United Nations Seminar on Assistance to Palestinian People Opens in Vienna
with Focus on Relief, Recovery, Reconstruction in Post-War Gaza
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VIENNA, 31 March — The United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, focusing on “Speeding up relief, recovery and reconstruction in post-war Gaza”, opened this morning at the headquarters in Vienna, hearing a message from the Secretary-General and statements by the senior adviser to President Mahmoud Abbas representing the State of Palestine, the Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria and the Chairperson of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Opening the meeting, being held from 31 March to 1 April, Fodé Seck, Committee Chairperson, said the two-day event would review the immediate and longer-term humanitarian and development needs in the Gaza Strip and in particular Gaza’s severe housing, fuel, power, environmental and water crises, which had intensified greatly in the wake of the war in 2014. The Seminar would also strive to identify the obstacles to Gaza’s recovery and reconstruction.

Ban Ki-moon, in a message delivered by Yury Fedotov, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna, discussed the operations of the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, brokered by the United Nations, and commended the Governments of Israel and Palestine for their continued adherence to it, as well as their statements of commitment to a durable solution for Gaza. Mr. Ban urged the Palestinians to overcome their divisions and donors to honour their commitments. He called for the full opening of the crossings into Gaza and emphasized the need to break the cycle of “build-destroy, build-destroy, build-destroy”, which caused so much needless suffering and waste in the enclave.

Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal, Director-General of the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria, said reconstruction and development in the Gaza Strip depended upon efficient aid, but also on a political process and the freedom of movement, for which access to Gaza was a prerequisite. He spoke about Austria’s assistance to Palestine and said the country stood ready to continue to assist the Palestinian people to meet their challenges, in order to find a lasting peace of two democratic States living side by side.

Mr. Seck, speaking in his capacity as Committee Chairperson, said that in the aftermath of the war, the already dire humanitarian situation in Gaza had become a near catastrophe. It would take time, money and the efforts by all to rebuild Gaza and equip it with a sustainable infrastructure. Although there had been encouraging first steps, many obstacles remained on the road to full recovery. The Committee welcomed the formation of the National Consensus Government and the start of its activities in Gaza and the fact that an increasing number of States were recognizing Palestine.

Mohammad Shtayyeh, Senior Adviser to President Mahmoud Abbas, said the Seminar was taking place just days after the Israeli elections in which the Israeli public had moved even further to the right by choosing a Government that had officially declared its intention to destroy the possibility of a Palestinian State. He spoke about the new direction being taken by the Palestinian leadership to achieve a lasting peace, and warned that Israel had the choice of a two-State solution or a one-State solution, a de jure apartheid State.

Following the opening statements, the Seminar’s first plenary session, on the immediate and longer-term humanitarian needs in the Gaza Strip, began with statements from experts on the subject. Taking the floor first was Samer Salameh, Assistant Deputy Minister of Labour, State of Palestine, who said that the humanitarian needs in Gaza were not just a result of the 2014 war but an accumulation of Israeli policies; in particular, the siege of Gaza. The immediate needs there, he said, included social protection, health infrastructure and job opportunities, and $1.2 billion was needed to meet them.

Ahmed Sourani, Resilience Development Expert, Gaza, said more than half the population in the Strip was excluded from economic activities and a huge number of people lived on the brink of poverty. He called for a focus on inclusive, community-based initiatives and micro-projects that could play a small role in economic revival, and on strengthening the role played by women in the economy.

Kathleen Maes, Head of Office, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Gaza, gave an overview of the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The way forward, she said, must involve accountability and a durable ceasefire that addressed root causes and lifted the blockade. Priority interventions needed for internally displaced persons were also essential, as were water, sanitation and hygiene services, and the provision of durable energy.

Eva Pilipp, Special Coordinator of the Palestine Society for Austro-Arab Relations, Vienna, focused on the needs of children and young adults in Gaza, who made up 60 per cent of the total population. It was not only infrastructure that had been destroyed but also minds, especially those of children, she said, also drawing attention to the rise in rates of domestic violence and aggressive behaviour between children since the 2014 war.

The meeting will reconvene at 3 p.m. to conclude the first plenary and begin the second, titled “Looking ahead: prioritizing reconstruction tasks”, at 4 p.m.

The programme, statements, press releases and other documentation relating to the Seminar are available on the [UNISPAL website](http://unispal.un.org/databases/dprtest/ngoweb.nsf/f12fded4d0597000852573fc005b9471/5b8224d57b122da185257ddd006868a7?OpenDocument).

Opening Statements

FODÉ SECK, Chairperson of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said that in convening the Seminar, the Committee sought to review the immediate and longer-term humanitarian and development needs in Gaza, in particular its severe housing, fuel, power, environmental and water crises, which greatly intensified in the wake of the war in 2014. The Seminar aimed to strengthen cooperation between all parties involved in the reconstruction and economic development of the Strip, namely the Palestinian Government, intergovernmental organizations including the United Nations, key donors, and the private sector. It would also strive to identify the obstacles to recovery and reconstruction.

BAN KI-MOON, United Nations Secretary-General, in a message delivered by YURY FEDOTOV, noted that the Seminar was taking place more than seven months after the end of the Gaza conflict. He said the temporary Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, brokered by the United Nations, had, to date, enabled access to construction materials for more than 60,000 Gazan homeowners, and so far approval had been granted for 42 construction and infrastructure projects funded by the international community and the private sector. The Mechanism’s operations, he said, were ready to be scaled up to facilitate the swift implementation of major large-scale projects. Mr. Ban commended the Governments of Israel and Palestine for their continued adherence to the temporary instrument as well as their statements of commitment to a durable solution for Gaza. He also expressed his deep appreciation to the international community for its generous pledges of support for reconstruction. However, he said he remained concerned by the slow pace of reconstruction and the suffering of the Gazan people in the aftermath of last year’s brutal conflict. Tens of thousands of Gazans — men, women, children and the elderly — still lived in temporary shelters or United Nations facilities because their homes had not yet been rebuilt. Four children had died due to inadequate housing during the winter storms in January, which underscored the dangers of the situation.

The Government of National Consensus had still not fully assumed control over Gaza and the majority of the donor funds had yet to be received, he said, urging the Palestinians to overcome their divisions, which he said were hurting the people of Gaza. He urgently appealed to donors to honour their financial commitments, including funding for United Nations agencies that carried out vital operations in Gaza. He also called for the full opening of the crossings into Gaza, including Rafah, to allow for legitimate trade and movement of people. He stressed that only a comprehensive peace agreement leading to a viable and independent Palestinian State living alongside Israel in peace and security would durably resolve the conflict. He emphasized the need to break the cycle of “build-destroy, build-destroy, build-destroy”, which had caused so much needless suffering and waste, and he urged both parties to refrain from action that could further exacerbate the situation and to demonstrate leadership. Finally, he hoped that with the Quartet and all other stakeholders engaged, there would be a better chance in 2015 at addressing seemingly intractable issues.

PETER LAUNSKY-TIEFFENTHAL, Director-General of the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of Austria, said speeding up relief, recovery and reconstruction in post-war Gaza was a daunting task, and with that, he welcomed the Seminar’s aim to review the role of Governments, including Palestine, the United Nations and other stakeholders, to strengthen coordination.

It was vital, he said, for the international community to act now to help the civilians in Gaza, who had paid the highest price. He noted that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) had a special relationship with Vienna as it was formerly headquartered there and highlighted the extraordinary efforts of UNRWA staff to help tens of thousands of refugee families, from education to health care. Reconstruction and development in the Gaza Strip depended not only upon efficient aid but also political process. Freedom of movement and access to Gaza was a prerequisite. He welcomed the announcement by Israel on Friday that it would release tax funds to the Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinians had been one of Austria’s priority partners since the beginning of the peace process in 1993, he said, noting that Austrian assistance to Palestine since 1995 amounted to $95 million. That assistance focused largely on water management, health care and humanitarian aid. Austria also supported the education and training of Palestinian students and researchers at Austrian universities and the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna. In 2014, the country had provided $6.3 million to UNRWA’s Gaza Flash Appeal, Health Programme and through the European Union’s PEGASE Mechanism, as well as to the Palestinian Water Authority. He said he was proud that the people of Austria were also doing their part, and thanks to active support from Austrian civil society, Gazans in need of special medical care were receiving medical treatment in Austrian hospitals. He said he looked forward to visiting Ramallah in two weeks, where he would be looking, in particular, at issues impacting upon the water supply in Gaza. He hoped for a renewed commitment from everyone to work for a peace that met the aspirations of all — Palestinians, Israelis and all the people in the region. Austria stood ready to continue to assist the Palestinian people to meet those challenges in order to find a lasting peace of two democratic States living side by side.

FODÉ SECK, Chairperson of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said 2014 was declared the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People by the General Assembly in the hope that following the recognition of Palestine as an observer State in 2012, it would strengthen support throughout the world for peace negotiations, leading to Palestine’s accession to the United Nations as a full, sovereign and independent Member State. Alas, the reality was completely different: the negotiations had broken down and, once again, violence had erupted, culminating in one of the deadliest wars Gaza had known. The 50-day war cost the lives of more than 2,100 Palestinians, the vast majority of them civilians — men, women, children and elderly — and it had destroyed the homes of more than 100,000 people as well as schools, places of worship and hospitals, and much of Gaza’s already weakened infrastructure. Thousands of Gazans had been forced to seek refuge in UNRWA facilities, but even there they were not safe from Israeli military assaults. In the aftermath of the war the already dire humanitarian situation in Gaza had become a near catastrophe, he said.

It would take time, money and the efforts of all to rebuild Gaza and equip it with a sustainable infrastructure, he said, adding that although there had been encouraging first steps, there were many obstacles on the road to full recovery and reconstruction. The Israeli blockade was still being fully enforced; the Gaza ceasefire remained shaky and the donor monies pledged in Cairo had not been fully disbursed. The situation in the enclave was critical and the Palestinian babies who froze to death in Gaza during the winter storms were a tragic example of that. Despite that bleak picture, certain positive developments must not be undervalued. He paid tribute to the tireless efforts of the Palestinian Government and civil society organizations, the international community and the United Nations, who kept the spirit of hope alive and showed the hundreds of thousands of suffering Gazans that they had not been forgotten. The formation of the National Consensus Government and the start of its activities in Gaza were welcomed by the Committee, as well as the fact that more and more States were recognizing Palestine and a number of parliaments had voted for such recognition, among them Belgium, France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.

MOHAMMAD SHTAYYEH, Senior Adviser to President Mahmoud Abbas, Representative of the State of Palestine, thanked the Committee and Austria for convening and hosting the timely Seminar as the entire Middle East region was at a crossroads, with demographic, political and geographic transformations. The Seminar was taking place just days after the Israeli elections in which the Israeli public moved even further to the right by choosing a Government that had officially declared its intention to destroy the possibility of a Palestinian State and bring in a new wave of colonization programmes. However, a National Consensus Government had been formed and was investing every effort in making Palestinian reconciliation a reality, in uniting people and geography and in preserving the two-State solution. Historically, the Palestinian leadership had moved from an armed struggle from 1967 to 1988 to a strategy of peaceful negotiations for a two-State solution. There had been 24 years of negotiations — the longest peace process in the world — and neither strategy had brought about an end to the occupation. Palestinians had received $23 billion in aid and were grateful to all countries which had given it, including Austria, but how many more times could it rebuild, he asked.

Instead, he said, Palestinians were taking a new direction. The first was through the United Nations Security Council. Although the resolution calling for a timeframe in which the occupation would be ended was not adopted, Palestinians would continue their endeavours because the United Nations was the legitimate address through which to seek justice. Second, 138 countries so far had recognized Palestine as a State; it was a member State of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and it would continue approaching other United Nations organizations. Mr. Shtayyeh called on the European Union to boycott Israeli products manufactured in Israeli settlements and to ask its dual nationals not to live in the settlements. The third was the legal direction. As of Wednesday 1 April, Palestine would be a member of the International Criminal Court, where it would seek justice for the aggressions against Gaza and the illegal settlements built on its territory since 1967.

Today’s Seminar was about rebuilding the accumulated destruction of Gaza, he said, noting that so far, no more than 5 per cent of aid pledged following the 2014 conflict had been delivered. Rather than relief, what was needed was reconstruction and development. The international community had to look at the situation with open eyes, he said, and to achieve a two-State solution the three-State reality of Israel, West Bank and the Gaza Strip must be ended. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in his election campaign, had stated that he would destroy the possibility of a Palestinian State. The reality of that intention was seen on the ground every day. Israel wanted to kill the possibility of a Palestinian State and keep the Gaza Strip separated from the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The international community held the carrot and the stick, and it was time to end double standards in terms of the world’s relationship with Israel. By 2020 the population between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean would be more than 50 per cent Palestinian, meaning that a minority of Jews would be governing a majority of Palestinians. He warned that Israel wanted to maintain the status quo, but in fact it had the choice of a two-State solution or a one-State solution, a de jure apartheid State.

Plenary I — Immediate and Longer-Term Humanitarian Needs in the Gaza Strip

SAMER SALAMEH, Assistant Deputy Minister for Labour, State of Palestine, said the humanitarian needs in the Gaza Strip were not just a result of the 2014 war but an accumulation of Israeli policies and, in particular, the siege of the Gaza Strip. The enclave had been destroyed economically as well as socially, he said, depicting the situation through statistics. In the 2014 conflict, 2,145 people had died, including 581 children; 11,200 had been injured, of whom 3,436 were children; and 1,500 children had been orphaned. To date, 25 per cent of the Gaza Strip had no housing: 10,000 houses were totally destroyed and another 10,000 seriously damaged during the war. A further 25 ambulances had been destroyed, and 28 clinics, 9 hospitals, 148 schools and 8 universities had been seriously damaged, as had the premises of 222 humanitarian non-governmental organizations operating there. The damage extended to 169 mosques and 2 churches. The electricity station was totally destroyed and a large number of wells and industrial premises were damaged. The war also had destroyed 1,255 commercial entities, leading to a huge increase in unemployment. The immediate needs in the Gaza Strip included social protection, health infrastructure and job opportunities, and $1.2 billion was needed to meet them.

AHMED SOURANI, Resilience Development Expert, Gaza, said more than half the population of Gaza was excluded from economic activities and a huge number lived on the brink of poverty. Many people were wholly dependent on promises of aid — aid which was late to arrive. Most people suffering from unemployment were young, including graduates who aspired to a life of dignity. Regarding food security, Mr. Sourani spoke about the need to revive the agricultural sector and animal husbandry in both the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and the need for a strategy to revive fisheries. The great pressure on Gaza’s aquifers had resulted in the severe depletion of water resources, which endangered the health and well-being of the population. Thousands of people had no choice but to purchase potable water on a daily basis. A new water-desalination plant was urgently needed, he said, calling for building on positive initiatives, such as the collection of rainwater and the decontamination and recycling of water for agricultural needs. There must also be a focus on community-based initiatives and micro-projects that could play a small role in economic revival, he said, giving examples of kitchen garden food production and small-scale water projects. Also crucial was to strengthen the role of women in the economy, including in the agricultural sector, he said, emphasizing that a new and inclusive approach should be based on shared responsibility, enlisting financial resources both from the Arab world and internationally, with a focus on capacity-building at the local level.

KATLEEN MAES, Head of Office, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Gaza, shared a slide presentation giving an overview of the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. She said that 80 per cent of the people in Gaza received some form of humanitarian assistance, mostly food aid. At the height of the crisis in 2014, some 500,000 people — 28 per cent of the Gazan population — had been displaced, and today 100,000 remained displaced. There had been massive damage to property and infrastructure: 20,000 homes had been damaged beyond repair and 144,000 needed repairing. Gaza’s power plant had been shelled repeatedly until it stopped functioning and, today, most people in Gaza only had electricity for a maximum of six hours per day.

Further, the water and sanitation infrastructure had sustained extensive damage and 90 per cent of wells and waste water treatment and desalination plants were inoperable due to power cuts and lack of fuel, she said. The capacities of the health sector were exhausted. Most Gazans were recovering from three wars in six years, and their psychosocial needs were often neglected, particularly those of the 300,000 traumatized children. The way forward, she said, must involve accountability and a durable ceasefire that addressed root causes and lifted the blockade. The priority interventions were to find solutions for the plight of the internally displaced persons, and to provide water, sanitation and hygiene services and durable energy. The Gaza Crisis Appeal Strategic Response Plan of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had requested $551.2 million, but humanitarian assistance could at best stabilize the situation; it was not a solution. The flame of hope was waning quickly, she warned, adding that the people of Gaza could not live without hope.

EVA PILIPP, Special Coordinator of the Palestine Society for Austro-Arab Relations, Vienna, said she had returned yesterday from a two-week visit to the Gaza Strip, her seventh visit over the last two years, including during Operation Protective Edge last summer. Ms. Pilipp focused her intervention on the needs of children and young adults in Gaza, who made up 60 per cent of the total population of 1.8 million. The median age in Gaza was 18 years compared to the world average of 28, she noted. According to United Nations figures, 495 children had been killed during Operation Protective Edge, and every young person she had interviewed in Gaza had said that that war had been the worst because of the absence of any “red lines”, which meant that everything and everyone was a target — including children.

The technical reconstruction needs, she went on, were of utmost urgency, but it should not be forgotten that the war had destroyed many minds, especially those of children, she said, adding that an 8 year-old child in Gaza would now have lived through three wars. Every person in the Strip was in need of therapy, but there was little opportunity to get treatment. Also since the war, rates of domestic violence in Gaza were rising, often following a chain of command from husband to wife, and from wife to children, in order for people to feel power over others. Children were increasingly seen carrying out extreme and aggressive behaviour towards other children, often in reaction to what they had seen at home and during the war. Ms. Pilipp also shared the powerful stories of four children from the Gaza Strip, which, she noted, were on the United Nations Information Centre website.