

AFRICAN UNION

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

REPORT ON DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND PALESTINE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Fifth Session of the Executive Council, held in July 2004, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia had reviewed developments in the Middle East and Palestine and noted the continued stalemate in the quest for a peaceful, lasting and acceptable solution to the conflict in the region.

2. At the conclusion of its deliberations, the Executive Council adopted Decision EX.CL/Dec.157 (V) which **inter alia** reaffirmed Council's commitment to a vision of two states, living side-by-side in peace and security; reiterated support for all previous initiatives aimed at attaining a just and comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East and Palestine; it also expressed concern on the Government of Israel's non-compliance with the demand by the 10th Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly to stop the construction of the "security wall" and settlement activities; and called upon AU Member States, members of the Committee of 10 on Palestine, to convene a meeting in the margins of the 59th Session of the UN General Assembly, in September 2004, in collaboration with other regional and international organizations, in order to examine and exchange views on the situation in the Middle East and Palestine, with a view to revive the peace process.

II. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE REGION

3. Since the acceptance by the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel of the Quartet Peace Plan, which was in effect a Performance-Based Road Map to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the conflict, little progress had been attained in the quest for an acceptable solution, owing basically to the lack of progress in the negotiations on the final settlement outstanding issues, such as the borders, the return of the Palestinian refugees, the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the future of Jerusalem.

4. Meantime, the vicious cycle of violence on both sides and suicide bombings, attributed to extremist Palestinian groups, has continued to obstruct all peace initiatives in the region. The Government of Israel in response, has amongst others, continued to exert excessive and disproportionate force in retaliation for suicide bombings; arrests/detentions of Palestinian militants in violation of international humanitarian law; blockage of Palestinian cities and villages; demolition of Palestinian homes; the destruction of properties and agricultural lands and infrastructure; continued settlement activities; and the construction of the "Security Wall" in disregard of the ICJs Advisory opinion in July 2004 calling for the dismantling of the wall, all of which, has caused untold suffering to the Palestinian people and has had a negative impact on their socio-economic well-being.

5. However, since the last Session of the Executive Council, the international community, at the level of the African Union, the UN and Arab Countries has continued to deploy all efforts in order to secure the disengagement of the Parties, so as to pave the way for a return to peace negotiations and the implementation of the Roadmap.

6. At the level of the AU and in implementation of Decision EX.CL/Dec.157 (V), the African Group in New York, in collaboration with the League of Arab States and other Organization convened a meeting at the AU observer Mission Conference Room in New York in September 2004, in order to deliberate on developments in the Middle East and Palestine and to pursue the peace process. However, owing to a lack of quorum, the meeting was postponed.

7. Furthermore, at the level of the 59th Session of the UNGA Fourth Committee, adopted a series of resolutions in furtherance of the programmes and activities on Palestine and the ongoing process for peace in the region.

8. On its part, in spite of opposition by members of the Knesset and some sections of the Israeli population, the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, successfully sought approval in October 2004, for his plan to withdraw Israeli settlement from the Gaza Strip and Northern West Bank.

III. THE DEATH OF PRESIDENT YASSER ARAFAT AND PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND PALESTINE CONFLICT

9. The death of President Yasser Arafat, which occurred on 11 November 2004, raised questions as to what prospects it holds for the future. It also gave rise to new initiatives taken by the USA and Great Britain to revive the peace process. The question is whether the death of the Palestinian leader will create a new order that could foster the advancement of negotiations for the peaceful resolution of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. An appropriate answer can only be provided if the fundamental issues that constitute an impediment to the process are addressed and adequate solutions are found.

ISSUES

10. Currently, the main issues considered as major obstacles to the resumption of negotiations in the peace process are at two levels. Firstly, the construction of the “Security Barrier” (Wall) by the Government of Israel, intended to protect Israelis and forestall terrorist activities, which has been widely criticized by the International Community and rejected by the ICJ in its advisory opinion. The Palestinians have rejected the construction of the wall, which is seen as an “Apartheid Wall”, intended to create “bantustans”. It is not only socio-economically damaging, in terms of the relocation of rich farmlands, water wells and Palestinian townships and population, but also restrictive of movements of Palestinians, separation of families and access to hospitals from isolated villages.

11. Secondly, with the Roadmap for peace stalled in late 2003, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had unilaterally announced in February 2004, a “Disengagement Plan” that will basically allow for the withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza strip and four settlements in the northern West Bank between March 2005 to the end of the year. The Palestine National Authority has outrightly rejected the Plan as a “serious violation of the Roadmap” peace blueprint, an attempt to destroy the peace process, and re-affirmed its commitment to the two-state solution.

12. On its part, the International Community shares a vision of a free, peaceful and a democratic broader Middle East, which includes a just and peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict, based on two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security. Furthermore, the forthcoming elections are seen as an opportune moment to make progress towards lasting peace; and the election of a new President will be the first step in creating lasting democratic political institutions through which a free Palestinian people will elect local and national leaders. Additionally, the International Community has pledged to mobilize resources to help revive the Palestinian economy, build up Palestinian security institutions and reform the Palestinian political system and in consonance with the Roadmap, lay the foundation for progress in the peace process and that will subsequently, lead to the final status negotiations.

13. On its part, the African Union has remained consistent in its traditional position in expressing support and solidarity with the Palestinian people and its condemnation of Israeli policies of oppression and, over the period, adopted relevant decisions in pursuance of the peace process and in the implementation of the Roadmap. The AU has been formally invited to the forthcoming elections on 09 January 2005 in Palestine, for a successor to President Yasser Arafat, and an Observer Team has been composed to participate in the elections. The AU is hopeful that with the election of a new leadership for Palestine, further pressure will be brought to bear on the Government of Israel to accelerate the process leading to the final status negotiations for Palestine.

IV. CONCLUSION

14. It is evident that for peace and security to prevail in the Middle East and Palestine, the Quartet Road Map still presents the most viable formula for an acceptable and lasting solution to the conflict. The International Community should therefore assist and convince the parties to move forward towards the implementation of the Roadmap, which has been agreed upon by the Parties, and still remains the only Plan for peace in the Region.

15. Furthermore, although the Government of Israel has already declined participation at the forthcoming proposed Middle East Conference in London, early 2005, that latter, and other new initiatives will nonetheless present

suitable fora for the exchange of views on the pending issues, relating to the return of refugees and Palestinian sovereignty.

16. At the level of the African Union, its support and solidarity with the Palestinian people remains steadfast for a peaceful and lasting solution based on all resolutions/decisions adopted over the years, pertinent UN resolutions, international law and the recognition of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people for self-determination and the attainment of the sovereign independent State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

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