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Addis Ababa, ETHIOPIA P. O. Box 3243 Telephone 002511-115 517 700 Cables: OAU, Addis Ababa
website : www.africa-union.org

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**REPORT ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
AND PALESTINE**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. A series of important developments and events had taken place in the region since the last Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Banjul, The Gambia, in June 2006. Amongst these, were the continuous illegal detention of Jericho Prisoners, the kidnapping and the subsequent imprisonment of a number of Palestinian Ministers and Members of the Legislative Council, the Israeli military escalation and the vicious cycle of violence against Palestinians, the massive Israeli offensive which culminated in the massacre of Palestinians in the town of Beit Hanoun, the continued construction of the segregation wall, expansion of settlements and the Israeli measures to judaize the nature of the holy city of "Al-Quds", the persistent deterioration of the Palestinian economic situation, the humanitarian disaster and its impact on the socio-economic, and political situation all over the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

2. Beside these events and other developments in the region, there is the bid to form a Government of National Unity in Palestine, and the fragile truce between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian factions.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

a) The continuous illegal detention of Jericho Prisoners and Palestinian Ministers and Members of the Legislative Council

3. The Israeli Government continues to illegally detain 22 Palestinian ministers and members of the Legislative Council, without any trial or charges against them. This detention is a grave violation of the International Humanitarian Law and an obvious obstacle to the ongoing efforts at resuming the peace process in the region. Moreover, Israel has ignored all demands from the Palestinian Authority and from the International Community to release all the Palestinian detainees, especially Ahmad Sa'adat, elected member of the Legislative Council and Secretary General of PFLP, who was kidnapped from the Jericho prison in mid 2005.

4. On its part, the Palestinian Leadership has called upon the international Community through the United Nations Security Council to ensure an international protection for the Palestinian people who are being subjected to an Israeli genocidal war and massive aggression in violation of all principles of human rights; the right to freedom and self determination.

5. The Palestinian Authority and the International Community have strongly condemned the continued Israeli illegal arrests and detention of more than 9500 Palestinians, in particular the latest detention of Ministers and Members of Parliament, and called for the release of the detainees.

b) The Israeli military escalation and the vicious cycle of violence against Palestinians

6. In spite of the withdrawal of its redeployment of forces and evacuation of settlers from Gaza, Israel continues to effectively control Gaza, frustrating the Palestinian Authority's efforts to govern and thus exacerbating the humanitarian crisis which is worsening by the day.

7. In yet another concerted display of its military control, Israel has since June 2006 intensified its offensive against Gaza, using indiscriminate and disproportionate measures intended to terrorize Gaza's population, which amounts to grave breaches of agreements reached between the parties and war crimes.

8. Since last July up until 28 November, Israel waged a massive military offensive against the Palestinian Territories, especially in the Gaza Strip, leaving more than 400 civilians dead and more than 1,000 injured. Amongst other acts of aggression, widespread destruction of public and private property, the Israeli military carried out many attacks, including air raids by F 16s and helicopters, arrested 112 Palestinians; demolished Palestinian-owned houses; launched several attacks on Palestinian public and private property, the vast majority of which property served civilian purposes. These incidents also included the destruction of three main bridges, dividing Gaza into three isolated units, and the damaging of government institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Islamic University buildings.

9. Moreover, during this period, the Israeli army destroyed the substation of the only power plant in Gaza, which provides electricity for 60 per cent of the population. As a result, the supply of electricity to 1.4 million Gazans was badly disrupted. The shortage of electricity also impeded the capacity of hospitals to provide services and has paralyzed water supply and water management facilities, as well as other public service institutions. It will take months and millions of dollars to repair the power plant and restore electricity supply, although presently, maintenance work is partially going on in some areas.

10. In addition to attacking civilians and civilian infrastructure, Israel on many occasions closed the Rafah Crossing Points, stranding thousands of Palestinians on the Egyptian side of the border, amongst whom, seven died while waiting for days with no shelter and inadequate water. Although eventually, Israel did agree to reopen the border for limited movement over four and a half days in order to let the thousands of Palestinians return home. Thereafter, the Rafah crossing, the only point of entry/exit to and from Gaza, has remained closed, trapping Gaza's 1.4 million Palestinians in the city.

11. The Israeli F-16 combat aircrafts have also repeatedly broken the sound barrier, breaking the windows of civilian houses and causing untold psychological damage to the civilian population, a large number of whom are under 15 years of age.

12. At least 5,000 Palestinians from the Ashoka, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahia areas were displaced by Israel's recent military activities in Gaza. The Israeli army has also for a while, maintained a free fire zone in a 9.5 km² strip of northern Gaza, threatening to fire upon anyone found within the area.

13. Furthermore, Israel has continued its policies of fragmenting the Palestinian territories, through the construction of the Annexation Wall, the construction and expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank, the isolation of East Jerusalem, among other detrimental measures that will undermine the prospects of peace and pre-empt the outcome of any possible final status negotiations. The latest wave of Israeli military assaults against the Gaza Strip in recent months, has claimed the lives of around 400 Palestinians and is a clear aggression against the Palestinians.

14. At the political level, Israel's policy of unilateralism has come to epitomize the failures of Israel's overall policy towards the Palestinians, where a negotiated solution on the basis of existing legal foundations is the only viable option; most notably Israel's withdrawal to the June 1967 boundaries, in accordance with UN Resolution 242.

15. The International Community has continued to condemn all these crimes committed by the Israeli army against Palestinian civilians across the northern Gaza Strip and West Bank, in which at least 4570 people have been killed during the last six years of the Intifada, and left more than 30800 Palestinians injured with 3530 permanently disabled.

c) The massive Israeli offensive and massacre of Palestinians in the town of Beit Hanoun

16. In Beit Hanoun, the northern Gaza district, the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) waged a six-day aggression and an offensive incursion, as part of an IOF operation named "Autumn Clouds." The number of victim's amounted to 60 men, women and children killed, 16 of them members of the same family, and at least 260 wounded of whom more than forty were in critical condition and most of them unarmed civilians. The attack further resulted to score of detainees, after imposing a strict curfew on the city. The Israeli occupation forces imposed a complete and hermetic closure of the town, causing the already bad living conditions to further deteriorate owing to cutting off the basic services, such as electricity, water supplies and the destruction of basic infrastructure.

17. The International Community condemned this brutal offensive aggression and the Israeli artillery attack on Beit Hanoun at a time when their commanders knew, or should have known, that the risk of civilian deaths far outweighed any definite military advantage.

18. Also of particular significance, was the Foreign Ministers of Arab Nations' decision in their emergency meeting on November 13 in Cairo, to break the aid embargo on the Palestinian people immediately. They expressed their strong resentment of the USA veto in the United Nations Security Council against the Arab motion condemning the Israeli deadly artillery attacks against Beit Hanun, which was considered as a message of encouragement for Israel to continue its aggressions against the Palestinians. They further called for a peace conference to be attended by Arab parties, Israel and the Permanent Members State of the UN Security Council in order to reach a full and equitable solution for the Arab- Israeli conflict. They also called for an International probe on the Beit Hanoun Massacre and the Israeli violations against the Palestinian civilians in the occupied Palestinian territories as well as to dispatch international troops to protect the Palestinian people. Furthermore, the Human Right Council was called upon

to urgently convene a meeting to discuss the Israeli violations against the Palestinians, which later condemned the attack and its consequences.

19. The United Nations General Assembly, in its emergency special session on **"Illegal Israeli Actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the Rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory"** overwhelmingly passed a resolution that calls for a United Nations fact-finding mission to the Middle East to examine recent Israeli attacks at Beit Hanoun. The majority of countries, including all the members of the European Union, voted in favour of the measure. However, the US and Israel were amongst the seven nations that opposed the resolution. The draft introduced in the Assembly condemned the killings and demanded "the immediate cessation of military incursions and all acts of violence, terror, provocation, incitement and destruction between the Israeli and Palestinian sides, including extrajudicial executions, bombardment against Palestinian civilian areas, air raids and firing of rockets." This comes after the adoption by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council of a resolution that also condemned the killings and dispatched a fact-finding mission to the region.

20. On its part, the AU issued a Press Communiqué of condemnation on the dastardly attack by the Israeli Forces on Beit Hanoun. It also called upon the Government of Israel to immediately cease all such acts of aggression and the members of the Quartet to prevail upon the Parties to return to the negotiating table so as to facilitate the implementation of the Road Map Plan for national sovereign independence of the Palestinian people.

d) The persistent deterioration of the Palestinian Economic Situation and the Humanitarian Disaster in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

21. The economic strangulation of Gaza has been the catalyst for the deteriorating political and unstable security situation in Palestine. Inevitably, social bonds have grown weak and fragile, even torn apart, due to the fact that over half of the population is presently unemployed and more than three-quarters are living in poverty.

22. Furthermore, the Palestinian economic crisis has worsened due to the continuous closure policies that the Israeli occupation authority perpetrates against Palestinians. Israel has severely restricted the movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza even after its "disengagement", thus crippling the Gazan economy and, hence, the Palestinian Authority's ability to generate tax revenues, and the customs revenues belonging to the Palestinian Authority (PA) withheld by the Israeli government, which accounts for 60 per cent of the PA's tax revenues. Additionally, no Palestinian workers have been allowed to move through trade crossing points since 12 March 2006. The Karni crossing, the principal goods terminal, has remained closed since 15 August 2006 for all consignments, including humanitarian aid. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has reported that the shortages of food, fuel and construction supplies are jeopardizing every element of their operations in the Gaza Strip. The Municipality of Gaza urgently requires 30 truckloads of pipes to improve the sewage system.

23. With regard to the fishing industry, it has been paralyzed by the complete ban imposed by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) on fishing grounds off the Gaza Strip for over 50 days. The General Syndicate of Marine Fishers requested the assistance of the international community to support the needs of the fishermen and their families. There

are almost 5,000 licensed fishermen in the Gaza Strip, most of whom support sizeable families.

24. While the blockade on the transfer of humanitarian and financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority continues, the economic situation keeps worsening day by day. In fact, Palestinian Government had not received their salaries for the past eight months. All these aggressive practices and brutal policies have left the people in a much more vulnerable situation where the population of the poor has reached 75% and the unemployment rate is over 50%.

25. Israel claims that the humanitarian and economic disaster befalling Gaza has a single, reversible cause namely: the capture by Palestinian fighters of an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, in late June, from a perimeter artillery position that had been shelling Gaza. In fact, Israel has always found reasons for oppressing, destroying and killing in Gaza, whatever the circumstances.

e) The bid to form a National Unity Government

26. With regard to the possible formation of a national unity government, the Palestinian Leadership reiterated the need to form such a government to protect and reinforce national unity as well as the national Palestinian aspirations. It is also by no means certain that it would help lift the economic boycott that was imposed on the Palestinian Authority earlier this year after Hamas was elected to power. In that regard, Fatah and Hamas, the two major parties, have already agreed largely on the ministries that each side will head.

27. By the time, President Abbas met with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Jericho at the end of November, Fatah officials expressed their doubt over the possibility of a national unity government ever coming to fruition. Additionally, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyyeh had echoed similar concerns, stating that national unity talks had reached an impasse in their "last stage." Haniyyeh, who wrapped up the first round of his Arab and Islamic tour, acknowledged that certain obstacles and difficulties stood in the way of finalizing a national unity government, but the Premier emphasized that talks will continue.

28. Palestinian internal political conflicts have led to a most disturbing security situation in the territories. The already precarious equilibriums existing there have been worsened over the last months by inter-Palestinian confrontations. The conclusion of a ceasefire has created conditions that can enable dialogue aimed at closing Palestinian ranks, safeguarding national unity and ending the internal confrontations.

29. It is against this backdrop that Palestinians detained in Israeli prisons prepared the paper on national understanding between Palestinian factions which enabled them to agree on conditions to form a government of national unity that is supposed to lift the economic, financial and political blockade. But it took the representatives of "Hamas" and "Fatah" several months to decide on the national government platform and the distribution of ministerial portfolios. Up to now, there has been no final agreement between the two parties. Accordingly, Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, to bring the crisis to an end, has voiced plans to call early presidential and legislative elections, although the various Palestinian factions are not unanimous about such a prospect.

f) The Truce between Israel and Palestinian factions

30. However, an encouraging development in the region, is the fact that Israel reached a truce agreement on 28th November with the Palestinian Authority. This recent development is bound to arouse hope. The agreement on a truce in the Gaza Strip could generate a new atmosphere in the relations with Palestinians and both parties must not let this rare window of opportunity pass by without positive action.

31. The truce will be able to take hold only if it applies to both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Every military operation in the West Bank is liable to affect the truce and as such invite a possible response from Palestinian factions, and vice versa. Therefore, the IOF's predawn operation in Qabatiyah on 4 December, after the truce in Gaza took effect - an operation that resulted in the deaths of a Popular Resistance Committee's operative and a 55-year-old woman - was harmful and unnecessary. Consequently, if both Parties want to give the cease-fire a chance they must apply maximum restraint. Any violation of this truce will not serve the efforts to consolidate the cease-fire.

g) New initiatives to revive the peace process

32. A number of initiatives were taken during the last months of the past year to promote the peace process which has been completely paralyzed by the escalation of incessant Israeli hostilities against Palestinians and the continuing economic and financial blockade imposed on the Palestinian Government.

33. After the massacres at Beit Hanoun, the American veto against a draft resolution of the United Nations Security Council and the blockage of the peace process, the Council of the League of Arab States, at Ministerial level, decided to organize a Peace Conference that would bring together the Arab parties, Israel and permanent Member States of the Security Council to seek a fair, global solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, in accordance with relevant international resolutions as well as the principle of "land for peace".

34. With a view to the organization of the Conference, an Arab Ministerial delegation composed of the incumbent Presidency of the Council of the Arab League, the Arab member of the Security Council and the Secretary General, was formed to initiate consultations and make the necessary contacts with the various international stakeholders, particularly members of the Quartet and Permanent Member States of the Security Council in order to pursue efforts to revive the peace process.

35. Spain, France and Italy announced plans to launch a new peace initiative aimed at bringing about a ceasefire between Israel and Palestine in order to reach a overall peace solution between the two parties. This came as the violence escalated to a height requiring urgent action by the international community. The initiative is hinged on the following points:

- Observance of an immediate ceasefire between the two parties;
- Formation of a government of national unity recognized by the international community;
- Exchange of Palestinian prisoners of war against the liberation of the three Israeli soldiers, two of whom were captured by Hezbollah and are in Lebanon, while the other one captured by Palestinians is in Gaza;

- Call for the convening of an International Conference aimed at initiating negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel;
- Deployment of international observer forces in the Gaza Strip.

36. Israel rejected the aforementioned Arab and European initiatives, but the Israeli Prime Minister took everyone by surprise when he announced ideas that were somewhat equivocal, transcending some aspects of the conflict. He called for the establishment of a geographically unified Palestinian State within the framework of direct negotiations with a government of national unity, and accordingly, the recognition of Israel, the approval of agreements signed by the Palestinian National Authority and the end of the acts of violence.

The Situation in Lebanon

37. In reaction to recurrent Israeli acts of aggression against Southern Lebanon and the Israeli persistent occupation of Lebanese farms in Shebaa, the Lebanese Hezbollah, on 12 July 2006, carried out an operation along the Southern border with Lebanon. The operation caused the deaths of eight Israeli soldiers, while two were captured and brought to Lebanese territory by the Hezbollah combatants who hoped to exchange them against Lebanese prisoners of war detained in Israeli prisons.

38. The incursion provoked a large scale Israeli military offensive against Lebanon, which lasted more than a month. Israeli military aircraft carried out an intensive bombardment of towns and villages in the South of Lebanon, in the southern outskirts of Beirut and the Bekaa region. Whole quarters were destroyed, while hundreds of persons, mostly women and children, were martyred and thousands of others were wounded, besides a great number of victims who were buried in the rubble. The Israeli invasion was an untold humanitarian and environmental disaster for Lebanon.

39. The Israeli forces further systematically destroyed Lebanese infrastructure. Israeli military aircraft bombarded Beirut airport, the port, roads and bridges, isolating Lebanese regions from each other as well as from the rest of the world, and making it almost impossible to bring in humanitarian aid and relief supplies. Moreover, Israel rejected appeals for a humanitarian truce to enable drugs and provisions to be brought to the needy.

40. To worsen the situation, some parties exerted pressure to stop the United Nations Security Council from adopting a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire. The resolution was finally adopted only after more than a month of Israeli military operations. By resolution 1701, the Security Council called for the total cessation of all hostilities by both the Hezbollah and Israel. It equally called on the Lebanese Government and the UNIFIL to jointly deploy their forces in the south. The Council further urged the Israeli Government to withdraw all its forces from South Lebanon once the UN and Lebanese forces start deploying in the area.

41. The gap has only widened among Lebanese political forces in respect of the application of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, of the departure of Syrian forces from Lebanon and the dismantling of militia, of the demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border in the Shebaa farms occupied by Israel as well as the

withdrawal of Shiite Ministers from the Government before the ratification of the agreement on the establishment of the international tribunal.

42. Against this backdrop of escalation, the Hezbollah and its allies called for the formation of a government of national unity, the organization of early elections and even incessant protests in the streets until the government satisfied these demands.

Recommendations

43. This report may be concluded with the following recommendations:

- Lend support to the Palestinian people and renew solidarity with them in their legitimate struggle, rejecting Israeli's *fait accompli* policy in the occupied Palestinian territories. Highlight the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and the establishment of its own independent State with AlQuds as the capital. Demand the immediate cessation of the construction of the separation wall and of settlements which are a flagrant violation of the rights of Palestinians;
- Condemn Israeli acts of military aggression by air, sea and land, and the detention of a number of Palestinian Ministers and members of Parliament, who should be released. Equally condemn the Beit Hanoun massacre which led to the deaths of 20 civilians, members of the same family, as well as all assassinations of civilians, be they Palestinians or Israelis;
- Take concerted action with the international community to find a solution to the financial crisis the Palestinian people are currently experiencing, while exhorting the Quartet to afford any type of subvention to the Palestinian people and not to punish them for their democratic choices;
- Make resolute efforts to create a conducive atmosphere for the resumption of peace negotiations between Palestine and Israel, especially since the two parties have been able to reach a lull marked by a ceasefire;
- Urge all international stakeholders in the Lebanese crisis to strive for internal stability in the country and to provide the Lebanese people any kind of assistance, especially in the regions most affected by the destruction caused by the Israeli army during the last Israelo-Lebanese war;
- Urge the international community to make efforts to revive the peace negotiation so as to put an end to the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights and the Shebaa farms.

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