Jerusalem Critical in Negotiated Two-State Solution to Palestine Question, Says Secretary-General’s Special Representative as International Conference Opens

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The historic and holy city of Jerusalem remained at the heart of any negotiated solution to the question of Palestine, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed today as the International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem opened in Dakar, Senegal.

“We must strengthen and reassert collective international efforts aimed at preserving the two-State solution and shape a political horizon,” Mr. Ban said in a statement delivered by Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA).  Indeed, only through a negotiated solution could Jerusalem emerge as the capital of two States, with arrangements for holy sites acceptable to all.

Condemning the continuing clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, he called on all sides to de-escalate tensions and respect the sanctity of holy sites.  He urged Israel to cease and reverse its settlement activities, describing that enterprise as illegal under international law, constituting a significant obstacle to peace.

Mankeur Ndiaye, Senegal’s Minister for Foreign Affairs and Senegalese Abroad, said his country was hosting the International Conference against the backdrop of continuing Israeli settlement activity, which had increased by 250 per cent in the first quarter of 2016.  In addition, the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip continued with no clear political horizons.  He warned that the upsurge in violence could jeopardize the efficacy of a number of new tools adopted by the international community — the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on development financing.

Riad Malki, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the State of Palestine, declared:  “There is no two-State solution possible without East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.”  The Security Council must shoulder its responsibilities by addressing the Israeli settlement issue after years of “deafening silence”, he said.  Jerusalem was besieged, and Israel’s colonial war against Palestinians was led neighbourhood by neighbourhood, house by house and holy site by holy site, he said.

Samir Bakr, Assistant Secretary-General for Palestine Affairs of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), said Jerusalem was foremost among that body’s priorities and political actions, as the capital of the State of Palestine and the core of the conflict with the Israeli occupation.  Warning against provocations that would take the conflict to a “religious dimension”, he said the continuation of Israeli settlement construction in spite of international condemnation constituted a flagrant violation of international norms.

Said Abu Ali, Assistant Secretary-General and Head of the Palestinian and Arab Occupied Territories Sector of the League of Arab States, said the situation in Jerusalem was becoming more complicated due to Israel’s policy of Judaization and its attempt to obliterate the city’s identity.  Noting that Jerusalem was facing an “ongoing catastrophe” as Israel continued to commit gross violations there, he said residents of the city were subjected to coercive measures to displace them.  The replacement settlement policy all over the Occupied Territories threatened prospects for peace and represented a violation of relevant international decisions, he said.

Also speaking this morning were representatives of Morocco, China, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Indonesia, Malaysia and South Africa, as well as the African Union Commission.

Opening Remarks

MOHAMED IBN CHAMBAS, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA), delivering a message on behalf of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, said recent weeks had seen continuing clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in the Occupied West Bank, including in East Jerusalem.  Condemning the violence as well as attacks on civilians, which undermined prospects for a return to meaningful negotiations to end the nearly half-century occupation, he called on all sides to de-escalate tensions.  He further reiterated calls on political, religious and community leaders to respect the sanctity of all holy sites, and reminded all parties that Jordan’s historical role as custodian of the holy places should be respected.

“The historic and holy city of Jerusalem remains at the heart of a peaceful settlement of the Question of Palestine,” he said, adding: “Only through a negotiated solution can Jerusalem emerge as a capital of two States, with arrangements for the holy sites acceptable to all.”  All parties should refrain from actions and provocations that could trigger further unrest and deepen mistrust.  It was important for all to uphold the status quo in word and in practice, in line with the recent understandings between Israel and Jordan.

Israel’s settlement enterprise, illegal under international law, continued in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and constituted a significant obstacle to achieving peace, he said, urging Israel to cease and reverse such activities.  Expressing particular concern about the significant spike in demolitions since the start of the year, he said they contravened Israel’s obligation to protect the civilian population under its occupation.

Noting that the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip remained of grave concern, he stressed that all efforts should concentrate on helping the population there, which was still suffering the consequences of the 2014 conflict.  Seventy-four per cent of affected families were still awaiting the reconstruction of their homes, while Gaza’s chronic energy, water and employment needs also required urgent and sustained attention.  Integrating the West Bank and Gaza under a single democratic Palestinian government through genuine Palestinian reconciliation, on the basis of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) principles, remained a key priority.

“We must strengthen and reassert collective international efforts aimed at preserving the two-State solution and shaping a political horizon,” he said.  Those included the efforts of the Middle East Quartet as well as the French initiative to build international support towards creating the conditions for the resumption of negotiations.  Support by such partners as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States and the African Union was a strong asset to ensure the viability and promise of an independent State of Palestine.

SAMIR BAKR, Assistant Secretary-General for Palestine Affairs of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, reiterated that body’s commitment and constant support to Palestine and the city of Jerusalem.  That city was foremost among its priorities and political actions, as the capital of the State of Palestine and the core of the conflict with the Israeli occupation.  Israel continued with its plans to Judaize the city, actions which had recently seen a major increase.  “The whole world has seen the increase in recurrent Israeli attacks against Muslim and Christian holy sites,” as well as the confiscation of Palestinian lands, he said.  Warning against provocations that would take the conflict “to a religious dimension”, he said the continuation of Israeli settlement in spite of international condemnation constituted a flagrant violation of international norms.

For its part, the international community must shoulder its responsibility and provide protection to the Palestinian people, he continued.  Referring to the outcome of the Fifth Extraordinary Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif, held in Jakarta on 7 March 2016, he said that, among other things, participants had expressed its decision to support the French initiative to establish an international support group and to hold an international peace conference as a basis for the political process.  He reiterated the position of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to support the State of Palestine and its people and to put pressure to bear on Israel to end the occupation of Palestinian lands.  He further reiterated the responsibility of the international community to allow the Palestinian people their freedom, independence and right of return within 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

RIAD MALKI, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the State of Palestine, said that, at the very moment when the Conference was taking place, Israeli occupation forces might be executing another Palestinian civilian and bulldozers might be tearing down Palestinian homes.  “A humanitarian crisis is unfolding before our eyes” in the Gaza Strip as civilians continued to suffer from a prolonged and unjustified siege.  Palestine had been a standing item on the United Nations agenda since its inception, which was a signal of the international community’s inability to take the necessary action to bring about a solution by ending the Israeli occupation.  “The solution is crystal clear and enjoys universal support,” he said, noting that it could be found in numerous United Nations resolutions.  Only one country was destroying the two-State solution based on 1967 borders and with it the very hope for peace in the region.  That State, Israel, did so at the expense of the lives and rights of the Palestinian people, and contrary to international will.

Indeed, he continued, the Israeli Prime Minister continued to reiterate his support for the two-State solution, while rejecting the 1967 borders.  Any peace initiative must have as its basis United Nations resolutions, the Madrid Principles and the Arab Peace Initiative, he stressed; as such, any plan must be based on 1967 borders and aimed at ending the occupation of the State of Palestine, including East Jerusalem.  Expressing support for the French initiative, he added that any successful plan must hold parties accountable.  “It is time to admit that Israel’s immunity and impunity are the greatest obstacles to peace,” he said in that respect, adding that those who wished to see peace prevail must support Palestinians in their pursuit of accountability, and not stand against them.  Only a few weeks ago, Israel had announced plans to build hundreds of new settlements, he recalled.

He stressed the need for States to translate the policies enshrined in Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions as well as those of other bodies into concrete measures — and to avoid abstaining in international votes on the issue.  States should prohibit ties between their Governments, entities and citizens with the settlement regime.  They must link their relations with Israel, the occupying Power, with respect for the inalienable rights of the Palestinians.

For its part, the Security Council must shoulder its own responsibilities as the main body responsible for international peace and security, by addressing the settlement issue after years of “deafening silence”.  Jerusalem was besieged, and Israel’s colonial war against Palestinians was led neighbourhood by neighbourhood, house by house and holy site by holy site.  Each Palestinian was a target, subject to arbitrary arrest and extrajudicial killing.  Israel, the occupying Power, used an arsenal of administrative and legal measures to forcibly transfer Palestinians out of Jerusalem and to create and expand illegal settlements, he noted.  Only a few days ago, two Palestinians — including a young pregnant woman — had been savagely executed at a checkpoint in Jerusalem, he said, noting that the extrajudicial killings had gone unchecked.  Jerusalem and Palestinians must not be left alone to face such crimes, he emphasized.  “There is no two-State solution possible without East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine,” he said, calling on States to deepen relations with the city, and for the creation of an “international coalition for Jerusalem” with lasting and structured support.

SAID ABU ALI, Assistant Secretary-General and Head of the Palestinian and Arab Occupied Territories Sector of the League of Arab States, said the situation in Jerusalem was becoming more complicated due to Israel’s policy of Judaization and its attempt to obliterate the city’s identity.  Noting that Jerusalem was facing an “ongoing catastrophe” as Israel continued to commit gross violations there, he said the number of violations had been unprecedented since the start of 2016 and increased on a daily basis.  Residents were subjected to coercive measures in an effort to displace them in a serious Judaization scheme known as “Jerusalem 2020”.  The replacement settlement policy all over the Occupied Territories threatened prospects for peace and represented a flagrant violation of relevant international decisions.

The Israeli Government was fully responsible for the crimes it had committed, he continued, adding that its responsibility also extended to the repercussions on the city, which faced major challenges on a day-to-day basis.  The League of Arab States, in response to the French initiative to rescue the two-State solution, was exerting all possible efforts to provide protection to the Palestinian people and their holy sites and to help establish an independent State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital.  The international community should forge ahead and carry out its commitments in providing protection to Palestinian civilians.  Meanwhile, the Security Council should carry out its responsibility rapidly and effectively to put an end to the settlement policy and to provide the necessary security for civilians, while working in earnest to put an end to the occupation itself.

MANKEUR NDIAYE, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Senegalese Abroad of Senegal, hailed the fact that the themes of the present meeting dealt with resilience and development that could be addressed from the angle of sustainable development.  The meeting should place itself in the context of continuing efforts to support the Palestinian people and to establish an independent Palestinian State.  Welcoming the capacity-building round table organized in Amman, Jordan, in April, he said that such initiatives deserved support and demonstrated the Palestinian Rights Committee’s unfailing commitment to a two-State solution.

He said that, in the difficult context marked by continuing Israeli settlement activity — which had increased by 250 per cent in the first quarter of 2016 — as well as the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the absence of any clear political horizons, the new upsurge in violence had created many victims and jeopardized the efficacy of the new tools adopted by the international community — namely, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda.  Special attention should be given to the terms of reference of the Madrid Conference and the Arab Peace Initiative, among other relevant plans.  He expressed hope that the recent efforts of the Middle East Quartet and the report on the state of play in the peace process would spark the resumption of negotiations.

To that end, he hailed the firm willingness of the Palestinian authorities to commit themselves to creating conditions for a lasting peace.  He further welcomed the activities of the Committee’s Working Group and invited African civil society to serve the Palestinian cause.  Finally, he invited the Committee to continue its watchdog functions and its sensitization work, while expressing hope that the present meeting would contribute to solutions to the complex question of Jerusalem.

Statements

The representative of Morocco said the questions of Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif was the essence of the Arab—Israeli conflict and a prerequisite for peace in the Middle East.  Morocco had always called for giving peace a chance, which could only be achieved by putting an end to the settlement policy practiced by the occupying Power.  Indeed, no peace could be negotiated if the two-State solution was buried by continuing settlement activities and Judaization.  Morocco accorded the Palestinian question high priority and had adopted a practical approach that combined a political stance with diplomatic endeavours to preserve Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

That defence of Jerusalem required all peace lovers to mobilize their efforts to defend the city on the political, legal, diplomatic and humanitarian levels, he said.  While there was no harm in having various peace initiatives, all must have genuine “added value” and employ all existing institutional mechanisms that had already proven effective.  Morocco supported the call by President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority to hold an international peace conference, and to support the relevant French initiative to form an international group of countries that would follow up on implementation of peace plans emerging from that conference, he said.

The representative of China said tensions between Palestine and Israel had recently been increasing and the resulting conflict had caused a significant loss of life.  Expressing deep concern in that regard, he said the recent conflict over the Al-Aqsa Mosque and other holy sites was extremely complicated and delicate.  The parties must resolve the question of Jerusalem on the basis of appropriate United Nations resolutions.  China supported the just cause of the people of Palestine in seeking the restitution of their legal rights as well as the establishment of an independent State on the basis of the 1967 borders, while respecting Israel’s legitimate security concerns.

In that regard, he called on the two parties to re-establish mutual trust and to halt Israel’s colonial settlements, as well as its continuing blockade of the Gaza Strip.  Noting that Palestine had recently undertaken a series of diplomatic actions on the international stage, he expressed his country’s support for such activities and for efforts to push the Security Council to adopt a resolution on halting Israeli settlements.  China had advanced a proposal to help resolve the question of Palestine, he said, recalling that the country’s President had recently called on the international community to support Palestine as a factor of regional stability.

The representative of Zimbabwe said the 49-year occupation of Palestinian territory continued, in violation of international law.  The killing of innocent civilians and the destruction of Palestinian property continued, while the “wall of shame” remained in place and the siege of Gaza persisted.  There were constant attempts to change the character of East Jerusalem, she said, adding that, despite numerous Security Council resolutions, the occupying Power remained defiant because of the support it received from certain powerful countries.  The only basis for long-term peace was a two-State solution, based on the 1967 borders, she said, calling on the Security Council to hold Israel accountable for its crimes.  It was apparent that Israel would not willingly surrender territory, and the Council must therefore act, in accordance with its own resolutions.

The representative of Cuba reaffirmed his country’s full support for the Palestinian people on the basis of the “clear and unequivocal” principle of self-determination.  The Palestinian people were still victims of aggression by Israel, he said, adding that the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip had led to terror, death and destruction.  Such crimes would continue as long as some States provided weapons to Israel and threatened to wield their veto power in the Security Council, he cautioned, emphasizing that Israel’s impunity must also stop.  It was critical that the Council live up to its Charter responsibility and compel Israel to stop its aggression against the Palestinian people.

He went on to condemn Israel’s settlement campaign, its occupation, aggression, extrajudicial killings, use of force and confiscation of Palestinian land through “massive colonization”, while noting continuing arbitrary detention, imprisonment, torture and other internationally-forbidden practices also continued.  Only action to end such policies, the release of Palestinian prisoners, and recognition of legitimate Palestinian rights would help to bring about peace.

The representative of Indonesia said Israel’s policies continued to defy the will of the international community as well as international law, while there were recent examples of international support for the Palestinian people, including the raising of the Palestinian flag at United Nations Headquarters in New York, he underscored the need for Palestine’s supporters to avoid fragmentation.  “We need to connect the dots” and apply synergistic approaches to the question, he said.  There were several important elements of any strategy to support the Palestinian people: establishing a common narrative for a sustained peace process; formal recognition of the State of Palestine among the community of nations; interfaith and inter-religious dialogue as part of a comprehensive peace process and a means to protect religious sites; and enhanced capacity-building for the State of Palestine.  Highlighting regional initiatives in that regard, he said Indonesia had committed to extending further support to the Palestinian people.

The representative of Malaysia reaffirmed her country’s support for a solution that would recognize the legitimate right of Palestinians to an independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital.  Malaysia was gravely concerned by Israel’s attempts to alter the character and legal status of Jerusalem, including by building settlements and through provocations and encroachment on the city’s holy sites.  Such actions threatened the viability and prospects of a two-State solution based on the 1967 borders, she warned.  The international community should ensure Israel’s accountability and work to halt its illegal measures, in accordance with international law.  Expressing hope that the Middle East peace talks would resume soon, she nevertheless emphasized that the question of Jerusalem must not be treated separately from the peace process.

AISHA LARABA ABDULLAHI, Commissioner for Political Affairs of the African Union Commission, recalled that, through the African Union — formerly the Organization of African Unity — the continent had been successful in eradicating colonialism, apartheid and other human rights violations.  The African Union had paid attention to the social, political and economic situation of Palestine, focusing particularly on the issue of human rights.  Through its Department of Political Affairs and other relevant departments, the regional bloc had conducted monitoring and prepared regular reports on the situation in Palestine and the Middle East, she said, noting that those reports covered several thematic areas, including the political and peace processes, the situation in the city of Jerusalem, the apartheid wall and colonial settlements, Palestinian prisoners, and conditions in the Occupied Territories.

The reports had been presented to the African Union policymaking organs for consideration, deliberation and decision-making, culminating in the African Union Declaration on Palestine and Middle East, she said.  In addition, the bloc had engaged in advocacy in defence of human rights in Palestine and the Middle East, with the goal of promoting and protecting them in line with the shared values of the African Union and the United Nations.

The representative of South Africa recalled that, last week, the city of Johannesburg had donated a statue of Nelson Mandela to the city of Ramallah in order to inspire Palestinians to continue their struggle for freedom.  South Africa continued its unwavering support for the Palestinian people and believed that the only way to bring about lasting peace in the Middle East was a comprehensive negotiated settlement and the establishment of a Palestinian State living in peace and security with Israel, on the basis of 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.  Indeed, a solution must be reached on the question of Jerusalem, in accordance with Security Council resolutions, he said, emphasizing that Israel must not “change the facts on the ground”, and should abide by international resolutions.

Until a final agreement was reached on the question of the holy sites, both sides should maintain the status quo, he continued.  Urgent action and practical steps by the international community — and the Security Council in particular — were needed to compel Israel to cease its settlement activity and abide by international law.  Expressing disappointment over the Council’s inability to act in a timely manner in order to avoid increased violence, he condemned all forms of violence, regardless of the perpetrators.