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COMMITTEE ON THE EXERCISE OF THE INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 244th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Thursday, 8 April 1999, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. KA (Senegal)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.50 a.m.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

1. The agenda was adopted.

2. The CHAIRMAN welcomed Ms. Telma Abascal, the recently appointed Chief of the Division for Palestinian Rights of the Secretariat, and assured her of the Committee's full cooperation in the discharge of her new responsibilities.

REPORT BY THE CHAIRMAN ON THE BETHLEHEM 2000 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, ROME, 18 AND 19 FEBRUARY 1999

3. The CHAIRMAN said that the Committee had convened the Conference, which had been held at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), with the objective of mobilizing the widest possible international support for the Bethlehem 2000 project of the Palestinian Authority and for the celebration of the new millennium in Bethlehem in a global vision of peace and reconciliation. The Conference had been an important milestone in the Committee's efforts in that regard, which had begun at the Conference in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, held in February 1998 in Brussels, at which President Arafat had called for international support for the initiative by the Palestinian Authority. Subsequently, upon the request of the Committee, the General Assembly had included the item "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of its fifty-third session and had adopted resolution 53/27 on the issue.

4. The Bethlehem 2000 Conference had been attended by eminent personalities and public and private bodies from around the world. Its success had been reflected in the large number of participants, the high quality of the statements, the seriousness of the deliberations, and the broad interest on the part of the Italian and international media. Representatives of 93 Governments, seven United Nations bodies and agencies, three intergovernmental organizations, and 71 non-governmental organizations had participated in the Conference. The Committee had been represented by Mr. Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla (Cuba) and Mr. Ravan Farhâdi (Afghanistan), Vice-Chairmen; Mr. George Saliba (Malta), Rapporteur; Ms. Mahawa Bangoura Camara (Guinea); Mr. Nasser Al-Kidwa (Palestine); and himself as Chairman of the Committee and head of the delegation.

5. At the Conference statements had been made by eminent political and religious personalities, including Mr. Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Lamberto Dini, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy, Mr. Jacques Baudin, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Senegal, His Eminence Roger Cardinal Etchegaray, President of the Holy See committee for the celebration of the year 2000, Sir Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs of the United Nations, Mr. Azeddine Laraki, Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and Mr. Francesco Rutelli, Mayor of Rome. Mr. Rino Serri, Senator and Deputy

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Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy, had made the closing speech at the Conference.

6. One session of the Conference had been specifically devoted to the role of parliaments in the Bethlehem 2000 project. He expressed appreciation for the efforts made by Mr. Miguel Angel Martínez, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Council, to mobilize the members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and particularly the European parliaments and the parliaments of the Mediterranean region with a view to the celebration of the new millennium in Bethlehem. The input made into the session by the Presidents of the Italian Senate and Chamber of Deputies, as well as the speakers of the Bangladeshi and Egyptian parliaments, should also be noted.

7. In the Rome Declaration on Bethlehem 2000, the Conference participants had welcomed the unanimous adoption of resolution 53/27 as a clear reflection of the world community's strong desire to bring an era of dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation to the people of Bethlehem and the entire Middle East. They had also noted the important work done by the Palestinian Authority on the various aspects of the Bethlehem 2000 project and emphasized the urgency of making concrete improvements in the situation on the ground in the city and in its vicinity. In that respect, they had noted that freedom of movement and unhindered access to the Holy Places in Bethlehem by the faithful of all religions and nationalities were essential to the city's revival. The participants had expressed their appreciation to the international donor community for its funding and other assistance in support of the Bethlehem 2000 project.

8. Mr. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, President of Italy, had received the Chairman of the Committee and the members of the delegation and had assured them that Italy would make every effort to bring the peace process back on track. His Holiness Pope John Paul II had also received the delegation, and had encouraged the Committee to continue its endeavours so that the celebrations in Bethlehem would be held in a spirit of peace, tolerance and reconciliation among all the peoples on earth. In addition, the Committee delegation had had an exchange of views with representatives of the coordinating committees of the non-governmental organizations present in Rome and had discussed with them the changes to be made in the programme of cooperation with non-governmental organizations.

9. He thanked the Government of Italy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the assistance they had provided, and expressed appreciation to the Permanent Mission of Italy and the FAO secretariat, particularly its Director-General, for their support for the Conference. In accordance with established practice, the report of the Conference would be issued as a publication of the Division for Palestinian Rights. A summary would be included in the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session. The text of the Rome Declaration had also been posted on the Internet.

10. Mr. FRANCESE (Italy) said that the Bethlehem 2000 Conference had helped establish the basis so that the Bethlehem celebrations and the beginning of the second millennium would be an opportunity for dialogue and would also serve to promote economic cooperation among the peoples of the region, with the assistance of the international community.

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11. Italy's prompt response to the Committee's initiative and to the choice of Rome as the venue of the Conference had been reaffirmed by the positive attitude of President Scalfaro, and of Mr. Lamberto Dini, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Cerri, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Violante, President of the Chamber of Deputies, and other dignitaries who had attended the event. His Government had been particularly pleased to work with the Conference, since its objectives were related to the jubilee celebrations in Rome for the year 2000. Italy's contribution to the master plan of the Bethlehem 2000 project and the commitments it had made at the Brussels Conference to support projects for road infrastructure and the preservation of cultural property should also be noted. His Government expressed appreciation to the Committee and to Mr. Al-Kidwa, Observer for Palestine, for their work in support of the Bethlehem 2000 project, and to President Arafat and the Palestinian authorities for their admirable commitment to the success of the Conference.

12. His Government viewed with concern the scarce progress achieved over the past few years in the Middle East peace process and felt that all the sides should make a firm commitment to reach an agreement based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978). Italy and the European Union would continue to extend their support to the peace process. It was to be hoped that at the meeting to be held soon in Stuttgart, progress would be achieved in respect of the European Union initiatives with regard to the southern shores of the Mediterranean, which would afford new opportunities for the economic and social progress of the Palestinian people.

AFRICAN MEETING IN SUPPORT OF THE INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE, WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA, 20-22 APRIL 1999

13. Mr. AL-KIDWA (Observer for Palestine) expressed appreciation to the Government of Namibia for having agreed to hold the next meeting in Windhoek. The Bethlehem 2000 Conference had achieved positive results and would undoubtedly contribute to the success of the celebrations of the new millennium.

14. The CHAIRMAN said that if there was no objection, he would take it that the Committee adopted the provisional agenda for the African Meeting in Support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to be held at Windhoek (Namibia) from 20 to 22 April 1999, as contained in working paper No. 2 of the Committee.

15. It was so decided.

16. The CHAIRMAN announced that the Committee delegation to the African meeting would consist of Mr. Ravan Farhâdi (Afghanistan), Vice-Chairman; Mr. George Saliba (Malta), Rapporteur; Mr. Nasser Al-Kidwa (Palestine); and himself.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS AND THE SITUATION IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY, INCLUDING JERUSALEM

17. Mr. AL-KIDWA (Observer for Palestine) recalled that on 4 May 1999 the five-year transitional period agreed upon by Israel and Palestine would come to an end. Unfortunately, Israel's attitude made it impossible to reach a final

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settlement before that date. It was therefore necessary to consider what action the Palestinian side could or should take on that date. Some had advised that the Palestinian side should undertake no action with legal and political ramifications, since that would destroy the peace process, provide the Israeli Government with a pretext for taking extreme counter-measures, and have a negative impact on the Israeli elections. However, that would mean that the Palestinians would surrender the realization of their rights indefinitely to Israel's will. Moreover, at the end of the transitional period, the mandates of the existing Palestinian institutions would also expire, leaving a legal and political vacuum with unpredictable results. Others advocated that any action should be postponed until after the Israeli elections, but that would not avoid the vacuum already mentioned. Moreover, the current Israeli Government did not seem willing to extend the existing agreements until the new Government was ready to negotiate. It was therefore quite clear that the Palestinians had to take legal and political action to prepare for the new stage, prevent any legal and political vacuum after the end of the transitional period, and achieve the establishment of a broadly recognized Palestinian State within a specific time-frame. That action would have to be accepted by the international community, however, and in that regard, there was a need to rectify the false impression that Palestine was threatening to take unilateral action to opt out of the peace process. The action that would be taken after the transitional period would not be inconsistent with the provisions of the agreements signed between Israel and Palestine or of international law, while the threatened Israeli response would be a violation of the essence of the peace process. There was wide international recognition of Palestine, as had been demonstrated by the statement by the heads of State and Government of the European Union made on 25 March 1999 (A/54/76), in which they reaffirmed their support for the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, including the option of a State, appealed to the parties to strive for a solution, and declared their readiness to consider the recognition of a Palestinian State in due course. Palestine was holding consultations at the highest level with friendly countries and with the United Nations so that the National Council could take action with full knowledge of what was entailed.

18. With regard to the possible convening of a conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to consider the application of the Convention in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem, he said that on 9 March 1999 the Permanent Representative of Switzerland had sent a letter to all the missions to the United Nations requesting clarification on the modalities of the conference, the convening of which was recommended in resolution ES-10/6, of 9 February 1999. The matter had been considered by the Coordinating Bureau of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, which had instructed its Chairman to respond to the letter and communicate to the Government of Switzerland the collective view of the member States; he had done that on 6 April 1999. Palestine thanked those States for their support, as well as the members of the Arab Group, which had taken an identical position. It was to be hoped that the Swiss Government would be able to overcome the last obstacles to the convening of the conference, as had been agreed at the United Nations Office at Geneva, on 15 July 1999. Moreover, it would be useful for States Members to respond separately to the letter from Switzerland, so as to join the collective position.

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19. After four months, the General Assembly's request to the Secretary-General to use the term "the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem" instead of other designations such as "West Bank and Gaza" had still not been implemented in the Secretariat. Palestine would send a letter to the Secretary-General to request him to intervene personally in that respect. That was a matter of great importance which should be a question of principle: the Secretariat could not ignore direct instructions from Member States.

20. The CHAIRMAN stressed the appeal made by the Observer for Palestine. The international community had always supported the Palestinian people at difficult times and would do so now as well.

OTHER MATTERS

21. Mr. YEL'CHENKO (Ukraine) informed the Committee of the recent visit to Ukraine of Mr. Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority, during which he had been received by the President of Ukraine, Mr. Kuchma. The meeting had been very fruitful; the expansion of commercial ties between Ukraine and Palestine, and various aspects of the Middle East peace process and of international security in the region, had been considered. Ukraine had confirmed its continuing support to the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and sovereignty. The President of Ukraine believed that that goal could be achieved if both sides to the peace process fully met their obligations and commitments. His delegation expressed satisfaction at the level of cooperation between it and the delegation of Palestine in the United Nations.

22. The CHAIRMAN informed delegations that the Government of Egypt had agreed to host in Cairo a meeting devoted to the Fourth Geneva Convention which the Committee would be organizing in June. In the context of that event, the members of the bureau of the Committee would visit Gaza or Ramallah for a meeting with Mr. Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority.

The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.