among Democrat voters for conditioning US military aid to Israel on prohibiting its use in violation of human rights. Additional positive signals were the recent decision of the “Ben & Jerry’s” ice cream company ending its business in Israeli settlements and the resulting re-energized calls for consumer activism and boycotts, including ending the non-profit status of US organizations raising funds for Israeli settlements as evidence of a growing momentum. For this reason, civil society representatives called on the Committee to join them in keeping this momentum through engaging US officials and policymakers.

Ambassador Cheikh Niang closed the event.

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