

Statement by Mr. Ammar Hijazi, First Secretary, Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations at the Opening Session of the Sixteenth Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-16), New York , Monday 5 May 2008

Allow me to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to share a few ideas that we believe are of utmost relevance to our important discussion today.

Peoples, like mine, face the unenviable challenge of being under occupation, where they are deprived of control over their resources, commercial activity, land, and other activities vital to economic development. This also directly impacts the Palestinian people's ability to overcome challenges in areas like agriculture, rural development, land development, and the growing threat of desertification. Today, we are asking this august assembly to ensure that peoples like the Palestinian People are not abandoned in facing these challenges.

The lack of control over land, natural resources, and movement means that most sectors of the Palestinian economy can and are hardly hit by punitive and illegal restrictions imposed by the Occupying Power.

Mr. Chairman,

An important factor contributing to the diminishing water resources and illegally confiscated Palestinian agricultural land is the regime of checkpoints, walls, roadblocks, and illegal settlements that form the cornerstones of the occupation. To maintain this colonial regime, Palestinians are banned from access to water, land, and other natural resources while their towns and valleys are turned into dumping grounds for untreated chemical and other hazardous waste. In fact, Israel, the Occupying Power, has restricted the use of 40% of the infrastructure in the West Bank to the exclusive use of Israeli settlers, who reside illegally in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Mr. Chairman,

The continued construction of the illegal separation Wall has isolated thousands of dunums of planted fields, which serve as the primary sources of income for thousands of families in the West Bank. This illegal wall isolates 11% of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and affects some of the most fertile land there. Naturally, this has plunged this important sector of the population into deep poverty and added them to the now growing list of Palestinians suffering food insecurity.

And the encroachment of Israel, the Occupying Power, over the natural resources of the Palestinian people is not confined to illegal confiscation of fertile land and aquifers. Palestinians suffer from severe discrimination in accessing their own national water resources. Aside from record-low rainfalls this season, the Palestinian population has been forced to consume less water

now than it did in 1967, when the occupation started. Palestinians are allowed to use a diminishing amount of water for agriculture, industrial, and home use. Per capita water consumption in the Occupied Palestinian territory amounts to a meager 60 liters per day. In comparison, average per capita consumption in Israel is 330 liters per person a day, five and a half times Palestinian consumption. The World Health Organization and the United States Agency for International Development recommend 100 liters of water per person per day as the minimum quantity for basic consumption.

Mr. Chairman,

The agriculture sector in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is a source of sustainable employment, income-generation and food security for many Palestinians and has represented the main coping mechanism in rural areas.

This sector has suffered immensely from siege, razing of fields, and other punitive measures by the occupying power. The situation is worst in the Gaza Strip, where all vital sectors of the economy have come to a grinding halt due to a brutal siege regime that has deprived the civilian population of access to basic goods and services. Approximately 75% of agricultural land in the northern Gaza Strip has become parched deserts because of razzings, a ban of fuel, and military attacks. This parched area served as Gaza's food basket and its destruction has had a severe impact on the food security of 1.5 million Palestinians who are now cut off from the world because of the siege.

In the West Bank, a regime of approximately 600 military roadblocks and checkpoints have denied many farmers ability to sell their produce at a profit, no matter how marginal. In addition, the West Bank closures, confiscations and destruction of land, wells and water-harvesting cisterns have impeded access to water, compounding the problem.

International organizations, like FAO, have stepped in to address the negative impact of the closure policy imposed on the West Bank and the Separation Barrier on fruit/vegetable marketing. However, there remains an urgent need to support impacted farmers and enable them to rapidly restore their vegetable and fruit production activities in order to sustain their families and provide the local market with fresh food products.

Mr. Chairman,

Land theft, restriction of access to natural resources and farms has had a devastating effect on food security. Recent reports confirm that 34 percent of Palestinians cannot afford a balanced meal and another 12 percent are at risk of reaching this state. In Gaza, more than a million people of 1.5 million Gaza residents now rely completely on outside food assistance to stay alive. And international aid organizations have stepped up their warnings that if the current siege on Gaza continues, the entire Gaza Strip will become 100% dependant on outside aid.

The Gaza siege has turned over 70% of the Gaza workforce into unemployed workers living on handouts. In the span of one year, the siege also caused a slash in fishing production by 98%, devastating this important Gaza economy sector, which feeds 3000 Gaza families or approximately 27 thousand people.

Finally Mr. Chairman,

A bitter 40 year-old experience has proven to the Palestinian people that development cannot coexist with oppression and hegemony, whose worst manifestation is foreign occupation and its oppressive practices. In this regard, we are fully confident that this assembly would make sure that the people of Palestine are not further isolated and alienated by being excluded from the urgently needed assistance of the international community in the area of sustainable development. While the rightful struggle of the Palestinian people for the achievement of their inalienable right to self-determination continues, we count on this august assembly to extend Palestinians its full support in achieving sustainable development and overcoming the awesome challenges confronting developing nations of the world.