United Nations Civil Society Forum on Palestine Discusses Innovative Ways to Take Action in Support of Justice, Ending Occupation

December 16, 2015

GA/PAL/1357

General Assembly

Meetings Coverage

http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/gapal1357.doc.htm

JAKARTA, 16 December — After the two-day International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem concluded on 15 December, the United Nations Civil Society Forum on the Question of Palestine met this morning to hear from experts and engage in discussions on the theme of “Civil society action in support of justice in Palestine and ending the occupation”.

Hasan Kleib, Director-General for Multilateral Cooperation in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, said, in opening remarks, that his country supported the Palestinian people and their struggle in a range of ways. It was important, at a time of the changing political and security landscape in the Middle East amid grave concerns about Syria, Libya and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh), that attention remained sharply focused on the Palestinian people’s decades-long struggle to establish their own State.

For their part, civil society organizations could do more in moving towards that goal, he said. Pointing to the Peace Now movement in Israel, he said that group had demonstrated a firm position against the expansion of Israel in Palestinian areas and stood in favour of the two-State solution. Networking with groups such as Peace Now in Israel should continue and flourish.

Desra Percaya (Indonesia), Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, welcomed participants and applauded their work. Many of the Committee’s 800 accredited civil society organizations were providing crucial and timely information on human rights violations. Involved with political and humanitarian work, they also promoted human rights and economic and social development.

“We diplomats need the strong support and engagement of civil society to support the resolution of the Palestinian plight,” he said, encouraging participants to take the opportunity to network and explore joint actions and to support Palestinian rights.

Delivering opening remarks, Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, thanked participants for their contributions and asked for them to play an active role in helping the Palestinian people. The current uprising was being shouldered by youth, as they were fed up by the humiliation of occupation by Israel. “Our youth are exploding out of frustration,” he said. They were demonstrating courage, as they were determined to put an end to misery and to the occupation.

“Follow the stories of the youth,” he said, emphasizing that they carried on their shoulders the responsibility of taking the efforts to end the occupation to a higher level in order to finally achieve independence and freedom. “Those are your brothers and sisters. Tell their stories. Indicate your support to them. It is so inspiring to the Palestinians when they know that youth everywhere, including Indonesia, give them strength in their struggle.”

Experts then addressed the Forum, touching upon avenues for civil society action and coordination, the situation on the ground and United Nations resolutions.

Maher Nasser, Director of the Outreach Division in the United Nations Department of Public Information, said Palestine had been a United Nations concern since just after the Organization’s creation in 1945. A few years later, the General Assembly had adopted resolution 181 on the partition of Palestine. In 1949, the Organization had created the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). United Nations involvement and resolutions had continued to be renewed year in and year out. A General Assembly resolution had then created the Palestinian Rights Committee, as well as a parallel series of Security Council resolutions.

The United Nations felt a sense of responsibility that until a solution was found, the question remained as a sore wound, he said. The issue of when the Palestinian people would have their aspirations realized was a question that the United Nations was working towards. Until a solution was reached, the situation’s consequences would extend far beyond the area of the conflict. Peace not only would establish a Palestinian State, but would help to promote stability throughout the region.

Shawan Jabarin, General Director of Al-Haq — Law in the Service of Man, based in Ramallah, said it was indeed a shame that the United Nations and others had allowed the long-standing situation in Palestine to languish. The United Nations was responsible for the current situation and there was no political will at all, otherwise a solution would have been found. Over the years, what was paralysing the United Nations from acting was that the United States had used its veto power at least 50 times in the Security Council. The Oslo Peace Accord had also not resolved the situation.

Unseen violations were now touching every human aspect of life, he said. A new policy of cutting off Palestinian areas by different means had included building roads, settlements and checkpoints. The younger generation was now exploding. They were the Oslo generation, who had been promised peace, development, democracy and hope. “What we got was nothing,” he said, calling on all States parties to human rights instruments to act now to ensure that international crimes were prosecuted, as written in the Geneva Conventions. Certain that justice would prevail; he underlined the importance of ending impunity for war crimes and remaining hopeful for the future.

Zulaiha Ismail, a trustee at the Perdana Global Peace Foundation in Kuala Lumpur, said that while the United Nations Charter began with the words “We the people of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, the Palestinian case had languished for almost a century since the Balfour Declaration.

The pursuit of justice had to go hand in hand with the pursuit of peace, she said. In response to the inertia, the Kuala Lumpur Foundation to Criminalize War was founded as a sister organization. In 2013, it had launched a tribunal that had, in 2013, found Israel guilty of genocide against the people of Palestine. As long as heinous crimes that had been committed against the Palestinian people were not addressed and victims’ cries of human rights abuse were not heeded, the world could expect renewed opposition, with people sacrificing themselves in the process.

Joserizal Jurnalis, a trauma surgeon and founder of the Medical Emergency Rescue Committee in Jakarta, said the most effective contribution to the Palestinian cause was to share their stories and raise awareness about the current situation. Civil society had the power to network and that power should be used to change the perception of people and Governments who were unaware of the status of Gaza and Jerusalem.

Humanitarian aid was needed, but so was humanitarian politics, he said. Starting now, focusing on the Palestinian issue was critical because it was the world’s main problem and required all efforts to find a solution.

The Forum was organized by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and hosted by the Indonesian Government.

Opening Remarks

HASAN KLEIB, Deputy Minister for Multilateral Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, said his Government supported Palestine and its people’s struggle to establish a State, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Indeed, that support had been written into the Indonesian Constitution. His country’s support had been expressed on a range of levels, from recognizing the State of Palestine as a United Nations non-member observer State and to bilateral agreements that included technical and capacity-building training programmes.

There was a changing political and security landscape in the Middle East, including issues such as Syria, Libya and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh), he said. Yet, despite those grave concerns, it was very important that attention must not be deferred from the Palestinian people’s decades-long struggle to establish their own State.

Further, he continued, it was important to deepen understanding of the situation of the Palestinian people, with an aim of strengthening more favourable perspectives on their struggle. It was also crucial to further pressure Israel to end its current practices and violations and to mobilize bolstered efforts towards the establishment of an independent State of Palestine.

Civil society organizations could do more, he said. Networking among those organizations should be strengthened. Pointing to the Peace Now movement in Israel, he said that group had demonstrated a firm position against the expansion of Israel in Palestinian areas and stood in favour of the two-State solution. Networking with groups such as Peace Now in Israel should continue and flourish.

DESRA PERCAYA (Indonesia), Vice-Chairman, Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, welcomed participants and their discussions. The Committee, whose mandate included extending cooperation and support to Palestinian and other civil society organizations, had re-established in 2013 a dedicated working group to exchange with civil society and promote the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. The working group could consider proposals for joint activities between the Committee and civil society organizations, examining their suggestions and endorsing their campaigns and other initiatives.

To date, more than 800 Palestinian and other civil society organizations were accredited or had observer status to the Committee, he said. Accredited organizations provided crucial and timely information on human rights violations and demolitions of Palestinian homes. Involved with political and humanitarian work, they promoted human rights and economic and social development.

He said that expert speakers would discuss key issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what the United Nations was doing about it and the current situation, including humanitarian hardships and the human rights violations the Palestinians were enduring as a result of the Israeli occupation. He encouraged participants to take the opportunity to network and explore joint actions and to support Palestinian rights.

“We diplomats need the strong support and engagement of civil society to support the resolution of the Palestinian plight,” he said. “Today, we will listen very attentively to your voices. I will take back to New York and discuss with my colleague Ambassadors at the United Nations the ideas you discuss today, which can bring us closer to achieving the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people according to the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law.”

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, thanked all participants and organizers of the International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem and today’s forum. Turning to the International Conference, he said the expert presentations had provoked lively discussions and debate surrounding the struggle of the Palestinian people and what could be done to advance their goal. He appreciated the Government of Indonesia’s support of the Palestinian people.

In that regard, he also encouraged civil society participants to play their role in supporting Palestinians. Those efforts could include influencing the Governments of the United States and of Israel. During the current era, social media was a very powerful tool that enabled users to express their opinions from all corners of the globe. Using those tools and methods could add qualitative, unique support for the Palestinian people.

Civil society organizations could also play a regional role in encouraging support from the youth of neighbouring countries, he said. In that connection, beyond sending letters to the United States Congress or to Israel, it was important to communicate with and influence students in countries of the region to pressure Israel to end its practices and end the occupation. That unique contribution would help the struggle of the Palestinian people.

Indeed, Palestinian youth were already contacting their counterparts the United States and in other countries, he said. Mobilizing those youth to influence their Governments was important. “You are young, you are smart, you have creative tools,” he said. “The rest will be easy for you. You will be able to communicate and advance the discourse of the Palestinian people. Through those processes, you can help the Palestinian people in a meaningful way.”

At the State of Palestine Mission to the United Nations, he said, social media was being increasingly used. The Mission’s Twitter account now had more than 20,000 likes and was among the five top diplomatic missions being followed worldwide, and Israel was not even in the ballpark. Emphasizing civil society’s contributions, he said “you are the face of the future and you can do a lot to help the Palestinian people. On behalf of the Palestinian people, I thank you for your help.”

The current uprising was being shouldered by youth who were fed up by the humiliation of Israel’s occupation, he said. They were many college graduates among them who were fed up with the threats to holy sites and the non-existent prospect for peace. “Our youth are exploding out of frustration,” he said, adding that they would charge with a stone or knife knowing most likely they would be killed by Israeli soldiers.

“We want to have freedom and independence as soon as possible,” he said. More than 120 youth, mostly children, had been killed and thousands of others had been injured. “Follow the stories of the youth,” he said, as they carried on their shoulders the responsibility of taking the efforts to end the occupation to a higher level in order to finally achieve independence and freedom. “Those are your brothers and sisters,” he said. “Tell their stories. Indicate your support to them. It is so inspiring to the Palestinians when they know that youth everywhere, including Indonesia, give them strength in their struggle.”

Presentations

Addressing the Forum were Maher Nasser, Director of the Outreach Division in the United Nations Department of Public Information; Shawan Jabarin, General Director of Al-Haq — Law in the Service of Man, Ramallah; Zulaiha Ismail, a trustee at the Perdana Global Peace Foundation, Kuala Lumpur; and Joserizal Jurnalis, trauma surgeon and founder of the Medical Emergency Rescue Committee, Jakarta.

Mr. NASSER, giving a presentation on “Key issues at stake: United Nations resolutions, inalienable rights of the Palestinian people”, said his role involved working with civil society on issues that were on the United Nations agenda, including the recent Sustainable Development Goals. He was often asked why there was a Palestinian Rights Committee and a separate agency of its own, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals would not be implemented without civil society support.

Providing an overview of the Organization’s history with the Palestinian people, he said that a few years after the United Nations was created in 1945, the British mandate for Palestine had led to the adoption of resolution 181, on the partition of Palestine into two States. In 1949, the United Nations created UNRWA to help on the ground. Since then, United Nations involvement and resolutions had continued to be renewed year in and year out. A General Assembly resolution had then created the Palestinian Rights Committee.

A parallel series of Security Council resolutions had become the bedrock of a process to move forward, he said. The Quartet was another mechanism to move the peace process ahead. Peace would establish a Palestinian State and help to promote stability throughout the region.

In addition to being present on the agenda in the form of resolutions, he said that the United Nations had also been present on the ground. He said that, as a Palestinian refugee himself, born in Ramallah, he went to a school run by UNRWA. The Agency employed more than 30,000 people, with more than 28,000 of them Palestinian refugees themselves, and was mandated to provide services until a solution was found. The Agency’s original mandate was for three years, but it had been renewed, as a solution had not been found.

Refugees had numbered 750,000 in the 1940s and today, there were 5.15 million, he said. Other United Nations agencies had also opened offices to provide humanitarian support. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs website provided daily information on a range of issues, including notices on movement restrictions. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) were also active. He said that among the civilians affected by the ongoing conflict in Syria there were the 500,000 Palestinian refugees living there.

The question of Palestine had been regularly present in United Nations discussions since the 1970s until today, he said. The United Nations felt a sense of responsibility that until the solution was found the question remained as a sore wound that would reflect on how the Organization was perceived elsewhere in the world. The issue of when the Palestinian people would have their aspirations realized was a question that the United Nations was working towards. Until the solution was reached, its consequences would extend far beyond the area of the conflict. The United Nations invited civil society to participate in every aspect of its work, including on the question of Palestine.

Mr. JABARIN, making a presentation on the “Situation on the ground: Settlements, displacement, Gaza blockade”, provided an overview dating to September 2015. He said it was a shame to the United Nations and others for the long-standing situation. The Organization was responsible for the current situation and there was no political will, otherwise a solution would be at hand. The United States had used its veto power at least 50 times in the Security Council, paralysing the United Nations from taking action.

Recalling his childhood, he said he had seen trucks in 1967 taking Palestinians from their homes. The occupation was controlling every aspect of life. Unseen violations touched every human aspect of life, including feelings and emotions. A new policy of cutting off Palestinian areas by different means had included by roads, settlements and checkpoints. People from the same family could not visit each other. Gaza had been completely cut off, like a prison and the restriction of movement included refusing to issue passports.

States parties to relevant human rights instruments must act now, he said. They had a legal obligation to ensure that international crimes were prosecuted, as written in the Geneva Conventions. With Palestine, there was no intervention and States had dealt with international law in a cosmetic manner, without action. Settlements were a war crime and imagining Palestine without settlements would most likely trigger peace in no time. In Hebron, for instance, 500 settlers required 2,000 soldiers to guard them. Those soldiers made Palestinians’ lives impossible on a daily basis. The younger generation was now exploding, he said. They were the Oslo generation, who had been promised peace, development, democracy and hope. “What we got was nothing,” he said.

Civil society could push their Governments to prosecute the perpetrators of war crimes, he said. There was no future for oppressive regimes to remain in power forever. He was sure justice would prevail, however, as it was important to combat those crimes and to remain hopeful. In closing, he screened his organization’s field visit, which examined how Israel was restricting access to Palestinian natural resources, including oil and gas.

Ms. ISMAIL, making a presentation on avenues for civil society action and coordination, reminded delegates that while the Charter began with the words “We the people of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, the Palestinian case, spanning almost a century since the Balfour Declaration, had been a tragic and sorrowful tale of a paralysis of international action and incapacity of global players to solve a problem that it, in itself, had created.

The pursuit of justice had to go hand in hand with the pursuit of peace, she said. With a view to the inertia in achieving accountability for what had amounted to war crimes against the Palestinian people, the Kuala Lumpur Foundation to Criminalize War had launched a tribunal, one of several civil society entities around the world which conducted “peoples’ tribunals” or “tribunals of conscience” in the name of social justice. In 2013, the foundation’s “tribunal” had found Israel guilty of genocide against the people of Palestine. As long as heinous crimes committed against the Palestinian people were not addressed and victims’ cries of human rights abuse were not heeded, the world could expect renewed opposition with people sacrificing themselves in the process.

Recalling a number of her organization’s efforts, she said a flotilla that she had boarded in Greece for Gaza had aimed to bring much needed help to the area. However, the boat was turned away before docking. On that note, she said “we need to break the siege of Gaza”, calling the area the world’s biggest open prison. The Peace Foundation had also held many events and taken many actions to strive for accountability for violations against the rights of the Palestinian people.

That the Palestinian cause was an incontrovertible one rang loud and clear with civil society around the world, she said. There was a need to create a proactive network of civil society and non-government entities that could build bridges across islands of efforts to present a more concerted and comprehensive view premised on peace and justice for the Palestinian people. Where Malaysia was concerned, there was generally wholehearted support for the Palestinians from all communities and the Government had been a major donor for solidarity and humanitarian missions.

Dr. JURNALIS, also focusing on avenues for civil society action and coordination, shared his experiences working in conflict situations. His organization, the Medical Emergency Rescue Committee, had taken part in campaigns to end the Israeli occupation, organized vaccination drives to reach vulnerable populations in many countries and had run a hospital in Gaza.

As a non-governmental organization, the Medical Emergency Rescue Committee had helped the most vulnerable, he said. It also faced many difficulties operating in the Middle East. Palestine was a grave concern and was among his Committee’s work, providing health services in conflict situations, including working in Sudan, Myanmar and Gaza.

Turning to the question of Palestine, he said the most effective contribution to the Palestinian cause was to share their stories and raise awareness about the current situation. Civil society had the power to network and that power should be used to change the perception of people and Governments who were unaware of the status of Gaza and Jerusalem.

Humanitarian aid was needed, but so was humanitarian politics, he said. Starting now, focusing on the Palestinian issue was critical because it was the world’s main problem and required all efforts to find a solution.

Discussion

During the ensuing exchange, participants asked the experts questions and raised a number of points and concerns. A representative of a civil society organization from Indonesia said his group had held a conference to hear the moderate voice of Islam. That moderate voice was key to responding to many current challenges, including extremism and Islamophobia.

Expressing a number of concerns, a member of civil society, a lawyer from Egypt, drew attention to some points made during the International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem. With a view to seeing peace among Palestinians and Israelis, he said that to discuss peace, Israel must stop its current practices and settlers must stop killing Palestinians. He then proposed that the Committee would convene four civil society fora in the coming year to be held on all the continents because civil society was the one who could shape the future. It was necessary for civil society to help the people of Palestine through many ways, including psychological and medical services.

A speaker from the London School of Communications in Jakarta asked where to get accurate, neutral information, aside from biased pro-Palestinian or Western news reports.

A representative of the Palestinian Cultural Organization in Malaysia said it was impossible to discuss peace without recognizing the ethnic cleansing that had occurred between 1948 and 1949. He also asked about boycotts and what options were available to change the balance of power, for instance the “P5” at the United Nations and situation in Palestine.

A member of civil society, a professor from Indonesia, expressed concerns over the current situation, emphasizing that tactics must change. For instance, the agriculture sector could be developed so the Palestinians could prosper with trading their goods. As such, the prosperity approach could bring about peace.

Dr. JURNALIS said precise facts about Gaza could be seen if participants would visit with him and his organization. Palestinians were supported by people all over the world.

Mr. JABARIN said his organization was professional and had reliable information on its website. The United Nations also provided accurate information, including from special rapporteurs. On a question about boycotts, he said it was the public’s right to express their opinion. Banning settlement products, sanctions and divestments were other action. There were two “international communities”, one was the public and that was where he placed his hope.

For his part, he continued to make efforts, he said. With regard to the International Criminal Court, he said he had submitted information two weeks ago in The Hague on behalf of four organizations and would send additional information on current events. Just being at the International Conference, however, would trigger negative articles in The Jerusalem Post that would likely call his organization a hate group. However, he believed in justice and he would continue to fight for real justice and for peace. Every step taken by civil society helped peace, he concluded.

Mr. NASSER said there were 1.8 billion youth, the largest young generation ever. The Secretary-General had appointed a Special Envoy for Youth and he invited participants to visit the United Nations website and get involved. The United Nations also provided impartial, objective information.

The United Nations, while having prevented another world war, had many issues on its agenda, he said. The Organization had laid out the foundations of a proper relation between nations and of human rights, which was now mainstreamed in many instruments. But, the United Nations was composed of Member States that were not always in agreement. The issue of reform, including the Security Council, continued to be on the regular agenda of the Organization.

Civil society could change things, he said. They could help to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. More than 60 million people were displaced worldwide and conflicts ensued. The Arab Spring, which was a reflection of young people who wanted real representation, had demonstrated that new generations wanted a say in how their countries were run. It was unfortunate that extremist elements had appeared. In conclusion, he said that finding a solution to the question of Palestine and ending the occupation would have positive effects around the world.

Ms. ISMAIL said there was a lot of information available. There was scant information, however, on the effects of newborn babies as a result of the war. Civil society could provide the kind of support for research on that and other areas. With regard to justice, she said the International Criminal Court would take a long time to address war crimes, and as such, civil society should not be shy. For instance, the notion of coexistence should be called what it was — decolonization. It was sad that Palestinian children were now sacrificing themselves. “You can take the child out of the war, but you can’t take the war out of the child,” she said, expressing concern for what had been called the Oslo generation. Civil society must play its correct role and provide those young people with the support they needed.