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Venue : PUTRAJAYA INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE
Date : 28 MARCH 2005
Title : THE GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
"PEACE IN PALESTINE"

Y.Bhg. Dato' Mukhriz Mahathir,
Coordinator of the Conference

Dr. Chandra Muzafar
President of JUST Malaysia
Chief Steering Committee of the Conference

Y.A.Bhg. Tun Dr. Hasmah Mohd Ali,

Excellencies/Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to host this Lunch and to welcome you, Distinguished Participants, to this important Global Civil Society International Conference on PEACE IN PALESTINE.

Let me also take this opportunity to congratulate PEACE MALAYSIA for its initiative in organising this Conference on an issue of great importance to the people of Malaysia as a whole, irrespective of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. The convening of this Conference is a clear manifestation of PEACE MALAYSIA'S strong and continuing commitment to peace. Its ability to bring together, at rather short notice, so many experts on the subject is testimony to its network of friends and fellow activists around the world, which augurs well for the viability of the global campaign. I take note in particular of the presence of five activists from Israel at this Conference, which shows the extent of the networking that has been established by PEACE MALAYSIA and its affiliates in organising this Conference. I am certain that the participation of our friends from Israel will enrich your deliberations because of their own unique perspectives on the issue.

As you know, the Honourable the Prime Minister will be delivering his keynote address to the Conference later this evening. For my part, during this luncheon address, I will focus on a few salient aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the peace process, particularly pertaining to the approaches, processes and institutions or mechanisms that have been used by the international community over the years in the efforts to find a peaceful solution to the problem. Since you are all experts and knowledgeable on the subject matter I shall not dwell too much on the nature and substantive aspects of the conflict.

Let me begin by addressing the question of the prospects for an early resolution of the conflict. With a number of so-called "breakthroughs" in the past, which did not live up to promise and turned out to be "false dawns" for the Palestinian people, it is

difficult to be upbeat about the future of the situation in Palestine. Yet, we must remain hopeful, for sooner or later, the conflict must come to an end when both peoples realise they cannot go on living in a state of permanent conflict. Therefore, although, like many others, I have my doubts about the prospects for peace for Palestine in the foreseeable future, I am cautiously optimistic and certainly very hopeful. While the underlying factors that led to past failures are still there, I feel that recent developments and changes, both at the regional and global levels, may now be more conducive towards a resolution of the problem than in the past.

To begin with, there is now a newly elected Palestinian leader, with a fresh mandate from his people to find a solution by peaceful means. A new person at the helm always changes the dynamics of a situation. It certainly gives rise to new hopes and expectations. It took great courage on the part of President Mahmood Abbas to make his stand on the peaceful resolution of the conflict with Israel in the recent elections and his determination to pursue that path following his election as President. He was rewarded for his brave stand, but he will be the first to admit that he has to deliver. He has already taken initial steps in that direction following his Summit Meeting with Prime Minister Sharon at Sharm El-Sheikh. These positive initial moves are important confidence-building measures. They must be sustained so as to generate the necessary momentum towards the implementation of the Road Map. The stakes are high for both sides, for if a peaceful approach towards resolving the conflict fails, we all know what the alternative might be.

Secondly, the US experience in Iraq and a second term for President Bush, may bring about a new orientation in its foreign policy, particularly with respect to the Middle East. Having had its Iraq experience, the United States of America, the closest ally of Israel, appears to have a better understanding of the political dynamics in the region and the world. It now has a better appreciation of the nexus between peace and security in the Middle East and a permanent peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I certainly hope so. There are indications of a refocusing of attention in Washington on the Israeli-Palestinian situation, which may lead to increased engagement in efforts towards revitalising the peace process through the mechanism of the Road Map. Clearly, the success of American diplomacy vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a direct co-relationship with and impact on its efforts to promote democracy and good governance in the Middle East, which has become an important element of its global strategy to combat international terrorism. However, success can only be assured by the final resolution of the key issues, namely, East Jerusalem as the capital of a future independent State of Palestine, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and, of course, withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, both of Israeli troops as well as the illegal settlers. The two sides must be urged to make maximum efforts to reach agreement on these three most crucial and contentious issues in the conflict. They must be strongly encouraged and assisted in every possible way to make progress in their efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to the equally pertinent question of approaches, processes and institutions or mechanisms that have been used in the efforts to resolve the conflict at the inter-governmental level. An understanding of the mechanisms involved would

allow us to make a better evaluation of the prospects for a resolution of the conflict and the best means of attaining it. At one level, there is the mechanism of the United Nations. The UN General Assembly plays an important role as a general and indispensable forum for the articulation of member States' position on the issue, where over the years support for Palestine has been maintained, in spite of a softening of position on the part of some, mostly, Western countries. This is largely due to a negative reaction to the increase in attacks on innocent Israeli civilians by Palestinian militants, particularly the suicide bombers. Clearly, the UN General Assembly's regular, and whenever necessary, emergency sessions, must continue to be the main international forum for the expression of political and moral support of the international community for Palestine. Every effort must therefore be made to prevent any weakening of support in this important organ of the United Nations.

It is, however, in the UN Security Council that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is most often debated and legally binding resolutions, adopted. But the Council is not structured as a negotiating mechanism. By its very name, the Security Council is principally concerned with the maintenance of international peace and security. Its principal concern is to defuse tension, de-escalate a conflict and arrange and supervise a cease-fire. It is an ineffective instrument of conflict prevention or conflict resolution, as is clearly reflected by the continuation of many on-going conflicts, which have gone on for years, if not for decades, as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As is well known, the ineffectiveness of the Security Council is largely due to its antiquated structure and decision-making process, particularly the instrumentality of the veto, which is resorted to by any one of the Permanent Members when it wants to prevent or negate a consensus among Council Members. The record shows that the veto has been resorted to on almost every resolution concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or threatened to be used, on countless times. On the few occasions the Council had adopted a resolution on the issue, they have been ignored by Israel with impunity, without any punitive action by the Council. It is therefore not an exaggeration for me to say, here, that with the number of vetoes that have been cast on behalf of Israel over the years, it would appear that there are not just five but six Permanent Members of the Security Council, the sixth being invisible but just as powerful! Given the prevailing situation in the Council, as presently structured, it is difficult to conceive of the possibility of the Council taking its own initiative to resolve the conflict in the foreseeable future. It is more likely to continue to react to events and developments occurring outside of the Council. Notwithstanding this, the role of the UN Security Council, as well as of the UN in general, is essential, both as the guardian of international legitimacy and in the mobilisation of international assistance for Palestine.

Of course, as far as Israel is concerned, the UN is considered as irrelevant to, and has no role in the peace process. Its position is that Israel's conflict with the Palestinians should be resolved directly by the parties themselves. In supporting the Israeli position on this matter, the US has over the years offered its good offices as an "honest broker". In this role the US has assumed the function of a facilitator through the efforts of its "Special Envoy" to the region. Occasionally, the US becomes more actively engaged in the process, with the personal involvement of the President himself. Useful though this process has been, there are, however, inherent

limitations of this approach, not the least of which is that the "honest broker" is too closely allied to one of the parties in the conflict, thereby comprising its impartiality, which is essential for the effectiveness of that role.

At the same time, the role of the US is very much conditioned or influenced by the political season in that country, particularly the presidential and Congressional elections, as evidenced by virtually every election season in the past when the role of the US in the peace process has invariably shifted to low gear during these periods. Since the two elections go through an alternating cycle it inhibits the US from taking fresh or bold initiatives to resolve the conflict.

There is, of course, the role of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. While that role is enshrined in the UN Charter, it has waxed and waned since the formation of the UN, depending on the global political situation and, more often, on the personality and inclination of the individual who occupies that position. On the highly sensitive issue of Palestine in which the Security Council is directly involved, Secretaries-General of the UN have tended to perform a largely advisory and facilitating, rather than a leading or catalytic role. For obvious reasons, they prefer to be more of a Secretary and less of a General.

The main focus now is on the mechanism of the Road Map and its systematic follow up and implementation by the two sides. Its co-sponsors, the International Quartet, comprising the United States, European Union, Russian Federation, and the United Nations have become more and more involved in the peace process. This more expanded role by external actors is a positive and welcome development as it involves almost all of the Security Council of the UN Security Council – directly, in the case of the US and Russian Federation, and indirectly through the EU in the case of France and the United Kingdom. This arrangement ensures greater transparency and impartiality of the process if each member of the Quartet plays its role properly and judiciously and pulls its weight as an equal partner in their collective effort to ensure the full, faithful and fair implementation of the Road Map. In fulfilling its role, it is important for the Quartet to ensure that elements of the Road Map are not implemented selectively. There should be a balanced approach between, on the one hand, satisfying the security needs of the Israelis and, on the other, the political aspirations of the Palestinians.

These are some of approaches, processes and institutions or mechanisms involved in the inter-governmental efforts in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which reflect the complex nature of the problem. They are cumbersome and inefficient mechanisms of decision-making or consensus building, which are obviously in need of reform. On top of that, the substantive aspects of the problem further complicate it, such as the issues relating to Jerusalem, right of return for Palestinians and withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, to name just a few.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me take this opportunity to also mention, briefly, of the role that Malaysia has played in its capacity as the Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in support of the Palestinian cause and the peace process. Aside from speaking out on behalf of NAM and OIC at the UN on this issue, Malaysia, as Chairman of the two groupings, had convened a special OIC Meeting on the Middle East at the ministerial level and a Ministerial Meeting of the NAM Committee on Palestine, last year, both of which had decided, inter-alia, to establish contact with the Quartet, the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council and other influential parties pertaining to the peace process. The purpose of this diplomatic exercise is to urge or pressure them to do their utmost to salvage the Road Map and push the peace process forward. The OIC Ministerial Mission, which I had the honour of leading, met with all members of the Quartet. A similar Mission by NAM, also led by Malaysia, hopes to complete the exercise at the appropriate time this year, depending on developments on the political front. Other regional groupings, such as the League of Arab States and the European Union, have also played active roles in coming out with constructive ideas and approaches intended to find a breakthrough in the process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Conference of Civil Society on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, of course, not the first gathering of civil society organisations or NGOs on the issue. There have been a number of similar conferences held over the years, including those held under the aegis of the United Nations, such as the one held in September, last year, in New York. The difference in this Conference is that it is intended to spearhead a world-wide campaign, which would be sustained as part of the global efforts towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict. For this purpose I think it would be important for the campaign to learn from the anti-apartheid campaign so as to ensure that tactics and strategies that will be adopted would contribute effectively towards sustaining the campaign, as well as in mobilising support from civil society organisations around the globe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are some of my remarks on certain aspects of the theme of the Conference, which I thought might be of interest to you as you delve deeper into the complexities of this age-old conflict. I trust that this overview has given you a fair idea of the limitations of the inter-governmental process and will enable you to determine and navigate your own role in the overall process. No doubt, you will take up these and many other issues during the panel discussions and workshops, whose topics, I observe, are both very interesting and relevant to the theme of the Conference.

I hope you will have a fruitful Conference and a successful launching of the campaign. The success of the campaign will be civil society's unique contribution to the peace process in that it will keep the Israeli-Palestinian issue in focus and on the agenda of the international community. We, on the part of Governments will work closely with you as partners and collaborators until the final peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Thank you for your attention.