Speakers Underscore Close Ties, Long-Standing Support of African States for Palestinian People as Conference on Question of Jerusalem Continues

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The International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem, entering its second and final day in Dakar, held a plenary session this morning on international support for resilience, protection and development in East Jerusalem, with many speakers focusing on the long-standing support of African nations to the Palestinian cause.

Babacar Diop, Professor of History and Member of the Senegalese Palestine Solidarity Association, provided an overview of the history of his country’s support for the Palestinian people under occupation.  He recalled that Senegal had been the first African country to open an office of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and in general Africans had stood beside many countries living under foreign occupation.  There were especially strong links between Africans and Palestinians, he said, adding that the two people were united by demography, history and blood.  “We will never insist enough on the support of Africa to Arab struggles,” he said in that regard.

John Ikubaje, Senior Political Officer of the African Union Commission, said the fact that Senegal was hosting the International Conference was a demonstration of Africa’s commitment to the Palestinian cause.  Citing his Organization’s African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, he said the continent espoused an ideology of mobilizing against colonialism and apartheid.  The African Union’s aim was to ensure that Africa spoke with one voice and that the bloc advocated for Palestine’s right to engage meaningfully with regional organizations.

The session also focused on living conditions in East Jerusalem, as well as ways that development could be used to reverse the negative impacts of the Israeli occupation.

In that regard, Ahmad Rwaidy, Former Chief of the Jerusalem Unit of the Palestinian Presidency, provided an overview of the geographic nature of Jerusalem.  He noted that the city’s inhabitants had to follow Israeli law in all areas of their lives.  Palestinians were not owners of the land, as there were regulations in place aiming at their removal; the city was also besieged by the separation wall and by Israeli settlements.  That siege had increased rates of poverty and unemployment, while the recent popular uprising had exacerbated the situation by leading to many layoffs among Palestinian workers.

Lubna Shaheen, Senior Urban Planner of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), described a number of urban planning challenges facing Palestinians living in East Jerusalem.  They had to contend with restrictive construction policies and demolition threats.  She said that Palestinian neighbourhoods were overcrowded and many homes were in need of repair.  Over one third of East Jerusalem had been expropriated to build Israeli settlements.

Nur Arafeh, Policy Fellow at Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, said East Jerusalem was in a kind of “development limbo” as Israel’s development policies were aimed at building Jerusalem as a Jewish city with a marginal Palestinian presence.  Those strategies particularly used urban planning as a geopolitical tool to constrain the urban expansion of Palestinians.  In that context, she said, the current Palestinian uprising should be viewed as an act of resistance and desperation against ethnic cleansing, forced displacement and economic marginalization.

As the floor was opened for an interactive discussion with the panellists, a number of speakers echoed the close links between Africans and Palestinians, with some calling for the continent to “take things up a notch” in its support for the Palestinian cause.  Many speakers, expressing support for Palestinians living under the harsh conditions described by the panellists, stressed the need for individual and collective action to bring the occupation to an end, including through boycotts of Israeli products.

The International Conference will reconvene this afternoon at 3 p.m. to hold a third plenary session and to conclude its work.

Plenary II

The second plenary segment of the conference featured presentations by Ahmad Rwaidy, Former Chief of the Jerusalem Unit of the Palestinian Presidency; Nur Arafeh, Policy Fellow at Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network; Lubna Shaheen, Senior Urban Planner, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat); John Ikubaje, Senior Political Officer, African Union Commission; and Babacar Diop, Professor of History and Member of the Senegalese Palestine Solidarity Association.

Mr. RWAIDY, providing an overview of the geographic nature of Jerusalem, said the people of the city had to follow Israeli law in all matters related to their lives.  Palestinians were not owners of the land, as there were regulations in place aiming at their removal; the city was also besieged by the separation wall and by Israeli settlements.  He noted that the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza could not reach areas of worship in Jerusalem and that only 12 per cent of the area was afforded to Palestinians.  Each month, 7 to 10 Palestinian houses in the city were threatened with demolition by the Israeli authorities.  Describing other strict regulations, including difficult requirements for building and work permits, he said the siege had increased rates of poverty and unemployment.  In addition, the recent popular uprising had led to the laying off of a number of Palestinian workers.

Israel still refused to hand over the bodies of martyrs killed by Israeli security forces, he continued.  “What we need in Jerusalem is a scheme to support resilience,” he said, describing a multisectoral plan that had been prepared with support from the European Union and other partners.  Some of the sectors addressed by that plan included the Palestinian education sector, which was being attacked by Israel.  Thousands of Palestinian children were in need of school enrolment, but there were numerous restrictions imposed, including a requirement that Palestinian children obtain an Israeli high school diploma.  He also described efforts to boost the tourism sector, particularly tourism to the holy and historic city of Jerusalem.  Calling for official support to the Palestinian cause in the city, he went on to invite States to contribute concrete support for building their resilience.

Ms. ARAFEH, asking whether the current development approach should be reconsidered in the context of the Israeli occupation, noted that East Jerusalem had historically been the cultural and economic centre of Palestinian life.  However, Israel’s policy of annexation and separation had left the Palestinian part of the city in a “development limbo”.  Recent statistics indicated a 75 per cent poverty rate in East Jerusalem, and most sectors were functioning well below their potential.  East Jerusalem was also absent in the Palestinian Authority’s development plan for 2014-2016.  The development approach approved in the plan took the Israeli occupation as a “given”.  That lack of genuine official interest in the city and the absence of a Palestinian political leadership in Jerusalem had left Palestinians feeling abandoned and resentful of the Palestinian Authority.

New Israeli plans for Jerusalem used urban planning as a geopolitical tool to constrain the urban expansion of Palestinians and Judaicize the city, she said.  The basis for the Israeli 2020 and 2050 visions of Jerusalem included developing it as a Jewish city with a marginal presence of Palestinians.  They focused on the areas of tourism, biotechnology and academia.  In that context, the current Palestinian uprising should be seen as acts of resistance and desperation against ethnic cleansing, forced displacement and economic marginalization.  However, development plans in Jerusalem were usually disconnected from the city’s political realities, and did not address the root cause of the problems.  She held that the development approach should be rethought and embedded in the larger Palestinian liberation struggle against Israel’s occupation and settler colonial regime.

She recommended some steps, including the promotion of domestic tourism, as well as creation of a national employment strategy, especially for youth; a coordinated media strategy to challenge Israel’s authority; and creative solutions that were proactive rather than reactive.  Noting that the international community had a responsibility to turn its rhetoric into concrete actions, she said the Security Council and the Human Rights Council could be used as platforms for advocacy to remind the international community of its legal obligations.  The European Union should advocate full compliance with the principle of non-recognition of Israel’s sovereignty over East Jerusalem and greater coordination with the Palestinian diaspora and countries that had shown solidarity.

Ms. SHAHEEN, giving an overview of the urban planning challenges facing East Jerusalem, said all related activities were regulated and managed by the Israeli Jerusalem municipalities.  Palestinians faced restrictive construction policies and demolition threats for building without permits.  Palestinian neighbourhoods were overcrowded and their houses were in need of repair.  Over one third of East Jerusalem had been expropriated to build Israeli settlements.  Meanwhile, around 50 per cent of East Jerusalem was allocated for green spaces and public infrastructure, where Palestinians were not permitted to build.  Israeli policies also aimed to control the demographic balance of the city, including by confiscating Palestinian land and limiting the possible expansion of Palestinian neighbourhoods.  There was also clear discrimination in basic infrastructure and services in the city.

United Nations agencies working in East Jerusalem had developed a plan focusing on three areas:  the provision of humanitarian assistance and protecting the vulnerable population of East Jerusalem; support for increased Palestinian physical presence in East Jerusalem; and advocacy to preserve the Palestinian character of the city.  Turning to UN-Habitat’s specific programmes, she said more than 210 hectares in seven communities were being planned and the agency was working to freeze the demolition of more than 750 homes.  Rehabilitation projects were also under way to support vulnerable Palestinian families and to protect Palestinian culture and civic identity.

Among other plans, UN-Habitat was working through small-scale interventions to create public spaces that helped to improve the urban environment and living conditions in general.  It also worked to advocate for the right of Palestinians to develop in East Jerusalem.  Among conclusions and lessons learned from such work was the need for sufficient land planned and zoned for Palestinian construction and the need for a comprehensive “master plan” for East Jerusalem that linked the Palestinian neighbourhoods and promoted economic development opportunities.

Mr. IKUBAJE said the fact that Senegal was hosting the International Conference demonstrated Africa’s commitment to the Palestinian cause.  The issue of Palestine had been on the African Union’s agenda for over a decade and the President of Palestine had addressed African Union Summits several times.  In addition to the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, the African Union had an African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and it espoused an ideology of mobilization to combat colonialism and apartheid.  That solidarity extended beyond the continent, which was why the question of Palestine was a matter of international concern.  One of the aims of the Charter of the then-Organization of African Unity, which came into force in 1963, was to eradicate colonialism and foreign domination.  Then there had been a paradigm shift to include issues of development and protection and promotion of human rights.

The African Union’s Department of Political Affairs studied and issued annual reports on the Middle East and Palestine that tackled the themes of political and peace processes, the situation of the city of Jerusalem, the apartheid wall and colonial settlements, the situation of Palestinian prisoners, and conditions in the occupied Palestinian territories, he said.  The African Union’s decision-making bodies deliberated on those reports and issued declarations on the issue of Palestine.  The African Union’s aim was to ensure that the continent spoke with one voice and that the bloc advocated for Palestine’s right to engage meaningfully with regional organizations.  Finally, he underscored the need for the Committee to hold a strategic meeting with the African Union on how to support the Palestinian cause going forward.

Mr. DIOP, noting that Senegal had been the first African country to open a domestic office of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, provided an overview of the history of the country’s support for the Palestinian people under occupation.  Africans had supported the struggles of many peoples under foreign domination, including Viet Nam, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Cambodia and other nations, and there were especially strong links between Africans and Middle East peoples.  “We will never insist enough on the support of Africa to Arab struggles,” he said in that regard and stressed that Africans and Palestinians were united by demography, history and blood.

In conclusion, he made a number of proposals, including removing checkpoints and barriers, allowing for a free movement of people and goods; providing education that promoted respect for diversity; improving employment opportunities for Palestinians; and preserving and enhancing Palestinian culture.  Finally, he underscored the need for an international economic boycott of Israel.

Discussion

During the ensuing interactive dialogue, a number of speakers echoed the close links between Africa and the Middle East, with some citing Egypt’s geographic location as an example of that relationship.  Many noted that, while there was much rhetoric on the part of African States in support of Palestinians, it was time for Governments to turn their words into action.

In that regard, a representative of the Democratic League, noting Israel’s “disgraceful attempts” to exterminate the people of Palestine, said the time had come to “take things up a notch” in Africa’s support for the Palestinians.

A Member of Parliament suggested that, after the closure of the International Conference, all Senegalese participants should convene to discuss how Senegal could better support the Palestinian cause.

Meanwhile, a Professor of Arabic, recalling that the United States was a strong backer of the Israeli occupation, called on Arab organizations — including the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation — to “go beyond words” in combating the occupation.

Speakers also stressed that it was up to individual Africans to take action to compel their Governments to act.  Among particular proposals made were calls for a boycott of Israeli products and for the closure of all African embassies in the Israeli capital until the occupation ended.

A representative of the Solidarity Action Commission focused on the issue of awareness-raising, which he said was an act of solidarity.  “You have to have the masses behind you,” he said in that regard.

Mr. RWAIDY responded to those comments, further underscoring the links between Palestinians and Africans.  Inviting greater practical interactions between the two peoples, including educational exchanges, he also noted that there was a proud African community in the city of Jerusalem.

Ms. ARAFEH agreed with the need to put pressure on Governments to shoulder their responsibility to combat the Israeli occupation.  Boycotts of products, besides being a deterrent for Israel, would help the Palestinian economy build its productive capacity, she said.

Ms. SHAHEEN said any support — including tourist visits to Jerusalem and boycotts of Israeli goods — was welcome.

Mr. IKUBAJE said the way forward was for Africa to organize and strategize on the issue of Palestine.  He called for the use of both horizontal and vertical measures, including advocacy, to support the Palestinian cause.

Mr. DIOP agreed that unity must be constructed around strategies of support.  He proposed that Senegalese leaders meet with the Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine to the United Nations in order to coordinate ways to move forward.