

Take up Palestinian cause

Address by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at the official opening of the ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement's Committee on Palestine at Putrajaya yesterday. NST-14/5/2004: 10, 12

TWO weeks ago, as chairman of the 10th session of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit, Malaysia had convened a special meeting on the Middle East, which issued an important declaration on Palestine.

Today, Malaysia is convening this ministerial meeting to further respond to the continuing grave situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, which is threatening international peace and security. The movement cannot but address the situation with an equal measure of concern.

One of the central platforms of the Non-Aligned Movement since its inception has been its resolute support for the Palestinian cause — along with its opposition to colonialism, apartheid, and the proliferation of nuclear arms, among others. As a movement, we are gratified that our collective position has made a positive impact on the efforts to rid the world of these evils.

They have either been eliminated, or are in the process of being eliminated.

Much to our dismay, however, the Palestinian issue has remained unresolved and is still very much with us after all these years. Therefore, we have a collective duty to renew our commitment to help find the solution.

More than half a century has passed and we have failed to end the conflict. This is an indictment against the international community.

It is with all the seriousness that it deserves. NAM, however, has been unwavering in this matter. Notwithstanding the vagaries and vicissitudes of the international system, the support of NAM in the struggle of the Palestinian people for an independent and sovereign state of their own remains solid and unshakable.

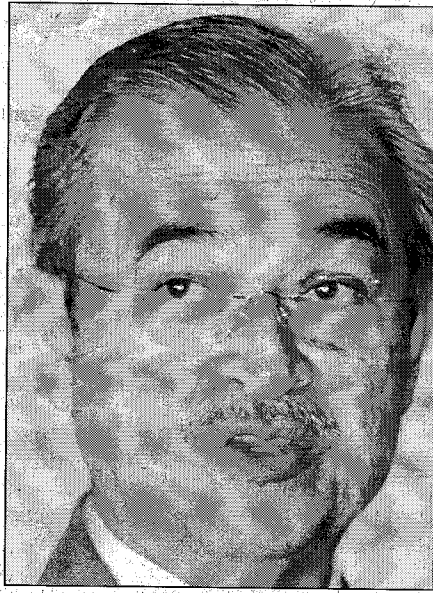
This tragic conflict has exacted a heavy toll of deaths, injuries and destruction, particularly on the part of the Palestinians. Israel, instead of easing its grip on the occupied Palestinian territories, has hardened its tough policies and practices in these areas. In the name of defending its security, the Israeli military and other forces have taken more repressive and violent measures.

These include house demolitions, stoppages and closures of economic activity, confiscation and/or destruction of lands and property, torture of detainees, extra-judicial targeted killings of Palestinians, and illegal expansion of Jewish settlement activities in the occupied territory, including Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

Clearly, Israel is also bent on destroying the institutions which make up the Palestinian national authority. Israel must be stopped and its excesses reversed.

All of the repressive actions, and others, have made life for the Palestinian people, under occupation, even more difficult and unbearable with each passing day. There seems to be no prospects of their ending in sight. Indeed, the situation has become more tense and potentially explosive following the brutal assassination of the late Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, founder and spiritual leader of Hamas in March this year.

This was followed by an equally cold and calculated murder of his successor, the late Dr Abdel Aziz Al-Rantisi, a few weeks later. Now, even the life of President Yasser Arafat is at risk, threatened



ABDULLAH: Situation more tense

by no less than the Prime Minister of Israel himself.

The targeted assassination by Israel of Hamas and other Palestinian leaders and activists is a clear violation of international law and the norms of civilised conduct by states.

Indeed, what Israel did and continues to do, constitutes acts of "state terrorism" which must be condemned. These are not actions one would expect from a country "racy" and a "beacon of civilisation" in the region. This policy must not be allowed to continue with impunity.

These actions by Israel, as well as the relentless construction of the so-called "separation wall" on Palestinian territories, can only provoke and inflame emotions, rather than ease them.

Equally provocative and destabilising is the unilateral Israeli decision to withdraw from Gaza, retaining the illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and denying Palestinians the right of return — all of which contradict the provisions of the road map for peace in the Middle East.

They add insult to injury by pre-empting the outcome of negotiations between the two sides on a final status agreement. Indeed, all of these actions have dealt a serious, if not fatal, blow to the road map.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon must be made to understand that he cannot simply trample upon the rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people.

We must view the recent series of violence as prolonged or repeated wake-up calls for the international community, particularly those entrusted with special responsibility to restart the peace process. If they continue to be ignored, the consequences to regional and international peace and stability would be serious indeed.

Notwithstanding our preoccupation with other important concerns elsewhere, these events are reminders that the long-standing and unresolved issue of Palestine demands our immediate and undivided attention.

I do believe that for as long as the Palestinian issue remains unresolved, it will continue to be the root cause of much of the violence in the Middle East. Let me say to you that much of the violence elsewhere in the world can also be traced to the same root cause. The international

community and the United Nations cannot afford to allow this issue to remain unresolved indefinitely.

As the UN Secretary-General himself had pointed out recently, the rising tensions in the Middle-East, following the war in Iraq, had increased the need for, and importance of, rapid positive movement on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

The international community must act to ensure that the Palestinian people will no longer endure the grievous violations of their rights and suffer the other indignities forced upon them. Other dignitaries, Yasser Arafat, their elected and universally acknowledged leader, must be allowed complete freedom of movement.

We should plainly reject the approach of apportioning blame and placing demands solely upon President Arafat, yet ignoring, indeed condoning, the provocative policies of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Malaysia feels very distressed by the dire plight of the Palestinian people living under occupation. That is why I had felt compelled, on April 16, 2004, to write to the leaders of the quartet, namely the President of the United States, the presidency of the European Union, the Russian President, the United Nations Secretary-General, as well as to Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain. To all of them, I registered the deep concern of the Malaysian Government and people, as well as that of the NAM and the OIC, to bring into being a Palestine state that was viable, sovereign and in-

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dependent, I had expressed my deep concern about the support which President Bush had extended to Prime Minister Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan.

I expressed my belief that this would only encourage Israel to continue ignoring Palestinian concerns and the need to fulfil the objective of the road map, at the same time creating severe risks of derailling the entire peace process.

I had, in my letter, urged all sides to dedicate themselves to finding a solution which was comprehensive, just and durable. I pointed out the importance of giving the Palestinians a role in any future discussions or negotiations.

They are the party most directly concerned with, and affected by, the outcome. I had also stressed the importance of the need for confidence building and the role of a UN peacekeeping force or an international monitoring mechanism in that process, particularly in monitoring

the implementation of the road map.

Malaysia and others had raised the warning that the latest grim situation on the ground risks sliding dangerously towards a precipice and full-fledged war.

Regrettably, these warnings have fallen on deaf ears. It is patently clear to all, except the Israeli Government, that the issue of security, while important in itself, cannot be dealt with in isolation.

The question of security must be viewed in a context — and the context remains the continued Israeli occupation and the illegal expansion of Jewish settlements on Arab lands. It is also clear to all, except Israel, that — given the deep mistrust between them — the Palestinians and Israelis would not be able to find a solution on their own. Clearly, the situation demands the intervention of the international community, particularly the UN Security Council.

To ignore the need for a "third-party-role" is to misunderstand the nature of the conflict, with all the consequent risks to international peace and security. Continued non-action by the international community, particularly by the UN Security Council, is tantamount to appeasing the occupying power. This can only encourage continued Israeli intransigence. It will also deepen the sense of frustration, hopelessness and despair of the Palestinian people, thereby aggravating the situation even further.

Indeed, the Israeli Government has its objective, carried out on the pretext of destroying the so-called "infrastructure of terrorism", is actually to dismember and dismantle the infrastructure of the Palestinian National Authority, to cripple and render powerless its leadership.

The television screens and the newspapers of the world have carried the graphic details. We have all been witnesses to the blatant and ruthless actions taken by Israel, using its overwhelming military might, to intimidate, terrorise and subdue the Palestinian leadership.

In doing so, Israel is destroying the very foundations of political dialogue between the two sides that had been painstakingly laid down and built on through the Madrid and Oslo processes.

By isolating President Arafat and rendering him "irrelevant", the Israeli Government is tearing up all the agreements, accords and understandings arrived at between the two sides since the beginning of the peace process.

The Israeli Government must be told in no uncertain terms that there can be no military "solution" to the problem. No military might, however powerful, can ever vanquish the will of a people determined to establish an independent and sovereign state in their homeland.

Israel must abandon these tactics of terror in favour of constructive dialogue and engagement with the Palestinians. President Arafat should not be shunned but taken seriously as an important, indeed indispensable, interlocutor.

We should all remember that it was not President Arafat who precipitated this latest crisis three years ago. It was Sharon who started it all by his deliberately provocative walk-about in the compound of the Al-Aqsa. It is indeed ironic that Arafat, who has made so much effort in the search for peace since Madrid and Oslo, is the one being de-

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monised and sidelined, when we all know that the second "intifada" was precipitated by the provocation of Sharon.

The United Nations, notably the Security Council, remains the last hope for the Palestinian people. They look to the United Nations as the champion of the oppressed and guarantor of their rights as a people.

Malaysia strongly believes in the value of the Security Council becoming fully engaged in the effort, along with others who are prepared to do so, to stop the violence, and to join in the search for a lasting peace between the Arabs and the Israelis.

The quartet's road map and the Arab peace initiative can form the basis. The

council must help to give substance to the vision of a Palestinian state contained in Security Council Resolution 1397. If the Security Council of the United Nations cannot intervene at this critical time, when — one may ask — will it be allowed to fulfil its responsibility in this critical matter?

I suggest that the United Nations can and must intervene effectively by establishing a UN mission or authorising an international presence to monitor the situation, ease the tension and maintain peace and security on the ground.

This is the way to end the bloodshed and bring about a modicum of calm to a situation steeped in mistrust and antipathy.

The United Nations must persevere and not give up. We do not wish to see the

credibility and prestige of the Security Council further undermined.

I also believe that the time is ripe for all caring, ordinary people of the world to do their part for Palestine. Repeating what I had already said before in another forum, there is now an urgent need for everyone to manifest solidarity with Palestine by starting a global, people-based campaign in support of the continuing struggle of the Palestinian people and their elected leadership.

Such a global campaign had been successfully carried out before against apartheid in South Africa. It led finally to the freeing of Nelson Mandela from incarceration and the liberation of the coloured people of South Africa from the racist regime of apartheid.

I think this is a challenge awaiting a response from our civil society within NAM.

There is need for a movement to champion, in a more focused and cohesive way, and in the name of justice, the cause of the Palestinian people.

I am certain that during its short meeting here today, the NAM ministerial committee on Palestine will consider the appropriate strategies and approaches, as well as concrete and practical measures that could be taken under its mandate, or by NAM as a whole.

I trust the committee will be able to arrive at a quick consensus so as to ensure equally quick follow-up action. I wish all delegates a fruitful deliberation on this very important issue. I also wish all of you a very pleasant stay in Malaysia.