



INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY WITH THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

Special meeting convened by the
Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People
in accordance with United Nations General Assembly resolution 32/40

STATEMENT

by

Dr. Hans Köchler

President of the International Progress Organization

United Nations Office at Vienna

5 December 2023

INTERNATIONAL PROGRESS ORGANIZATION

Vienna, Austria · i-p-o.org

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is not a time for solemn declarations or an occasion to merely invoke noble principles – at a moment when 16,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, have been indiscriminately killed in massive bombings, with thousands more missing under the rubble of their houses in Gaza, and when the territory’s infrastructure is systematically destroyed. Hospitals, schools, mosques, churches, United Nations facilities that serve as places of refuge – no place is safe from attack. Let’s not mince words: dropping 2,000-pound bombs over densely packed neighborhoods is tantamount to committing massacres of the civilian population – under the dehumanizing label of “collateral damage.” The Vice President of the United States of America, Kamala Harris, called the scale of civilian suffering in Gaza “devastating,” describing it as “truly heartbreaking.”*

Also, more than 100 United Nations staff, more than 200 medical personnel, and more than 60 journalists have died in this onslaught. The disproportionate death toll among humanitarian staff and journalists is unprecedented in the history of recent conflicts, and in particular in the history of the United Nations.

In the West Bank, forces of the occupation army carry out deadly raids, wantonly killing unarmed civilians, many of them minors, and destroying Palestinian homes and livelihoods.

While the world watches and the United Nations Security Council – due to the veto of at least one permanent member – is condemned to impotently stand by, the occupying power in Palestine has been able to wage a relentless campaign, indeed a war of vengeance, on the Palestinian people and its aspirations for a life in freedom and dignity.

Ending a “peace process” that never was allowed to flourish – in all the years since the war of 1973 – has been the strategic aim of the political groups that now – under the labels of “Religious Zionism” and “Jewish Power” – form the most extreme, nationalist and chauvinist government in Israel since 1948. I have warned of the consequences in my speech here, at this forum, last year.

To avoid all ambiguity: We unreservedly condemn the events of October 7. All lives are equally precious. Double standards must not be tolerated. Both, the right of resistance

* Press conference on the sidelines of COP 28 in Dubai, 2 December 2023.

to foreign occupation and the right of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter, must not serve as a pretext for collective punishment. These rights are never an entitlement to a disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force. They do not in any way justify the commission of war crimes or crimes against humanity, such as those we are witnessing now – and of a brutality and intensity rarely seen since the end of World War II. Those responsible must be brought to justice, regardless of the person's role or position.

In the face of a campaign to intimidate those who are committed to speak the truth we need to make it crystal clear: Condemning these acts and the policies and ideology behind them is not an expression of anti-Semitism as, likewise, condemning the atrocities against Israeli civilians is not an expression of Islamophobia. However, in all these cases, to remain silent would be irresponsible.

The leaders of Türkiye, Brazil, South Africa, Colombia, Bolivia and other states have spoken out with courage. On 17 November, South Africa, Bangladesh, Bolivia, the Republic of the Comoros and Djibouti referred the situation in the State of Palestine to the International Criminal Court. In Europe, the Prime Ministers of Spain and of Belgium – the outgoing and incoming President of the Council of the European Union – were also clear in their criticism of the massive violations of international humanitarian law in Palestine. Others in Europe should follow their example. Politicians should be aware that each state party of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 is under the obligation “to ensure respect [of international humanitarian law] in all circumstances.”

Also, the *UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel* stated, “there is already clear evidence that war crimes may have been committed in the latest explosion of violence in Israel and Gaza.” Regrettably, many United Nations officials who had the courage to speak the truth have been subjected to vicious attacks by officials of the occupying power.

We join the Secretary-General of the United Nations who, with the large majority of UN member states, has called for a durable ceasefire and for a political settlement that addresses the root cause of the problem: the continued denial of the right to self-determination, in persistent violation of all relevant UN resolutions. The Palestinian people, António Guterres said in the special session of the Security Council on 24 October, “have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation.”

Mr. Chairman,

The “Oslo Peace Process” of thirty years ago has reached a dead end because it was not primarily based on the paradigm of self-determination, but – like the earlier Camp David Accords of 1978 – focused on the modalities of local self-administration under the ultimate authority of the occupying power. So-called “permanent status” issues were excluded from what was described as the “Principles of Interim Self-Government Arrangements.” Over years of prevarication and mistrust, this – not surprisingly – encouraged annexationist tendencies, as did the bilateral accords concluded more recently.

However, in the face of the inferno being inflicted on the people of Gaza, those issues can no longer be ignored.

Israel must withdraw from all territories it occupied in 1967, and it must rescind the annexation of Arab Jerusalem – unconditionally. This will also require the dismantling of colonial settlements in the West Bank, one of the major stumbling blocks to peace. The citizens of Palestine must be able to decide on the legal status and political organization in their land without any tutelage or outside interference. After all, that is what self-determination means.

In the absence of coercive measures by the Security Council to give effect to resolution 242 (1967) on the withdrawal from occupied territories, movement in this direction will substantially depend on the influence of Western states – first and foremost the United States and the European Union – who have leverage on Israel and have already declared their commitment to a two-state solution as the key to a final settlement. Words must now be followed by actions. (It will be an enormous challenge nonetheless. After decades of effective colonization in the West Bank, there is not much land left for a Palestinian state that, like any state, needs a contiguous territory to be viable.)

In the Gaza area, the General Assembly could follow the precedent of the decision it took during the Suez crisis of 1956, on the basis of the “Uniting for Peace” formula: The UN member states could again create a “United Nations Emergency Force” to monitor a future ceasefire and act as a buffer between the parties along the border. Countries with sufficient clout should act as guarantors for each of the parties. In that regard, the international community may pay attention to the idea recently put forward by

Türkiye, a state that has already acted as mediator in the Istanbul negotiations of 2022 between Ukraine and Russia.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, regarding the *actual* prospects for peace, the role of international civil society will be crucial.

It is quite telling that even in countries, such as our host country today, that voted against an “immediate, durable and sustained” humanitarian truce in the recent Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly, the majority of citizens are not in favor of a continuation of the war in Gaza. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll in the United States, more than two thirds of respondents agreed with a statement that “Israel should call a ceasefire and try to negotiate.” (In any case, the governments rejecting a durable ceasefire were only a tiny minority among the 121 member states that voted for the resolution on 26 October.) In large demonstrations and on social media, citizens’ groups on all continents, including e.g. “Jewish Voice for Peace” in the United States and “European Jews for Peace,” have made clear that they favor a settlement of the conflict through negotiations and mutual recognition, and not through a war of extermination – a total war the likes of which the Israeli Prime Minister, in a televised speech, ominously described by reference to Chapter 15 of the First Book of Samuel,** and which his official Spokesman sarcastically referred to as “the mother of all thumpings.”

If the Gaza War of 2023 is to be ended in the apocalyptic way alluded to by the Prime Minister, **there may be no “day after”** to embark on a vision for peace such as the one advanced by the Prime Minister of Spain at a press conference at the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Gaza on 24 November. I quote from his impassioned plea for peace and justice in Palestine: “... *the moment has come for the international community, especially for the European Union and its member states, to recognize the State of Palestine.*”

Also, the international community should listen to the cautioning words of President Emmanuel Macron, a few days ago, in Dubai: “There can be no long-term security in the region if that security comes at the price of Palestinian lives.” Speaking about the need

** “Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”

of protecting civilians, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin warned that a “tactical victory” might turn out to be a “strategic defeat.”***

If the logic of total war – with the forced transfer of the population of Gaza and the annexation of the West Bank as ultimate goal (as contemplated by leading figures of the coalition government in Israel) – is allowed to prevail, we are faced with the risk of a never-ending cycle of violence that may engulf the entire Middle East and endanger world peace.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

*** Speech at the Reagan National Defense Forum in California, quoted according to AFP, 3 December 2023.