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

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INTRODUCTION

1. The eleventh plenary session of the Executive Council, coinciding with the fortieth anniversary of the Israeli complete occupation of Palestine alongside vast areas of neighbouring Arab territories, it is to be admitted that despite the numerous peace initiatives and attempts aimed at reaching a final solution to this tragic conflict, no substantial progress has been realized in the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is worth recalling also that successive Israeli Governments systematically refused any serious negotiations with the Arab countries whose territories were occupied in 1967 until after the 1973 war.

2. It is, by the day, becoming clearer to all observers and concerned parties that more effort by the international community and regional organizations is needed to match the increasing dangers of continued Israeli occupation and aggressions, as well as the deterioration of the security situation in the Palestinian and other occupied Arab territories, characterized by continued violence, massive destruction of lives and properties threatening not just this part of the world but international peace in general.

3. Since the convening of the last AU Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 29 – 30, January 2007, the occupied Palestinian lands have witnessed a series of important developments. The agreement concluded in Mecca, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in February 2007 between the two Palestinian movements, Fatah and Hamas, the formation of a Government of National Unity, the reconfirmation of adherence to the Arab Peace Initiative by the Arab Summit in Riyadh, in March 2007, and the important decisions adopted thereat to enhance the said Initiative, all constituted hope to find a lasting solution and usher in a new era that would lead to resumption of the stalled peace process.

4. Subsequent developments have however obstructed the achievement of any tangible results in the interest of peace in the region. Israeli Government aggressions, exacerbated by siege and embargo against the Palestinian people, illegal acts of killings and abductions as well as liquidation of the Palestinian resistance leaders, especially those from the Hamas Movement, continue to be the order of the day.

5. This report relates developments recorded in Palestine during the reporting period at the political, security and socio-economic levels. It highlights initiatives taken to revive the peace process. It also briefly reviews the situation in Lebanon where worrying developments have been observed during the same period.

I. Situation in Palestine

A. POLITICAL LEVEL

6. Following His Majesty, the King of Saudi Arabia's initiative, the Saudi Government succeeded in bringing together the Palestinian factions from 6 to 8 February and facilitated the concluding of the Mecca Agreement which paved the way for a halt to the bloody internal conflict between Palestinian brothers and made possible the formation of the Government of National Unity.

7. The Agreement stipulated the composition of a Government of National Unity that would comprise all Palestinian factions, including independent elements. Arab and international decisions on the Palestinian issue shall be respected, including the Agreements concluded between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Israel. President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Liberation Organization shall be authorized to administer negotiation for peaceful settlement with Israel. Based on the Mecca Agreement, a Government of National Unity was declared on March 17th, 2007. Arab countries welcomed the formation of the Palestinian Government of National Unity and announced their full support to it.

8. The declaration of the National Unity Government was also widely welcomed by the international community and in particular by the African Union. This international recognition revived hope for the Palestinian people in lifting the embargo imposed on them for the second year. It also spread an atmosphere of optimism on the resumption of the peace talks. The Israeli Government and some countries which support its policies however, refused to recognize this Government and insisted on boycotting it while some European countries decided not to deal with the new Government Ministers from the Hamas Movement.

9. The United States of America upheld its restrictions on Palestinian banks and warned international banks against dealing with the Palestinian financial companies and banks. Thus no financial support reached the Palestinian Government leading to a deterioration of the situation in all aspects.

10. The Arab League Summit held in Riyadh on 28-29 March 2007 reaffirmed adherence to the Arab Peace Initiative, first declared at the Beirut Summit in 2002. This initiative demands Israeli withdrawal from all the Arab territories occupied in 1967, the establishment of an independent Palestinian State and resolution of the Palestinian refugees' situation on the basis of the relevant U.N. Resolutions. In return, the Arab countries would recognize Israel and normalize relations in a final and comprehensive peace agreement.

11. The Arab Summit called on the International Community to lift the embargo immediately, recognize the Government of National Unity and deal with its members without discrimination since they represent all the Palestinian political shades.

12. The Summit also constituted a Committee consisting of Foreign Ministers of eight Arab countries (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, Morocco) and the Secretary General of the Arab League, assigned the task of contacting international and regional organizations in order to clarify the Peace Initiative and make all efforts to start a serious and meaningful peace negotiation aimed at reaching a final solution based on the Arab Initiative.

13. The Ministerial Committee held its first meeting on April 18th, 2007 in Cairo and decided to hold various meetings including with the U.N. Secretary General, U.N. Security Council members, members of the Quartet, the E.U. and European Parliament, the Organization of American States, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Islamic Council and the African Union (AU), amongst others.

14. In implementation of its mandate, the Committee entrusted with the pursuance of the Arab Peace Initiative, requested Egypt and Jordan, being the two Arab countries that retrieved their lands from Israel and have diplomatic relations with it, to explain the Arab Peace Initiative to the Israelis, and deploy efforts to facilitate the beginning of negotiations between Israel and the Arab countries that have territorial claims on the lands occupied by Israel, namely Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority.

15. A delegation of the Ministerial Committee was mandated to establish individual or collective contacts with the UN Secretary General, the members of the Security Council, the Quartet, the European Union, the African Union, the Islamic Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of American States, Japan, Norway, etc., call for an International Conference to launch the process of direct negotiations on all fronts in compliance with the agreed texts and fix a time-frame for conclusion of the negotiations.

16. On the margins of the International Conference on Iraq, convened in Sharm-El-Sheikh (Egypt), on 3-4 May 2007, the Arab Ministerial Committee held a number of meetings with the Quartet and the European Troika, where the Arab side emphasized that the parties in the conflict, i.e. Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians are ready to reach a fair and acceptable settlement without delay, and that what is requested is that the International Community should work with Israel to take the necessary political decisions to reach this settlement. The Arab side equally asked for the lifting of the financial and economic embargo imposed on the Palestinian Authority, as well as full and unqualified recognition of the Palestinian Government of National Unity.

17. The Foreign Ministers of Egypt and Jordan, assigned the task of contacting the Israeli Government to explain the Arab Peace Initiative, in their capacity as representatives of the League of Arab States, met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel, on 10 May 2007, in Cairo. Briefing was provided on the contents of the Arab Peace Initiative.

18. On the same occasion the American Secretary of State, Ms. Condoleezza Rice made several trips to the region where she met President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Her attempts at starting any meaningful

negotiations despite the agreement by both sides to hold regular bilateral meetings did not bear fruit.

19. Several meetings between President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert were held with no tangible results. The meetings failed to agree even on reducing the Israeli military checkpoints between areas in the West Bank or opening permanently, the international passage posts, in particular Carnie and Rafah passage posts, thereby perpetuating the siege of the Palestinians.

20. The Israeli Government rejected the Arab Initiative even before studying it and concerned itself once more with putting conditions to modify the Initiative's principles, in particular those related with the Palestinian refugee issue.

21. The extent of weakness of the current Israeli Government and its lack of political vision to enable it make any political decision regarding the current situation, in particular since the last war against Lebanon, became apparent. On the other hand, the report of the Special Committee investigating the Israeli army's failed mission in that war made matters worse and the Government even weaker. The conclusions of the said report forced the Israeli Prime Minister to look for means to strengthen his Government's position and instead of making the wise decision of going back to the negotiation table to seize the opportunity the Arab Initiative presented, military escalation against the Palestinian people was resorted to. Air strikes in Gaza along with heavy artillery attacks, as well as surface and marine missiles under the pretext of stopping Palestinian rockets launched from Gaza Strip added to the tension and made matters worse.

B. SECURITY LEVEL

22. Israeli arrests of Palestinian civilians continued on a daily basis and several Palestinian Cabinet Ministers and elected Legislative Council Members remained under illegal captivity. The Israeli detention campaign reached its height in the dawn of May 24th, 2007, when 33 Palestinian political activists were arrested, among them, the Education Minister, Mr. Nasser Al-Shaar, the Head of Nables Local Council, in addition to 3 elected Legislative Council Members.

23. The tireless efforts to free the Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the Israeli soldier captured in Gaza have so far been fruitless. It is regrettable that some international powers express their concern about the plight of the Israeli soldier whereas the suffering of more than 10,000 Palestinian prisoners, some of them, having been in captivity for more than 10 years, is ignored.

24. The building and expanding of settlements, by Israel, in the West Bank has continued unabated and the decision by the Israeli Government to construct 20,000 housing units in Jerusalem and its surroundings is in total disregard of the agreement with the American Administration to remove settlements built after 28th March 2003 and also in contradiction with the Quartet's demands.

25. Israel also continues its disregard of the Hague International Court's ruling on the separation wall and its stubborn defiance of the UN General Assembly Resolution that called for the immediate cessation of the construction of the separation wall and the removal of the parts of the wall that were already built. Instead, Israel continues the construction of the wall, confiscating for that purpose vast areas of privately owned farmlands, isolating tens of thousands of Palestinian farmers from their fields and completely isolating the city of Qalqilya from its surroundings making it a huge prison.

26. The Israeli occupation forces continue their violent aggression in all parts of the West Bank refusing the truce the Palestinian Authority accepted in Gaza strip and ignoring all calls to extend the truce to the West Bank and occupied Jerusalem. The continued Israeli attacks resulted in the killing of 80 Palestinian civilians since the formation of the Government of National Unity, in addition to hundreds of wounded and the demolition of a big number of factories and workshops in Gaza Strip.

27. The Israeli aggression provoked Palestinian responses in launching locally made rockets against areas surrounding Gaza Strip. The occupation forces reacted with excessive force - starting on May 17th, several air strikes using fighter jets and helicopters in addition to heavy artillery and missiles were launched from land surface and warships against densely populated areas in Gaza city, resulting in a new massacre committed against the residence of Legislative Council Member, Mr. Khalil Hayya, where 8 civilians were killed and more than 20 wounded. The Israeli attacks were not limited to those suspected of launching rockets but expanded to target houses of innocent civilians, shops and food stores on May 23rd.

28. The Israeli authorities continued hampering efforts made by the Palestinian Authority for the maintenance of sewage systems and waste water collection sites in northern Gaza Strip in complete disregard of the dire environmental and health consequences. In effect, a sewage collection site collapsed on the night of 28th March and sewage water flooded a nomads' village causing the death of 5 villagers, the complete destruction of 250 houses, while 120 more houses were partially damaged. The sewage water polluted a vast agricultural area causing a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe.

29. On the security level also, it is to be reported that factional fighting broke out in Gaza early this year resulting in more than 450 Palestinian casualties and huge economic losses. That fighting was contained only after active Saudi Government intervention in February, which resulted in the signing of the Mecca Agreement and the formation of the Government of National Unity.

C. ECONOMIC LEVEL

30. Reports by several international agencies have repeatedly warned against the negative consequences of the continued deterioration of the financial situation in the Palestinian occupied territories. The World Bank Report, in May 2007, linked this deterioration directly to the Israeli siege and warned against the reduction of investments in the private sector.

31. The occupation authority continued its policy of withholding Palestinian tax revenues estimated at US\$55m monthly, which constitute two thirds of the Palestinian national income. Meetings between the two sides failed to solve this problem and thus the Government budget deficit worsened. The Palestinian Authority failed to pay salaries of its employees, especially in the education sector which witnessed frequent strikes, with serious repercussions on the education system while depriving Palestinian students from education for prolonged periods.

32. On the one hand, the economic embargo continued, particularly that imposed on the Palestinian banks weakening the Palestinian Authority, while on the other, the financial support from donor countries, especially from Arab countries, increased three-folds during last year. The latter was handed over as direct financial assistance, rather than productive assistance, to the poorest sectors of the Palestinian society.

33. The continued confiscation by Israel of Palestinian tax revenues also caused social and economic setbacks both in the public and private sectors.

34. The Israeli restriction on Palestinian export and the closing of international passage points continued, resulting in huge economic losses and the accumulation of agricultural and industrial products. In many instances, resultant effects included massive retrenchments and the closure of many factories and workshops.

35. Israel refuses the mere talk about Gaza airport rehabilitation or the building of the seaport thereby denying all possibility of creating new job opportunities in these two vital economic sectors.

36. High levels of unemployment reaching 58% of the workforce in Gaza Strip and a little less in the West Bank have been recorded. 60% of the Palestinian population in Gaza is below the poverty line - the impact of this situation is obvious, leading scores of youth toward deviation and despair. The demand on emigration also increased, reaching 45,000 applications for the first time. While these statistics may be alarming, they fall squarely in line with the Israeli Government policy of emptying the occupied territories by all means, in contravention of the Fourth Chapter of the Geneva Convention and its Additional Protocol Number One, on the duty of the occupation power to protect the civilian population.

II. Situation in Lebanon

37. During the reporting period, the situation in Lebanon recorded worrying developments which once more placed the country already plagued with many tragic incidents at the forefront of current events.

38. Following last year's Lebano-Israeli war, of which Council was duly informed, and international pressure for the full implementation of Security Council Resolution No. 1559, tension heightened between the Government and the Opposition in Lebanon, leading to the withdrawal of Opposition Ministers from the Government.

39. The Opposition stepped up pressure on the Government, demanding its dissolution and the formation of a new Government of national unity. It then called on its followers to take to the streets, and to organize strikes and demonstrations to achieve what it called “total national reconciliation”.

40. The Government in turn called on its sympathizers to take to the streets to lend support to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora’s position. The crisis worsened to the extent that the League of Arab States had to intervene to reconcile the two parties.

41. Accompanied by the Representative of the incumbent Chair of the Arab Summit (Sudan), the Secretary General of the League went to Lebanon to try, together with the Government and the Opposition to broker a solution acceptable to both parties who, unfortunately were unable to overcome their differences.

42. Thereafter, the Government and its members of Parliament, who form the majority in Parliament called for the latter to be convened to adopt a motion requesting the Security Council to set up an international tribunal to investigate the assassination of the Former Prime Minister Rafik El-Hariri. The Speaker of the Parliament, Mr. Nabih Berry, in solidarity with the Opposition, rejected this request.

43. The crisis once more deepened. Some opposition parties, notably Christian, called for the holding of fresh legislative elections, which would be followed by presidential elections. Accordingly, instead of returning to the negotiating table and resuming dialogue, each party started accusing the other of violating Lebanon’s sovereignty and trying to draft the Lebanese people into another civil war.

44. After the failure of efforts by the Prime Minister and his supporters to convene the Lebanese Parliament, Mr. Fouad Siniora wrote to the Security Council requesting it to set up an international tribunal responsible for investigating the assassination of Rafik El-Hariri, pursuant to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

45. Reacting to this request, the Security Council, on 30 May 2007, adopted Resolution 1757 imposing the establishment of a Tribunal of international scope to try those responsible for the assassination of Mr. Rafik Hariri and for the attempts that have been causing bloodshed in Lebanon since October 2004.

46. It is against this backdrop that the situation registered serious incidents on 20 May 2007, when violent clashes broke out between the Lebanese army and a Jihad group known as “Fath Al-Islam” in the North Lebanese town of Tripoli. The Lebanese army retaliated forcefully and was able to eliminate the terrorist elements who had taken up positions in several areas of the city. The clashes then spread to the “Nahr Al-Bared” Palestinian refugee camp where dozens of Fath Al-Islam elements had been trained.

47. All the Lebanese parties rejected any form of aggression against the Lebanese army and called for the aggressor, whoever he is, to be punished. Government supporters demanded the total annihilation of this terrorist group so that the phenomenon can be completely wiped out.

48. The army used several armoured vehicles and heavy weapons to circle the Nahr Al-Bared camp which is home to 45000 Palestinian refugees. The Bombardment of the camp by the army resulted in numerous casualties among the refugees and led to electricity and water cuts.

49. Several voices were then raised demanding the protection of the refugees found within the camp. PLO representatives and the Lebanese Prime Minister met several times, and their efforts led to a ceasefire between the two parties and enabled Red Cross vehicles to be admitted into the camp to deliver water and foodstuff to the inhabitants.

50. The Government asked the Palestinian Movements to settle this issue by wiping out the Fath Al-Islam from the camp. Since this demand could not be executed, the bombardments resumed for sometime and then ceased again. Taking advantage of this calm spell, about 15000 people were able to leave the camp.

51. In June, the fighting spread to the Ain Al-Heloue refugee camp in South Lebanon where violent clashes pitted the Lebanese army and Fatah combatants against militia of the Jound Al Cham Chad group.

CONCLUSION

52. Some 40 years after the Israeli occupation of Arab territories, Israel still shows an obvious will to remain in the said territories. The so-called pull-out from Gaza was just an illusion, considering the arts of violence perpetrated almost daily in this and other areas of Palestine, whose populations continue to suffer the torments of the Israeli occupation. Certainly, the revival of the Arab Peace Initiative gave a glimmer of hope, but one party cannot bring about peace, and insofar as Israel does not show any commitment to peace through direct and fair negotiations, any hope for lasting peace in the region will remain fiction.

53. It is therefore important for the international community to exert the necessary pressure on Israel so that it can finally embark on the peace process.

54. The developments in Lebanon reflect the fragile situation in the country which harbours many Palestinian refugees. The acts of violence recorded in the refugee camps are a reminder of the risks inherent in the pressure of armed units who want to take advantage of the refugee camps to perpetrate terrorist acts that are highly prejudicial to the refugees themselves, who are living under rather deplorable conditions.

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