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PA17506

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
Twenty-Ninth Ordinary Session
10 – 15 July 2016
Kigali, RWANDA

EX.CL/961(XXIX)
Original: French

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

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. This report covers the period from January to July 2016. It reaffirms the solidarity of the African Union with the rights of the Palestinian people and Arab States within the framework of the Afro-Arab partnership and through the support for the main issue facing the Arab world in line with the values of freedom, justice and the human concepts that Africa is attached to. It stands shoulder to shoulder, in international forums, with all those who support the rights of Palestinian and work to ensure that Palestine recovers its right to exist as a key State in the region, given its influence on the history of humanity and celestial religions, as well as its territories occupied by Israel since 1967. Africa reaffirms the absolute right of Palestinians to establish a Palestinian state on all Palestinian territories with Al Quds (East Jerusalem) as its capital within the framework of the two-state solution as stipulated by the Arab Peace Plan and the relevant decisions of the African Union. The African Union also supports the immediate withdrawal of Israel from the Syrian Golan Heights and from South Lebanon, as well as an end to the blockade and isolation of the Gaza Strip from the rest of the Palestinian territories.

2. During the period under review not much progress was achieved in respect of the Israeli-Palestinian question due to Israeli intransigence and the imposition of a policy of *fait accompli* which led to deadlock in peace talks despite persistent international calls which could not deter Israel from expanding the settlements or encourage it to return to the negotiating table. Worse still, Israeli oppression against defenceless Palestinians increased in intensity characterized by the cold blooded assassination of innocent people, demolition of houses, uprooting of trees and confiscation of farm lands. This situation has resulted in growing frustration and portends to a new Intifada by the Palestinian people and a return to the situation of violence and counter-violence, especially after the major events that shook the region which relegated the Palestinian question to the background in the Arab world. All the aforementioned practices represent a real threat to peace and security in the region and undermine regional and international peace efforts as well as the spirit of the Arab Peace Initiative.

3. Through this report, the AU expresses its support for a peaceful solution and calls for the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the intensification of international and regional efforts to rapidly find a peaceful, just and durable solution, based on the two-state solution and in line with the relevant decisions of the African Union and the Security Council. Such an outcome would definitely contribute to efforts to find solutions in the Arab region plagued by political unrest and ideological conflicts which have plunged the region into violence and paved the way for the emergence of extremist movements in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, threatening regional peace and security. A viable solution to the Palestinian question is one of the factors that can contribute to the resolution of the issues facing the Arab world in general and reduce tension and frustration in the region.

II. Occupied Al Quds (Jerusalem)

4. In recent decades, Israel has attempted to complete its settlement plan in order to have total control of the city of Al Quds. It has been pursuing this objective through the extension of the so-called boundaries of Al-Quds to the east and the north, the annexation of Ma'ale Adumim, home to about 20,000 people, as the main settlement in the East in addition to small military settlements such as "Antot, Mishor, Adumim, Kadar, KFAT Benjamin" in the east and Kakhav Jacob KFAT Ziaev, KFAT Hdasha, KFAT Hardar in the north, resulting simultaneously in the doubling of the number of settlers and the reduction in the Palestinian Arab population to 220 000, which represents a third of the population of Al Quds, including the annexed part which has a population of 380 000. It would be recalled that the number of settlers in Al-Quds is equal to the number of settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip which is 180 000. Also, the number of settlements in Al-Quds is 29, including 14 in the annexed part of the city, also known as the boundaries of East Al-Quds (East Jerusalem). The settlements are spread over the Al-Quds district in the form dense settlements surrounding the city and its suburbs. It must also be noted that the boundary of the West Al Quds West has been formally extended due to the seizure of 72 square kilometres of land through various decisions and the limiting of the urban expansion of Palestinian areas in Al-Quds and the transformation of the areas into Jewish settlements as in the case of Abu Ghneim.

5. In spite of all the warnings and international resolutions, Israel continues to change the boundaries of the city and to protect the Jewish groups and extremist settlers in their attacks against Islamic and Christian holy places in the city, causing a lot of friction and violence whose victims are always unarmed Palestinian Muslims and Christians.

III. Israeli-Palestinian talks

6. Since the Madrid Peace Conference which established a framework for the peace process between the Palestinians and Israelis, several rounds of negotiations have taken place but have not yielded any significant results. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains deadlocked on several key issues concerning the demarcation of borders, the status of Jerusalem and the return of refugees in particular. The issues of the settlements and the status of Jerusalem, a city holy to the three monotheistic religions, are the most important pending issues.

7. Apart from the disputes between the parties in the negotiations, the parties also face their own internal conflicts. In the ranks of the Palestinians, Hamas maintains a hard-line position contrary to the Palestinian Authority, whose position is largely described as moderate. On its part, Hamas does not attach much importance to the resumption of negotiations, describing them as waste of time. According to observers, the two sides must resolve their internal conflicts if they want to achieve fruitful results in

the negotiations. Egypt, in particular, has been using its good offices in order to bring Fatah and Hamas, the two Palestinian rivals, together.

8. During the last three years, the Middle East region has witnessed major political and strategic turmoil due to the effects of popular protests and violent upheavals which have altered the scale of political priorities under the current situation.

IV. International efforts

9. International efforts and pressure are continuing in order to achieve breakthrough among the parties and revive the peace process. It is in furtherance of this objective that the US Vice President Joe Biden visited Israel and the Palestinian territories on March 8, 2016, and during which he reaffirmed the two-state solution. The visit which was part of the regional consultations on the Syrian situation did not lead to any new initiative due to the lack of political will among the two parties on the outstanding issues under the peace process.

10. The Fifth Extraordinary Islamic Summit dedicated to the Palestinian cause concluded its deliberations on March 7, 2016, in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, by supporting the call by the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for the organization of an International Peace Conference in order to bring an end to the Israeli occupation. The decision of the summit reaffirmed the central role of Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in taking all necessary measures to guarantee the protection of Palestinians, safeguard the sacredness of the city of Al-Quds and its status, especially the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The decision also stressed the commitment of the Member States to defend the holy Aqsa Mosque against any action that could affect its sacredness and reiterates the exclusive right of Muslims to the land and outlying areas around the site of the mosque.

11. The Summit also called for further efforts at the UN Security Council so as to compel the body to fulfil its obligations under the Charter and assume its legal and moral responsibilities vis-à-vis illegal acts committed by the Israeli occupation authorities.

12. The summit also adopted a decision which called on its Member States and the international community to prohibit the access of goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements to their markets and to take measures against individuals and entities who are involved in or benefit from the promotion of the occupation and settlements system. Also, it recommended that the leaders of the settlements should be included in the list of terrorists wanted by the ICT. The decision called on all the Member States of the Organization to support the Palestinian cause and Al Quds in all international forums, including at the United Nations Security Council and Human Rights Council, and to urge the said organizations to fulfil their obligations and provide the necessary support and assistance to Palestinians in their bid to be part of the International Institutions and Treaties, including full membership of the United Nations.

13. The Islamic World Conference, held in Istanbul, Turkey on April 15, 2016, for its part, stressed the centrality of the Palestinian cause and the city of Al Quds (Jerusalem) to the Islamic nation and renewed its support for the right of the Palestinian people to regain their inalienable national rights, including the right to self-determination and the creation of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state in the Palestinian territories occupied since June 1967, with Al Quds as its capital. It also stressed the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes under international law and UN Resolution 194, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 11 December 1948.

14. The Conference reaffirmed the need to convene, at the earliest opportunity, an international peace conference in order to establish mechanisms capable of providing international protection to the Palestinian people and ending the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories since June 1967, including Al-Quds, in pursuance of the relevant Resolutions of the UN Security Council (242 and 338) and the Arab Peace Initiative.

15. It called for continued efforts aimed at securing UN Security Council Resolution to end the Israeli occupation within a specific timeframe, and also reiterated its full support for the efforts of the State of Palestine to join international treaties and organizations with a view to strengthening the legal capacity of the State of Palestine at the international level.

16. The Conference commended the efforts of the Al-Quds Committee to protect Islamic and Christian holy places in Jerusalem and to cope with the measures taken by the Israeli occupation authorities to ensure the judaization of the Holy City. To this end, it hailed the role played by the Beit Mal Al-Quds Al-Sharif Agency, an organ of the Al-Quds Committee, for completing development projects and activities for the benefit of the inhabitants of the Holy City and for its support to the inhabitants in their resistance. It further called on Member States to increase their assistance to the Agency to enable it to continue with its work.

V. Palestinian detainees:

17. Approximately 6,500 prisoners, including 20 women and 230 minors, are languishing in over 22 Israeli prisons and jails under difficult and harsh conditions. More than 1,000 of the prisoners suffer from various diseases. 180 of them suffer from chronic and serious diseases such as cancer, paralysis, heart disease and consequently require permanent care.

18. Regarded as one of the biggest prisons in Israeli, the Ofer prison has an inmate population of 800. It is however overcrowded and the inmates lack basic necessities such as blankets and clothing due to the large number of new inmates daily thrown into jail by the occupation authorities. Also, the installation of jamming devices in the premises adversely affects the health of the inmates.

19. The inmates who embark on hunger strike after exhausting all other forms of protest, are subjected to forced-feeding which is a form of torture and violation of human rights. Just like feeding amidst threats and the use of force, physical restraint, isolation, or cruel and inhuman and degrading treatments are meted out to inmates who chose to embark on peaceful hunger strike. These practices used in Israeli detention centres are considered a clear violation of all international and humanitarian conventions.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations:

20. The African Union reaffirms its unwavering support for the cause of the Palestinian people as affirmed by Resolutions 242 and 338 of the Security Council and Resolution 194 of the United Nations General Assembly relating to the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent state within the June 4, 1967 borders with Al Quds (Jerusalem) as its capital.

21. The African Union calls on the Palestinian Authority and Israel to resume without delay the peace talks in order to end the conflict through the creation of two states living side by side in accordance with international law, the Arab Peace Initiative and the recommendations of the international Quartet.

22. To this end, the African Union urges Israel to take all necessary measures to create a favourable environment for the resumption of peace talks, especially through permanent halt to settlements and the dismantling of unauthorized buildings on lands belonging to Palestinians. Also, the African Union condemns the systematic policy of oppression used by the Israeli authorities against the Palestinian people due to their rejection of the occupation of their territory and their demand for freedom and independence. It calls for the release of the thousands of Palestinian prisoners languishing in overcrowded Israeli jails under inhuman conditions in which neither the sick, women nor children are spared.

23. The African Union demands an end to provocations caused or encouraged by the Israeli government regarding restrictions and barriers to religious freedom, particularly the access of worshippers to the AL-Aqsa Mosque and other places of religious worship.

24. It condemns the deliberate policy of Israeli aimed at altering the civilizational and religious character of the Old City of Al Quds (Jerusalem) and its status as the historic capital of Palestine through an all-out judaization policy backed with punitive and vexatious measures against the Palestinians who have, since time immemorial, been owners of their homes.

25. The African Union fully supports the convening of an international peace conference to establish a mechanism for the protection of the Palestinian people, to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and to decide on the creation of an independent Palestinian state within the borders of June 4, 1967, with Al Quds (Jerusalem) as its

capital, in line with the relevant Security Council resolutions, the Arab Peace Plan and the recommendation of the International Quartet.

26. The African Union reiterates its full support for the steps taken by the Palestinian Authority to have State of Palestine admitted as full member of the United Nations.

2016

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