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COUNCIL OF MINISTERS
Fifty-fifth Ordinary Session
24 - 28 February, 1992
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

CM/1695 (LV)
Original: English

REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE
QUESTION OF PALESTINE



Cm/1695

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**REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE QUESTION OF
PALESTINE**

I. INTRODUCTION

At its Fifty-fourth Ordinary Session, held in Abuja, Federal Republic of Nigeria, from 27 May to 1 June 1991, the Council of Ministers of the Organization of African Unity considered the report of the Secretary-General of the Organization on the Question of Palestine (Document CM/1665 (LIV) and adopted Resolution CM/Res. 1335 (LIV).

2. *The resolution, inter alia, strongly condemned the continuing inhuman acts perpetrated by Israel against the citizens of the occupied Palestinian and Arab territories, the mass deportations and detentions, the slaughter of women and children, the destruction of homes, the desecration of holy places and the confiscation of land and property. It condemned the expansionist policies of Israel in occupied Palestine including Jerusalem and the settlement of immigrant Jews in the occupied Arab territories.*

3. *The resolution hailed the Palestinian people's resistance to Israeli occupation, the intensification of their uprising in the face of brutal repression and the sacrifices made by the Palestinian people under the leadership of the PLO, their sole legitimate representative, with a view to recovering their inalienable rights to return to their homeland, to self-determination and to the establishment of their independent and sovereign State with Jerusalem as its capital.*

4. *The Resolution requested the Secretary-General to follow-up the developments pertaining to the Palestinian Question and submit a report thereon to the forthcoming Session of the OAU Council of Ministers.*

II. CONDITIONS IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

5. *During the period under review, living conditions in the occupied territories had deteriorated. Life under occupation was rendered more intolerable with the loss of remittances from the Palestinian workers and employees in the Gulf as a result of the Kuwait crisis. The mass influx of Soviet Jews put thousands of Palestinians out of jobs, amongst whom unemployment was already high. Stricter restrictions by Israeli authorities were imposed on*

the movements of the Palestinians. Residents of the West Bank who had permission to work in Israel were penalised for breaking their journey en route. Trucks had their loads confiscated if they, unwittingly, entered Jerusalem's extended municipal boundaries. Half-a-million Palestinians were kept under military curfew and were confined to their homes in towns and nearby refugee camps during the Madrid Peace Conference. The desecration of holy places, and sometimes destruction (albeit unintentionally?) continued as evidenced by the collapse of a wall in a mosque in Jerusalem towards the end of November 1991, which was caused by diggings under it. The Israeli authorities were said to be bent on encircling the Palestinian heart of East Jerusalem and then, breaking it up with Jewish enclaves. Ultra-orthodox Jews continually harassed Palestinians with impunity as the latter got no protection from the State apparatus.

III. PALESTINE NATIONAL COUNCIL (PNC) MEETING

6. *The PNC, the Palestinian Parliament in exile, met in its 20th Ordinary Session in Algiers, Algeria, from 23 to 28 September 1991. The Session was well attended, though the representatives of the people in the occupied Palestinian territories were refused permission by the Israeli authorities to travel.*

7. *Though predictions were aplenty that there would be a major split in the ranks of the PLO at the Session, the Council approved Palestinian participation in the planned Middle East Peace Conference. Those who favoured participation did not want the Palestinians to be sidelined completely, while those who initially advocated boycott of the Peace Conference saw no point in giving legitimacy to a process that would only benefit Israel.*

8. *The PNC's approval of the Peace Conference was, however, given on condition that:*

- *the Peace Conference be based on international legitimacy, particularly UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338;*
- *there be commitment to enforce the Security Council resolutions and ensure total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Arab and Palestinian territories including Jerusalem;*
- *Jerusalem be considered an integral part of the occupied territories and be treated as such;*
- *an end to settlements in the occupied territories and guarantees to that effect are essential before the peace talks can begin;*
- *solution be found to the Palestinian refugee question in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194.*

9. *Linking its endorsement of the Peace Conference to the above-cited conditions, the PNC hoped to achieve the following aims:*

- *the attainment of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, freedom and national independence;*
- *the total withdrawal of Israel from the Palestinian and Arab territories occupied in 1967, including Jerusalem;*
- *the resolution of the question of the Palestinian refugees, who were displaced within their homeland;*

10. *It should be noted here that Israel had always refused to countenance any PLO presence or any participation by Palestinians from East Jerusalem or the inclusion of East Jerusalem in any part of the Agenda of the Peace Conference. However, the US Secretary of State, Mr. James Baker, in a letter of clarification to Mr. Faisal Husseini, a prominent Palestinian academic, and a leader in the occupied territories stated that:*

- *the palestinians had the right to raise any issue they chose;*
- *East Jerusalem would be included in any stage of negotiations on transition to autonomy;*
- *representatives from East Jerusalem would participate in any final negotiations on the future of the city;*
- *East Jerusalem would be considered occupied territory.*

11. *Mr. Baker, had invested eight months of hard diplomacy trying to bring together the parties to the Middle East Conflict. The Arab allies, in the US-led coalition, at the time of the Gulf Crisis, were promised that Washington would make an all-out effort to bring Middle East peace. The US Administration refused to grant Israel its badly needed loan guarantees, until a later date, for housing projects. Mr. Baker, on the other hand, would not tamper with Israeli conditions for the convening of the Conference. But for the Palestinians, he had this to say in mid-October 1991: "the bus is not going to come again and the Palestinians have more to gain from this process and more to lose by its absence than anybody else."*

IV. THE PEACE CONFERENCES, MADRID 30 OCTOBER - 4 NOVEMBER 1991
WASHINGTON 4 DECEMBER

12. *In the joint letter of invitation sent to the parties of the Middle East Conflict by Presidents George Bush of the United States and Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, it was stated that the purpose of the Conference was "to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement, through direct negotiations along two tracks between Israel and the Palestinians based on United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. The objective of this process is real peace".*

13. *It was envisaged that there would be bilateral negotiations on a one-on-one basis between Israel and the Arab States most involved in the conflict namely Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Syria. There was also a scheduled two weeks of multilateral negotiations (between Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Maghreb States, as well as the main parties to Arab-Israel conflicts with the possible participation of the European Community) to cover region-wide issues such as the sharing of water resources, economic cooperation and development, arms control and the environment.*

14. *Despite its acrimonious conclusion in Madrid, the peace process is believed to be on track. Differences in positions remain yawning and no instant break-throughs are expected, in the Washington round of talks. Negotiations would for the first time address issues of substance if the procedural wrangling over the status of the Palestinians in the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation was satisfactorily resolved:*

The Arabs demanding that the Palestinians and the Jordanians should meet separately with Israel while Israel is insisting that it should meet with them together in the same room.

15. *Israel accused the Arabs of hoping to force a US-imposed solution on it and delayed its delegation's arrival in Washington as a protest against the "dictates" of the Bush Administration. Israel continues to refuse to withdraw from the occupied Arab territories and to stop settlement activities in them. In fact, Israel inaugurated a new settlement in occupied Syrian Golan Heights within days of the Madrid Conference ending. Commenting on this development, Mr. Baker said: "it is now hard for us to see how inaugurating a new settlement now can help the negotiating process".*

16. *Syria, the PLO and Lebanon oppose moving to regional issues until real progress is made with bilateral negotiations. Syria's position on the talks is that it would not sign any peace accords with Israel until the question of Palestine is definitively settled as it is not ready to abandon the Palestinian cause for a vague promise of the eventual restitution of the Golan Heights. Lebanon feels that Israel's control of part of its territory date from 1978 and is subject to a more specific UN Security Council resolution 425.*

17. *The PLO views Israel's refusal to discuss the question of withdrawing from the occupied territories as a violation of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 on which the convened conference was based. The PLO had shown willingness to discuss self-government in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip but insist that, at the very least, the Israeli occupation forces should quickly withdraw from the main towns. Israel is said to be contemplating the withdrawal but over an unacceptably long period. Be that as it may, the morale of the Palestinians, under occupation, is uplifted by the fact that, after years of neglect, the question of autonomy features high on the international agenda.*

18. *It is worthy of note, that the UN General Assembly had adopted, as the Middle East Peace talks began in Washington, resolutions advocating a UN-sponsored peace conference and condemning Israeli conduct against the Palestinians. The peace conference resolution, as yet unnumbered at the time of writing, while welcoming the talks in Madrid and Washington as "a significant step" towards comprehensive peace in the Middle East, stated that the United Nations should convene a Middle East Peace Conference, which would put the PLO on an equal footing with other delegations. The resolution further said that the attainment of the "legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people, primarily the right to self-determination" would contribute towards peace in the region.*

19. *For his part, the Secretary General of the OAU, issued a release on the occasion of the International Day Solidarity with Palestinian People. The Secretary General in his statement reiterated the OAU's unequivocal and principled support for the just cause of the Palestinian people. He stressed that the OAU's support for the Palestine Liberation Organization was steadfast and unwavering. He expressed the OAU's fervent hope and expectation that the peace process on the Middle East currently underway would take full cognizance of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and statehood and exhorted the international community to put pressure on Israel, with a view to forcing it to abandon its policies in the occupied Arab territories, that had proved detrimental to the attainment of a just and lasting peace in the region.*

V. CONCLUSION

20. *At no time did the glimmer of hope for a peace settlement in the Middle East shine brighter. Despite the conditions imposed on Palestinian participation, the parties to the conflict are talking face to face and not through intermediaries. With the international limelight on the talks, the protagonists are bound to be reasonable and engage in constructive discussions lest their side be put in the wrong by international public opinion. The international community should exert all the necessary pressure on the parties to the talks, and particularly on Israel, so that this unique historical chance for attaining a just and lasting peace in the region would not be missed.*

21. *The General Secretariat will follow events as they relate to the Question of Palestine and report to Council accordingly.*



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