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CIVIL SOCIETY MAKES VOICES HEARD DURING UNITED NATIONS PUBLIC FORUM

IN SUPPORT OF PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

Global Coalition of Non-Governmental Organizations Proposed to Provide Greater Support for Two-State Solution

(Received from a UN Information Officer.)

JAKARTA, Indonesia, 10 June — Representatives of non-governmental organizations, as well as students and others attending today's United Nations Public Forum in Support of the Palestinian People, discussed ways in which civil society could promote greater solidarity with the Palestinian people, and how they could join forces in backing a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while stressing that a two-State solution was the only way.

The one-day event followed the United Nations Asian and Pacific Meeting on the Question of Palestine, which took place in Jakarta on 8 and 9 June. Both events, hosted by the Government of Indonesia, were held under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

In opening remarks, Desra Percaya, Director for International Security and Disarmament in Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, encouraged non-governmental organizations to assist in the peace process as their ideas and enthusiasm were critical. In order to be effective, however, non-governmental organizations must not only keep abreast of developments, but also work in close collaboration with other non-governmental organizations to form a strong network.

Paul Badji (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, commended civil society organizations for their efforts to uphold international legitimacy with regard to the question of Palestine through advocacy and the mobilization of public opinion, and urged them to harmonize their efforts at the local, national, regional and international levels.

The Forum consisted of two panel discussions under the respective themes "Civil society in solidarity with the Palestinian people" and "Joining forces -- Civil society of Asia and the Pacific and worldwide initiatives to support a peaceful solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict". Panellists highlighted their organizations' activities and offered ideas and plans for advancing the vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

Opening Remarks

PAUL BADJI (Senegal), Chairman, Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, said the Committee periodically held consultations with civil society representatives to seek new ideas as to how it could improve its work. The Committee commended civil society organizations for their efforts to uphold international legitimacy with regard to the question of Palestine through advocacy and the mobilization of public opinion. It encouraged them to

broaden their base by involving trade unions and other large organizations, while focusing and harmonizing their efforts at the local, national, regional and international levels.

The Committee had been following the activities of various regional civil society organizations in support of the Palestinian people, and was highly appreciative of Indonesian civil society organizations in particular, he said. The convening in Jakarta of the International Humanitarian Conference on Assistance to Victims of Occupation in late 2008 was a clear example. The Committee was also aware that the very strong civil society community in the Pacific region was organizing many solidarity and awareness campaigns in support of the Palestinian cause.

Announcing the convening of the United Nations International Meeting on the Question of Palestine in Geneva, on 22 and 23 July, he said its theme would be “Responsibility of the international community to uphold international humanitarian law to ensure the protection of civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory in the wake of the war in Gaza”. It was regrettable that the international community had failed to stop the devastating offensive in Gaza. Governments, the United Nations and civil society must each play their own role in restoring long-lost justice to the Palestinian people.

DESRA PERCAYA, Director for International Security and Disarmament, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, said the long-standing Palestinian-Israeli conflict had had many faces, including war, destruction, dislocation and humanitarian stress. Hopefully, civil society would contribute ideas on how to continue seeking answers as to how the Palestinians could enjoy a sovereign and independent State.

To be effective, civil society actors should ensure that they were organized and up to date, he said. They must not only keep abreast of developments, but also work in close collaboration with other non-governmental organizations to form a strong network. Hopefully regional networks could work in solidarity to move the peace process forward until the final objective was achieved. Today’s Public Forum was a starting point to demonstrate their readiness to participate in helping the Palestinian people achieve their right to an independent, prosperous and peaceful State.

Panel Discussion 1

Ram Karthigasu, grass-roots organizer from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, moderated the discussion, which featured panellists Joharah Baker, Senior Writer with the Palestinian Initiative for Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH) and former Editor of the *Palestine Report*; Gershon Baskin, Co-Chair, Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), Jerusalem; Hikmahanto Juwana, Professor of Law, University of Indonesia, Jakarta; Nizam Bashir, Member of the Legal Team, Kuala Lumpur Foundation to Criminalise War, Malacca, Malaysia; and Marie Antoinette S. Leviste, Outreach Convener, Young Moro Professionals Network, Manila, Philippines.

Ms. BAKER said that, as a Palestinian writer involved in the media, she found it increasingly difficult not to be overwhelmed with frustration. Trying to portray the Palestinian perspective meant running against an extremely strong counter-current of biases about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in most Western media. In the mainstream English-language media, the image of violence was almost always prevalent in coverage of the conflict. The coverage of Israel’s operation Cast Lead in Gaza was an example of terrible distortions.

She said the main purpose of Palestinians in the media was to convey the goal of all Palestinians: ending the occupation. All too often, however, that goal was lost in the details. It was important to bear in mind that the conflict was not about Hamas, Fatah or even a military conflict. It was about ending an illegal Israeli occupation, a fact often ignored by mainstream English-language media. When an apartment in Gaza City was bombed, killing 19 civilians because Israel wished to “take out” one Hamas operative, the Israeli rhetoric was about defence and security. The killing of civilians was brushed aside, as was the fact of their having lived under oppressive occupation for more than 40 years. The media had grown accustomed to a kind of tunnel vision, whereby there was Palestinian “terror” and Israel’s “necessary retaliation”.

While not supporting suicide bombings or violence, she said she did take issue with people’s refusal to consider the possibility that suicide bombings were a symptom of a much bigger problem. The Palestinian media had not done a sufficiently good job of properly conveying their just cause. It was a duty to seek out the truth even if that meant putting oneself in the way of criticism or even ostracism. Bold Israeli journalists spoke a truth that many in their own society would rather not hear. There was no absolute truth or complete objectivity, but a responsible piece written from a certain perspective could offer a window into a situation not otherwise available. In the words of Edmund Burke: “All that is needed for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Mr. BASKIN introduced a plan devised by a strategic unit of his “think and do tank” on how to move forward following the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, with the assumption, among others, that there was now a

chance that the United States would cease to use its Security Council veto in relation to Israeli-Palestinian issues. As the Israelis had always coordinated strategic issues with Washington, it might now be possible for the Palestinians to coordinate their strategies with Washington as well.

The Palestinian State existed and had been recognized by more than 100 countries, he said. Its borders had been defined, and it had been decided that Jerusalem would be the capital of both Israel and Palestine. Given the existence of the Palestinian State, President Mahmoud Abbas should now submit a formal request for membership to the United Nations in the knowledge that the United States would not block that request with a veto in the Security Council. Such a request would certainly get the necessary two-thirds support in the General Assembly. That would change the rules of the game as Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza would no longer be an occupation of undefined territories, but an occupation by one Member State of another Member State.

The Security Council would then be fully authorized to use all its tools to bring about an Israeli withdrawal, he continued, adding that the implementation mechanism could be the empowerment of the Middle East Quartet. Israel must then immediately remove outposts and stop expanding its settlements. The Council would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the two States and, recognizing the importance of the holy sites, place them under international guardianship. The Council would also announce its readiness to deploy peacekeeping forces. Once that plan was put into place, the Provisional Government of the State of Palestine would set a date for new elections, while Hamas would either recognize it or be removed from relevance by the Palestinian people.

Mr. HIKMAHANTO, discussing the impact of academia and the responsibilities of academicians, said professors and students had conducted research on the conflict, some of which had been published in newspapers. Faculty members and students had held seminars, and it was their moral responsibility to inform the public at large, who had sometimes been influenced by biased information. Academicians also had a responsibility to explain the complexities of the conflict according to their specializations. They had a responsibility to ensure that people were not misled and that the public were well enough informed to be able to advocate solidarity in a civilized manner. Academicians could also strengthen Government positions. Upon the invasion of Gaza, the Indonesian Government had considered various means to stop the invasion, including a Security Council resolution. There should be a call for a "coalition of the willing", as had been done in other cases. While such a coalition was a "crazy idea", it would get Israel's attention.

Mr. BASHIR noted that today, 10 June, was the forty-second anniversary of the Six-Day War, yet Israel continued its occupation of Palestinian territory. One of the reasons why the status quo had remained unchanged since then was the media's failure to highlight the illegality of Israeli actions under the objective parameters of international law. The International Court of Justice, upon the request of General Assembly, had issued an advisory opinion, in which it had decided that the construction of the separation wall on Palestinian territory was illegal. The Court held that Israeli settlements had been "established in breach of international law", and concluded also that settlements in the "Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem", were illegal, thereby countering Israel's claim that East Jerusalem was part of its eternal and undivided capital.

As Israel had often been accused of human rights violations, it should first be established whether Palestinians enjoyed any human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory according to international human rights and humanitarian law, he said. The International Court of Justice had clarified the matter in its advisory opinion, finding that the Fourth Geneva Convention, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child applied to Israel within the Occupied Palestinian Territory, where it exercised territorial jurisdiction.

He said the advisory opinion affirmed that the construction of the wall constituted a breach of Israel's obligations as it changed the demographics of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, restricted freedom of movement, and impeded the exercise of the right to work, health, education and to an adequate standard of living. However, the media presented an alternate reality, referring to the Occupied Palestinian Territory as "disputed territories". Some media insisted that the wall was necessary due to security concerns, an argument rejected by the International Court of Justice decision, which stated that "[...] the infringements resulting from that route cannot be justified by military exigencies or by the requirements of national security or public order". The media stated also that Israel obeyed the rules of war, a claim that could not be reconciled with the number of Palestinian civilians killed when compared to the numbers of Israeli civilians killed. It was time for the media to realize the importance of international law.

Ms. LEVISTE said the Koran and the Bible taught peace, as did the Torah. If people stopped to reflect on the essence of their faiths, perhaps there would be no need for today's Forum. In President Obama's words, "The interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart." It was not justice and peace that must be

created. Rather, there was a need to remove the obstacles preventing justice and peace from thriving and flowing freely. “Our work must be to stand with the marginalized, seek out the root causes of injustice and violence and then work to remove those root causes. To be called a member of the human race, we must first practise our humanity by forbidding the inhumane actions.”

Using slides to show the devastation and deaths caused by the Israelis, she asked rhetorically: “Why are Palestinians reacting against Israel?” A picture was worth a thousand words and the images shown spoke for themselves. They would be spread to all corners of the globe with the help of the Internet, along with an enthusiastic force of over 300,000 young Moro professionals, “one click at a time”. Regardless of race, religion or station in life, whether one was a Muslim in Mindanao, a coloured man in the United States or a Jew in Palestine, all shared common aspirations: to live in peace and security; to be educated and work with dignity; and to love one’s family, respect one’s community and pray to one’s God. One characteristic of a good Muslim was having patience in facing difficulties, during extreme poverty, sickness and battle. “We have been patient, but God helps those who help themselves.”

Panel Discussion 2

Mr. Hikmahanto moderated the second discussion, which featured as panellists Mr. Karthigasu, the Kuala Lumpur organizer; Latif Dori, Secretary, Committee for Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue, Tel Aviv; Sonja Karkar, President, Women for Palestine, Sydney, Australia; and Din Syamsuddin, Chairman of Muhammadiyah, an Indonesian Islamic organization.

Mr. KARTHIGASU said the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affected foreign policy, diplomatic relations and international trade for many countries, even those as far away as Malaysia, where civil society was often spearheaded by radical non-governmental organizations. Asian civil society must work on specific issues and identify specific causes in order to have categorized yet collective efforts. Its efforts must range from creating awareness of the refugees’ right of return to focusing on the humanitarian plight of the citizens of Gaza and the construction of the separation wall, among other things. There must also be information campaigns to counter Israel’s military links with Asian countries. Malaysian non-governmental organizations tended to focus on general issues of peace. If they would take on issues one at a time, their efforts could have a greater impact.

He said the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was used as a pretext for both State and conventional terrorism. The conflict had resulted in further violence in the region and elsewhere, and the situation had evolved to a stage where Governments were constantly on their toes, ensuring that the world remained in a state of paranoia and high tension. The conflict was not a religious war, since Jews and Muslims had lived peacefully with each other for centuries. The myth that the conflict was purely one between faiths, however, had been successfully propagated by those who benefited from such thinking. Asian civil society must play an important role in eradicating that illusion.

There was a constant need for awareness and advocacy campaigns to ensure that enough pressure was exerted on Governments to take constructive action on the international stage, he said. The recent attempts by certain members of the United Nations to invoke resolution 377 (1950) — “Uniting for Peace” — in relation to the invasion was a good example of civil society-Government cooperation. Given that the United Nations had always made use of civil society organizations in tackling global issues, there was a need to maintain and further maximize the potential of that partnership.

Mr. DORI said civil society organizations could fulfil a very important role in confronting the occupation, adding that combining civil society forces in the Asia-Pacific region to that end should be a high priority. There was a need for a comprehensive and dynamic plan of action to organize and mobilize international efforts. The Committee for Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue was launching several international campaigns, including one for an end to the occupation, which would feature demonstrations, marches, hunger strikes, press conferences and more. It was also launching international campaigns in support of Palestinian prisoners and of Palestinian women, among other things.

He said those and other campaigns would culminate in a giant demonstration in Jerusalem, which would attract tens of thousands from all over the world to express their identification with the struggle of the Palestinian people and the Israeli peace forces. The activities of the Israeli peace movements encountered numerous difficulties, however, especially since the election of the new right wing Government. They needed to be included more fully in international activities. “The dove flies with both its wings,” in the world of an Arab proverb. Similarly, the joint struggle would cause the dove of peace to fly with both Israeli and Palestinian wings, arriving at the two Jerusalems: Jewish western Jerusalem, capital of the Israeli State, and Arab eastern Jerusalem, capital of the Palestinian State.

Ms. KARKAR said the Palestinian struggle against Israel’s occupation, ethnic cleansing and institutionalized apartheid over 61 years was the defining struggle of the twenty-first century. The savagery of Israel’s recent attacks on Gaza had

brought about a seismic shift in the way people thought about the question of Palestine. The ripple effect was reaching the four corners of the globe, including Australia. Nevertheless, a number of challenges impeded that country's solidarity work for the Palestinian people. Melbourne had the world's largest post-Holocaust Jewish population after Israel, and Zionist organizations played a significant role in legitimizing the illegal occupation at the highest governmental and business levels. Australia's support for Israel went back to its creation in 1948, and the country had increasingly aligned itself with United States foreign policies.

It was against that background that Palestine solidarity groups had to do battle, she said, noting that a reframing of the Palestine advocacy agenda in Australia had helped to provide a much more effective voice. Israel's attack on Jenin in 2002 had been the catalyst for that change, which had first come from women in Melbourne, who had staged weekly public vigils in the city centre. Other volunteer groups had begun forming and their work had done much to help raise the profile of the question of Palestine. Unfortunately, Australia still had no single national solidarity movement. Concentrated international pressure was the only way to break Israel's stranglehold on the Palestinians. Israel must hurt economically and politically, and the most effective way to make that happen was to undertake global campaigns of boycott, divestment and sanctions.

Under the banner of the "Australian Coalition Against Apartheid Israel" (ACAAI), several solidarity groups had come together and launched several boycott campaigns, she said. The global campaigns currently running against corporations were extensive and their effects were beginning to show. Consumer boycotts of Israeli goods in the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries, for instance, had led to a 21 per cent drop in demand for Israeli products. In other campaigns, a mock wall was erected in Melbourne every November, in solidarity with the global "Stop the Wall" campaign, to remind people of the most easily recognized edifice of Israel's apartheid, racist ideology. Israel was working hard to make a two-State solution impossible, and the campaigns must focus on exposing Israel's apartheid regime as the most prolonged colonial enterprise of modern times. In the event of any compromise two-State solution being implemented, there was a moral duty to expose the restrictions that would prevent full Palestinian sovereignty.

Mr. SYAMSUDDIN said Indonesian concern about the Palestinian cause stemmed from an Islamic motive, but also from the constitution, which opposed all kinds of colonialism. Many Islamic movements had been consolidated into one organization, the Indonesia-Palestine Friendship Initiative. Other motivations for local non-governmental organizations included a perception of the conflict as a territorial dispute or a problem of injustice. Non-governmental organizations were also putting pressure on politicians and the Government to take concrete, hard measures based on the constitution. The Government was listening.

What was needed were campaigns and advocacy activities to create awareness in order to mainstream the question of Palestine as an issue of peace, he said. Mainstreaming peace and emphasizing the importance of a two-State solution was a realistic way to encourage the Government and all movements for solidarity with the Palestinians to follow that "middle way". A global coalition or movement of strategic coalitions for solidarity with the Palestinians should be launched to encourage the new Administration in the United States to implement President Obama's very good speeches.

Representatives of the following non-governmental organizations and civil society groups participated in the ensuing discussions: Indonesia Committee of Religions for Peace; Indonesia-Palestine Friendship Initiative; Junior Diplomatic Course, Foreign Ministry of Indonesia; Australians for Palestine; Australian Friends of Palestine Association; and the All India Indo-Arab Friendship Association.

Closing Remarks

The Committee Chairman said participants had learned about the work of Palestinian and Israeli friends and their respective organizations in supporting a two-State solution and bridging the divide between the two peoples. Hopefully the Forum had helped to broaden their base further and their advocacy efforts at the local, national and regional levels would lead to concerted efforts at the international level.

He said the Committee would continue to work with civil society organizations towards a two-State solution, the only feasible way towards a settlement of the conflict. Civil society organizations working closely with the Committee had come together in the framework of the International Coordinating Network on Palestine (ICNP) and other umbrella organizations.

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