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

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This report focuses on the Palestinian question with highlights on recent developments. A small part of the report is devoted to Lebanon where instability persists with attendant consequences on peace and security in the country.

THE SITUATION IN PALESTINE

1. Since the last session of the Council, the situation in Palestine has recorded mixed progress. The efforts by the international community intended to give a fresh thrust to the peace process failed to produce any appreciable progress in the situation of occupied Palestinian territories. The daily life of the population continued to worsen while the core issues which constitute the mainstay of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain unresolved. Particularly, the issue of settlements in occupied territories resurfaced, in light of recent decisions taken by the Israeli authorities immediately after the Annapolis conference, in spite of statements and commitments made by these same authorities on a settlement freeze. Furthermore, the occupied territories are prone to instability and violence caused by rivalry between Palestinian factions and continued acts of aggression by Israelis and violations of human rights in the territories.

Diplomatic initiatives and the Annapolis Conference

2. During the period under review, several diplomatic initiatives were engaged by the international community, on the one hand, and by Israeli and Palestinian leaders, on the other hand, to attempt to place the negotiations within a perspective that could take the peace process to new horizons. A series of meetings was thus held between President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, while US Secretary of State Mrs Condoleezza Rice made several visits to the region. She tried to pave the way for the two sides to exert their utmost efforts to reach an agreement ahead of the peace meetings scheduled to be held on 27 November 2007 in Annapolis, United States, on the initiative of President Bush.

3. The highlight of all these initiatives was the Conference on Peace in the Near East held in Annapolis, United States of America, on 27 November 2007 and which brought together Israelis and Palestinians along with some fifty countries, including sixteen Arab nations and representatives of international organisations. On that occasion, the two parties reached an agreement in which they agreed to “engage in continuous negotiations and to make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008”. The first session on negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, following the Annapolis Conference started in Jerusalem on 12 December 2007, in a tense atmosphere, caused by Tsahal incursion into the Gaza Strip which resulted in the death of six Palestinians, and the announcement, a week earlier, of the construction of new housing units in the Har Homa colony, near Bethlehem; which had consequently been perceived by the Palestinian party as real provocation, and that no breakthrough could be made in the peace process as long as the issue of Israeli settlements in the West Bank remains unresolved. In fact, Israel’s ever-expanding settlement in the

occupied Palestinian territory poses the single greatest threat to the establishment of an independent, viable and contiguous Palestinian state, and hence, to a just and lasting peace between Israel and Palestinians.

4. The International Community also continued to provide financial assistance to Palestine. In that connection, a Donors Conference took place on 17 December 2007 in Paris at which pledges amounting to 7.4 billion dollars were announced for the development of Palestine. Praise should be given for this act of solidarity on the part of the international community in a context of persistent worsening conditions for the population in Palestinian territories. At the same time, however, it should be underscored that the effectiveness of such support can only be measured in terms of positive developments that such a commitment by the international community would have brought in to resolve the overall issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therein lies the post-Annapolis challenge.

The Post-Annapolis Challenges

5. It unfortunately turned out that despite efforts to successfully conduct the peace process and to establish an independent and viable Palestinian State, after 15 years of on-and-off peace negotiations, socio-economic and security conditions of the Palestinian people continue to worsen. The challenges today are of a political, economic, security and human rights nature.

Political Issues

6. Following Hamas' coup in Gaza Strip, a new reality has been created in the Strip. This reality has undermined the Palestinian economical and political life.

7. Israel announced a "goodwill gesture" ahead of the US-sponsored peace meeting with the release of 86 Palestinian prisoners in November and other 429 and 250 prisoners on December respectively. But the facts on the ground reflect that this decision by the Israeli government is by no means a goodwill gesture. The release of prisoners, which received a lot of media coverage, very soon appeared as a decoy, when viewed in relation to the measures taken by Israel following the Annapolis Conference that could jeopardise negotiations at which Israeli and Palestinian leaders made commitments. In fact, Israel has arrested almost four times the number of prisoners it plans to free since the Annapolis meeting was announced on 16 July. Between 17 July and 24 November 2007, a total of 1,714 Palestinians were arrested, 1,604 in the West Bank and 110 in the Gaza Strip, including 95 children.

8. Less than one week after both Palestinian and Israeli leaders reaffirmed their commitment to fully implement their Road Map obligations at the Annapolis Conference, the Israel Land Administration (ILA) published tenders for the construction of 307 new housing units in the settlement of Har Homa (the Palestinian land of Jabal Abu Ghneim), located between Palestinian East Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This move by the Israeli government to consolidate and expand its settlement was just the latest example of

such attacks, citing Israel's ongoing campaign of killing, injuring and arresting Palestinians, whilst increasing the number of movement restrictions in the West Bank.

9. Palestinian National Authority (PNA) described the ILA's action as a major violation of Israel's obligations under the Road Map that undermines the entire political process. Palestinian Authority urged the international community and in particular The United States, as the agreed judge in this process, to take all necessary steps to reverse this latest violation, as well as any future violations of the settlement freeze, including in the areas of construction, financing, incentives, planning, land confiscations and migration of new settlers. Also, the Israeli government's determination to relocate its Jerusalem police headquarters to the occupied West Bank land on which its largest settlement is built contradicts its public declarations as a willing partner for peace. The move will slice the West Bank in two and will sever East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, preventing the territorial contiguity of any future Palestinian state, and precluding the designation of East Jerusalem as the capital of such a state. This would spell the end of a viable two-state solution.

Security issues

10. The development and expansion of the Palestinian government security forces was one of the biggest challenges that President Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian Authority faced. It is a vital national interest for Palestinians, where they face a double threat when it comes to their own security. First, they face the security threats inherent in an occupation by Israeli military and the abuses and confrontations that result in deaths of both combatants and innocents. Security forces associated with the Palestinian Authority were continuously targeted by Israel during the second Palestinian uprising. This situation required the Palestinian Authority to strengthen the government's security forces. The Prime Minister has demonstrated his committed to this requirement in his Government's Security plan by implementing the first step of the plan over Nablus City.

11. A major threshold has recently been crossed in Nablus, where the Palestinian Authority redeployed around 300 Palestinian police officers into Nablus in an effort to bring order to an increasingly lawless town. However, Israel's continued incursions into Nablus after the police deployment had the effect of seriously undermining attempts by the Palestinian Authority to establish legitimacy in its efforts to police the city. For now, this problem appears to have been ameliorated.

12. However, improvements in the security situation for both Palestinians and Israelis cannot be divorced from two other essential components of progress. First, it must be clear that the diplomatic process is leading inexorably to the establishment of a fully sovereign and viable Palestinian state. Second, security progress must be accompanied by improvements in the conditions of daily living for the Palestinian people, especially economic progress and opportunities, as well as easing of restrictions on the movements of goods and people.

Economic issues

13. With the beginning of the second Intifada in September 2000, economic conditions have started to seriously deteriorate in the Palestinian Territories. Not only did the international community reduce its amount of financial aid, but the Palestinians working in Israel also lost their jobs because it became impossible for them to cross the border with Israel. At the same time, tourism, once an important economic pillar, almost completely disappeared. According to the most recent figures of the World Bank, the GDP growth of the Palestinian Territories has declined by 23% since 1999. Around 60% of the Palestinians now live below the poverty line of \$2/day and 3 out of 5 Palestinians are unemployed. Underpinning the problems of the Palestinian Territory is its status as a non-sovereign entity. Export, customs and imports are all regulated by Israel. The Palestinian Authority (PA) cannot borrow from international markets, issue bonds or print money. Palestinian exports - most of which are low-value products - and its migrant Labour, mostly go to Israel.

14. Victory of Hamas in the parliamentary elections further worsened this economic downfall. The main funding governments imposed a strangulating economic boycott on the Palestinian Authority, completely halting all aid directly to the Authority and limiting assistance to relief efforts. The results have, no doubt been devastating on the leadership and the people alike. Since the boycott, its 160,000-strong civil servant sector has not received regular salaries for months. Unemployment levels have also been on the rise, partly because of the impoverished Palestinian economy and Israel's stringent security measures that have barred large numbers of Palestinians from seeking work inside Israel. The World Bank has estimated the unemployment rate in the West Bank and Gaza at a staggering 40 percent.

15. Furthermore, since the boycott started over year ago, the World Health Organization estimated that 270,000 Gazans rely on food aid. This number shot up to 377,000 after the Palestinian infighting earlier in June, resulting in the Hamas takeover of the Strip.

16. This dismal picture has put the Palestinians in a bind, not only politically but economically as well. So, the PNA Government backed by President Mahmoud Abbas succeeded during Paris meeting in gaining a huge financial support (7.4 Billion USD) for the Palestinian People in order to pull them back from the abyss and the threshold of poverty.

Violation of Human Rights in Palestinian Territories

17. Over the past 40 years, Israel's occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip targeted both the land and the people of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). Israel's settlements - not simply haphazard structures of concrete, steel and tarmac - and their accompanying maze of bypass roads, hundreds of checkpoints, other movement restrictions and the Annexation Wall, are ever-

increasing monuments to the dispossession and subjugation of the Palestinian people, at the expense of their fundamental rights guaranteed under international law. Supporting the physical infrastructure of the occupation is an invisible system of administrative restrictions and military dictates. Military orders serve as the arbitrary basis for land expropriation, property destruction and the exclusion of Palestinians from vast tracts of land, while a permit regime further restricts movement and stifles social, economic and cultural existence.

18. Since the beginning of the occupation, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained, thousands more killed in extrajudicial executions, and an estimated 115,000 forcibly displaced internally, while over six million Palestinians remain refugees, unable to return to their homeland. The occupation is an accumulation of 41 years of violations of international law through which Israel has advanced a policy of control, isolation and annexation of Palestinian land, and the dispossession of the Palestinian people. Ultimately, the occupation violates not only their rights as individuals, but also their most fundamental right as a people - the right to self-determination.

19. The current situation in Palestine is becoming worse than ever in terms of pervasive violence, unprecedented levels of poverty and unemployment, deteriorating standards of living, and the absence of a political horizon. The continuation of this situation will lead to an explosion.

20. A series of Israeli military attacks in the West Bank and Gaza Strip once again highlight the gap between Israel's rhetoric and the reality it is imposing on the ground. Many Palestinians were killed and hundred others wounded, including journalists, children and women, during the Israeli military invasion of the Palestinian occupied territories. Despite Israeli declarations that the number of physical movement restrictions in the West Bank would be reduced, the number of barriers actually increased from 543 in August 2007 to 572 in September 2007. This pattern is reflected in the increase in the number of movement restrictions over time, which has seen the number of barriers rise by 52% since 2005, from 376 barriers in August 2005 to the current 572.

Jerusalem and Islamic Sanctities

21. Compounded by increasing movement restrictions, Israel is consolidating the separation of Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank by imposing blanket restrictions on the movement of Palestinians to and from the Holy City. This was evidenced every Friday when Israeli soldiers prevented thousands of worshippers from reaching Jerusalem to participate in prayers. Israeli occupation authorities carried out excavations at the Magharba (Dung) Gate of the Old City, which leads to the Aqsa Mosque Compound, and the tunnel is built over a hill under the jurisdiction of the Waqf Authorities (the Islamic endowment that oversees the compound), and in which there is Islamic archeological ruins. The bridge is also being built in order to give Israeli police and army direct access to the Aqsa Compound to enable it raid the area with ease. The dirt hill, which is being torn down by Israeli authorities, is also a main supporting wall to the compound, and therefore threatens the destruction of the Aqsa's foundations.

22. Israel has dug a network of tunnels beneath Al Aqsa mosque and set up a number of synagogues and a museum. The "underlining," risks are doubled on daily basis, as long as Al Aqsa mosque is still being occupied.. There currently efforts aimed at obliterating the antique sites at Al Mughrbi gate and judiazing the area.

23. On the 24th of September 2007, the Israeli military issued an order to confiscate more than 1,100 dunums of Palestinian land in Abu Dis, Sawahreh, Nabi Mousa and al-Khan al-Ahmar in the Jerusalem Governorate for the construction of an "alternate" road for Palestinians linking Bethlehem to the eastern West Bank. The road will roughly run parallel with the southern and eastern sections of the Adumim Wall outside the Adumim "bloc". The road is part of Israel's broader plan to replace territorial contiguity with "transportational contiguity" by artificially connecting Palestinian population centers through an elaborate network of alternate roads and tunnels and creating segregated road networks - one for Palestinians and another for Israeli settlers - in the West Bank. The "Roads and Tunnels" Plan includes a series of 24 tunnels and 56 roads for Palestinians. Meanwhile, Israel continues to construct a separate highway network to link settlements (colonies) on both sides of the Wall with each other and with Israel. Such transportation networks serve to facilitate settlement expansion throughout the Israeli-occupied West Bank, while limiting any future Palestinian development.

24. PNA described this recent Israeli move as destructive to all the efforts led by the international community to revive the peace process and to realize the two-state solution by having a viable contiguous Palestinian state. Such unilateral Israeli measures demonstrate yet again Israeli intentions to consolidate and expand Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem, and effectively take Jerusalem off the negotiating table. The construction was on-going in the E-1 area to Jerusalem's east, despite repeated assurances from the Israeli government to the United States that it would not construct there. These settlement activities in and around East Jerusalem, including in E-1, indicate that the time for 'two-state solution' may soon run out.

25. The timing of this confiscation order is particularly outrageous, noting that it coincided with the meeting between Israeli and Palestinian negotiating teams working on an agreement addressing core permanent status issues following the Annapolis US-sponsored international meeting.

Gaza an "Enemy Entity"

26. In the meantime, Israel is threatening to step up its ongoing, unprecedented siege of Gaza, which will deepen its collective punishment of Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants under the pretence of its recent declaration of the Strip as an "enemy entity" - a label which has no basis in international law. The implementation of this decision will lead to various dangerous developments, among which, are five issues that will further destabilize the situation in the region: 1. Impose collective punishment (illegal under international law) on ordinary Gazans, who are already suffering the dire impacts of economic sanctions imposed in January 2006; 2. Create further lawlessness in Gaza; 3. Deepen the existing humanitarian and economic crisis in the Strip; 4. Consolidate the

complete separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, thereby precluding the outcome of any final status negotiations before they begin; and 5. Undermine the creation of a viable Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and West Bank (including East Jerusalem), transforming it instead into a series of disjointed Bantustans.

27. Furthermore, Israel retains full control of the Gaza Strip's land borders, population registry, airspace and territorial sea. These facts establish that the Gaza Strip remains an occupied territory, along with the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Accordingly, Israel, as the occupying power, is required by law to ensure the safety and well-being of the civilian population of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli security cabinet's use of the term "enemy entity," having no basis in international law, in no way alters Israel's legal obligations in respect of the Palestinian civilian population of the Gaza Strip. Rather, it represents a deliberate misinterpretation of relevant international law aimed at relinquishing Israel's legal obligations.

28. In addition to the daily Israeli military attacks, economic sanctions, political stagnation, social disintegration killing and maiming of Palestinian civilians, Israel has repeatedly decided to put the Gaza Strip in a difficult situation by reducing the provision of electricity and fuel supply and other services to Gaza Strip. This decision to limit the electricity and fuel supply to the Gaza Strip and to further restrict movement in and out of Gaza will exacerbate the existing humanitarian crisis in the Strip. In addition, the sanctions constitute a grave breach of the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law.

29. The Israeli Cabinet's claim that the proposed sanctions will not affect the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is misleading. Limiting the electricity supply will drastically reduce the functioning capacity of hospitals and health clinics. In addition, these limitations will impact all aspects of Palestinian life in the Gaza Strip, including the functioning of water pumps and essential sanitation services.

30. Israel is seeking to punish the Palestinian people in Gaza, by cutting electricity and fuel supplies, whilst the closures of crossings at Rafah and Karni into and out of Gaza are aimed at preventing the movement of people, goods and funds. Gaza is now completely sealed off from the outside world for more than eight months. The decision not to allow international humanitarian agencies to enter Gaza is further proof of the gravity of the situation. This decision and Israel's declaration that Gaza is "an enemy entity" represent a declaration of war against all Palestinian people and the collective punishment of all Gaza residents.

31. Israeli Minister Ehud Barak threatened to launch a large scale invasion of the Strip. This declaration of war against the Palestinian people on the grounds that Gaza is a 'hostile entity', aurait des conséquences particulièrement néfastes, non seulement sur le processus de paix, mais encore et surtout sur les populations civiles. Elle devrait être fermement condamnée par la communauté internationale.

Israeli prison authorities attacks on Palestinian prisoners

32. As an illustration of the Israeli continuous aggression against the Palestinian People, the Israeli prison authorities carried on a brutal attack against Palestinian prisoners in the Negev detention centre, which led to the death of Mohammed Al Ashqar (from Tulkarem) and the injury of at least 255 others, including critical injuries. During the extremely violent attack, a special unit of the Israeli military stormed the Negev Desert Israeli jail, and went on a rampage. They beat the prisoners with sticks, used tear gas, sonic bombs and ransacked the prisoners' tents. Several tents were set on fire and the prisoners' belongings were destroyed. The attack was a gross violation of the prisoners' rights. Israel currently holds more than 11,000 Palestinian prisoners, including 376 children under 18, 118 women, and at least 950 "administrative detainees" held without charge or trial. The majority of the Palestinian prisoners are political prisoners imprisoned by Israel for opposing the occupation. Prisoners are often victims of torture, and that their families cannot visit them.

33. The Palestinian National Authority called on the international community to intervene to stop the widespread imprisonment of Palestinians by Israeli authorities, the inhumane treatment they receive while imprisoned, the daily Israeli breaches of international law and for Israel to release all Palestinian prisoners.

34. That is the bleak picture which the international community faces, alongside other major challenges to be met if it intends to successfully conduct the new peace initiatives it has embarked on. It is obvious that the success of such initiatives can only be envisaged if they embrace the fundamental issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a comprehensive manner, including the issue of refugees and Jerusalem, as well as the recurrent security issues. At the same time, however, it is up to the Palestinians to demonstrate unity in the face of Israeli occupation. That is a guarantee of success in the fight for their inalienable rights, including the right to create an independent and viable Palestinian State, living side-by-side with Israel in peace. The African Union and the rest of the international community should concentrate their efforts in that direction.

II. THE SITUATION IN LEBANON

35. In my report at the last session of the Executive Council, I informed Council of the serious developments Lebanon had experienced, especially the violent clashes in May 2007 between the Lebanese Army and the "Fath Al-Islam" Jihad group in the northern part of the country. The victory of government troops over this group unfortunately failed to stem the instability in the country. During the period under review, Lebanon continued to sink into a multi-dimensional crisis. First, with regard to security, there is persistent instability, marked by a political assassination campaign that has persisted for about three years. The assassination, last December, of Brigadier General François Hajj, Director of Military Operations, along with four other soldiers, constitutes further proof of an escalation in the political violence in Lebanon.

36. Furthermore, at the political level, Lebanon has been without a President since the term of office of President Emile Lahoud ended in November 2007. A successor is

yet to be designated. At the time of drafting this report, the Lebanese Parliament had failed 11 times to meet in its attempt to elect a President and the next meeting is scheduled for 12 January 2008. Although the majority of the opposition has agreed on a compromise candidate, in the person of General Michel Suleiman, Chief of Staff of the Lebanese Armed Forces, they are however still to reach an understanding with regard to the formation of a government of national unity. In addition, the prospect – which is controversial – of amending the Constitution is envisaged to facilitate General Suleiman's election.

37. Against this backdrop of political crisis, a dramatic humanitarian situation continues to develop in that country. The numerous wars that have marked the country and compounded by Israeli-led attacks have profoundly affected the populations in their daily life and destroyed the infrastructure. The scope of the destruction entails a particularly costly reconstruction process that is estimated at nearly 3 billion dollars. Lebanese authorities have made several efforts to collect the necessary funds for the reconstruction from the international community. But the endemic instability in the country is at the root of donor reluctance to disburse the funds. This is the time to appeal to the international community to resolutely make efforts towards the reconstruction of Lebanon.

38. In conclusion, Lebanon is in an extremely fragile situation and there seems to be no immediate prospects. In the present context, the international community should redouble its efforts to lift up this country which has been stricken by many years of repeated political crisis.

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