

Statement by Mr. Ammar Hijazi, First Secretary, Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations at the Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting of the Seventeen Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-17), New York, Tuesday 24 2009

(Please check against delivery)

Madam Chair,

Agriculture is a vital sector of the Palestinian economy and a way of life that generations of Palestinian farmers have enjoyed. But like other peoples around the world, Palestinians share many of the challenges developing nations face. Compounding these challenges however, is the unique Palestinian reality of being one brutalized and exploited by a foreign military occupation. In fact, agriculture is an area where Palestinians face tremendous hardships because of this unique and oppressive reality. Every day, and every season, is almost an insurmountable challenge for Palestinian farmers, who struggle to access their lands and resources while being deprived of all control over import and export, movement of agriculture goods, and points of entry.

Allow me here to shed some light onto the tragic reality Palestinian farmers face on daily basis. Since the year 2000, the bulldozers and tanks of the occupation army uprooted and destroyed hundreds of thousands olive trees in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including Occupied East Jerusalem. Concurrent with this destructive behavior, the occupation authorities also confiscated 560 thousand dunams of olive groves, threatening one of Palestine's most important agricultural products. In the same period as well, the systematic actions and policies of the occupation have ensured that the Palestinian agriculture sector regresses beyond repair in some areas; like razing fruit trees to near extinction in some areas and destroying the irrigation systems and water pipes produce depend on.

Burin Village in the northern West Bank is a prime example. It has been subjected to a sharp increase in violent attacks from illegal Israeli settlers for the past decade. The Burin Village Council reports settler attacks between 1995 and 2008 have cost Burin 10,500 trees; either burned, cut, or uprooted by illegal settlers in the past 13 years. According to a report by OCHA last December, armed illegal Israeli settlers attacked Burin six times, setting ablaze several village fields and damaging over 20,000 olive trees, which constitute the only source of income for most farmers in Burin.

Across the West Bank, Palestinian farmers are stripped of their land unlawfully by the occupation; with their lush fields turned into military roads and bases. Already, the Occupying Power uses 40% of the West Bank for Israeli-only infrastructure, depriving Palestinians from the West Bank's most fertile land and water resources. In fact, at least 230 square kilometers of the West Bank's most fertile land – constituting some 15 percent of the West Bank's agricultural land - has already been confiscated by the Israeli occupation authorities.

It is a devastating blow to the lives and livelihoods of these farmers that often turns them from active partners in the economy into dependants on aid. In other cases, Palestinian farmers are banned from entering their land and tending to their crops except twice a year and for a limited number of days; Once to plant, the other to harvest. Consequently, their yields diminish every season and the effort and suffering they endure becomes economically unfeasible. In many cases, these farmers abandon their way of life and become part of the largely unemployed workforce, vying for any low-paying job to make ends meet.

In Gaza, agriculture, like all other sectors of the economy, has been decimated by the illegal hermetic siege imposed by the Occupying Power; with the criminal war between December 2008 and January 2009 dealing the sector a final blow. Thirteen thousand families in Gaza depend on farming, herding and fishing for income. Almost all of them have suffered damage to their assets during the recent conflict, with many of their farms, once full of blooming crops, turned into arid land strewn with debris and unexploded ordnates.

According to the UNDP, much of the agricultural infrastructure has been shattered, threatening the food security of Gaza residents. The military operation resulted in widespread razing of cultivated lands and greenhouses. Most recent estimates say Israeli attacks during the last war has destroyed 18 percent of planted fields, 8% of livestock and poultry farms, 13 percent of groundwater wells, as well as irrigation networks and other productive agricultural assets.

The FAO reports some three thousand Gazans who rely on fishing for a living have suffered damages to their equipment and buildings, at an estimated cost of USD 1.52 million. At least 78 boats have been damaged or completely destroyed, as well as nets, engines and cold storage facilities. The Gaza Fishermen Syndicate reports that since the cease-fire, three fishermen have been injured by Israeli fire. This situation only adds to the already grave situation of the fishing industry in Gaza. Earlier reports by OCHA had already indicated a 98% decline in the Gaza Strip's fishing catch between March 2008 and March 2007.

This wanton destruction wrought on Gaza has worsened an already alarming food production and income generation situation in Gaza. Already suffering from the devastating of almost two years of complete closure, with farmers banned from exporting their goods to outside markets, incomes and living standards of this vital sector have plummeted. Additionally, because of this situation, people in Gaza are facing an acute shortage of nutritious, locally-produced and affordable food, with meat and animal protein in short supply.

To put these facts, figures and grim realities in focus, Palestinian farmers are forced into thirst, poverty, and the brink of hunger – as the unlawful practices of the Occupying Power continues to deprive of them of their livelihoods and punish them for their way of life.

Finally Madam Chair,

The international community has a collective responsibility to protect the right to development of all peoples, especially the most vulnerable like my people who live under occupation. During these difficult times in the world economy, we have all come to realize that development and international cooperation is in our shared interest. Hence, the protection of vulnerable peoples like the Palestinian People must be an urgent global objective superseding all political considerations. That is why the CSD must not tolerate ambiguity in this regard; as time is of the essence and we must not shy away from addressing the special needs of peoples living under occupation out of fear of being accused of politicization. Such an accusation is a weak attempt to protect those who stand in the way of development and who have made fortunes at the expense of an occupied peoples' right to development. Like all other peoples, peoples under occupation also deserve to life of dignity and hope so they can charge forward and be active partners in achieving the Millennium development Goals.

Thank you Madam Chair,