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Ghaleb Darabya

'They Are Not Living As Human Beings'

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... There is a lot of talk now going on about something called "The Disengagement Plan" ... or Sharon Plan, or vision to move the peace process forward—which is an equivalent to a unilateral peace, that he is trying to impose on the Palestinian people.

Always, I find myself really obliged, not only morally, as a Palestinian official, but as a human being, to talk to people about the suffering of our people in the Palestinian territories. ... Therefore, I will start my presentation by talking to you about the socio-economic humanitarian conditions. ... I find it unbearable and unbelievable: How could the international community just keep silent about what is going on inside the Palestinian territories?

First of all, I will give you just figures, that give you an insight into the conditions. And first, about home demolitions, which is very important in Palestine, because it is becoming a systematic policy that the Israeli occupation army is imposing on the Palestinian territories. When I tell you these figures, just imagine that ... your house is destroyed. For the Palestinian people, they live their whole lives just for the sake of building a shelter for their kids. They work an entire life, just to build a home. ...

In the past 14 months ... there was a complete destruction of about 5,135 homes, killing the hopes of 5,135 families inside the West Bank and Gaza; and more than 55,000 houses were partially destroyed inside the West Bank and Gaza. It has a tremendous psychological impact on the Palestinian families, of course. And you are only given sometimes from 2-5 minutes notice of leaving your house, because the bulldozer is just outside of your house, and it is just about to destroy your house. So you really have not time to take even your savings, sometimes, from that home.

Schools: There are about 320 schools in the Palestinian

territory that were hit and partially destroyed, just in the past 14 months. Plus, 43 schools that have actually closed completely and became military outposts for the Israeli Army.

Four hundred and twelve Palestinian police stations were systematically destroyed, destroying the capability of the Palestinian Authority to maintain law and order, and even to keep our criminals in prison. So there is a systematic policy since Sharon came into office, to destroy the capabilities of the Palestinian security apparatus, so it becomes unable to provide the Palestinian people with law and order.

Close to 1 million Palestinians' trees were uprooted, just in the past 14 months. ... Each olive tree means history for them; and we are talking about 982,000 trees were uprooted in the past 14 months. Close to 1,000 lakes and water-reserve tanks were destroyed, and that has a huge impact on the Palestinian agricultural sector.

In terms of human loss, we are talking about close to 3,000 Palestinians killed. If you want to compare this number to the American population, we are talking about 260,000 Americans being killed in 14 months. This is how much, and how dramatic this is for a nation of 3 million. Out of this number, at least two-thirds of them are civilians; 534 of them are kids under the age of 18; 191 women; 103 patients died at checkpoints simply because they couldn't reach a hospital, they could not reach a medical center to get treatment; 87 Palestinian mothers gave birth at a checkpoint, seeing their unborn children dying in front of their eyes, simply because they could not get to a hospital.

This is what the Palestinians are really faced with. ... The checkpoints—more than 670 checkpoints in the West Bank alone, and 30 in Gaza—these checkpoints became a systematic way of dehumanizing people, humiliating them. A journey of half an hour, takes up to 6-10 hours now in order just to cross from one point to another. Close to 40,000 Palestinians are injured, and around 20% of this 40,000 are disabled, with permanent disabilities. Twenty-nine medical aides were killed when they were providing medical help to Palestinian wounds.

60% Poverty, 70% Unemployment

I am going to shift now to the physical economic conditions that also have a great impact on the Palestinian nation. Figures I am giving you are all according to the UN, World Bank and UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency]. We are talking about a nation that has 60% of its population living under the absolute poverty line, as decided by the international community, at less than \$2.00 per day. This is 60% of the population.

The unemployment rate, a year ago, was close to 70%, but since the UN issued alerts about this, it dropped to 43%, due to the new programs of creating new jobs. So 43% of our workforce is unemployed. The indirect loss of the Palestinian economy just in the past 14 months: \$9.92 billion. And the direct loss is \$2.4 billion.

Whenever I am in Gaza or in Palestine, the best way of

discovering, or really knowing conditions, is to go to hospitals and emergency rooms. . . . Unfortunately, I have a nephew who is a doctor, and he works in the emergency room, and he told me that you find increasingly, just in the past four months, a high rate of strokes, high rate of high blood pressure, diabetes, and suicide attempts from young people in the Gaza Strip. That is due to the physio-economic conditions. . . . Day after day, people are losing hope. And the Israeli government keeps saying that this is a war against terror.

If I go on with the figures I have: how many head of cattle they have destroyed, how many birds they have felled, it doesn't look to me like a war against terror—it is a war *of* terror against the Palestinian people, against a people that is only looking for a better life for their kids, looking for freedom and dignity, and that is the cause of the Palestinian people.

Powell: 'Not a Fence, This Is a Wall'

I am sure you have heard much about the suffering of the Palestinian people . . . with reference to the wall. But the wall is creating a status in the Palestinian territories, that is unbelievable to witness in the 21st Century. Ghettos inside the Palestinian territory in the West Bank are in existence. Israel is more and more becoming an *apartheid* country. There is no other word to describe the wall and the status quo that exists now, but an *apartheid*.

The Israeli army just passed a law—Military Order 378—in October last year. This law declares that the Palestinian land between the wall and the pre-occupied 1967 boundaries on the West Bank, is a closed-zone area. Only Jewish people are allowed to be there, and Palestinians with permits; and we are talking about 800,000 Palestinians living in this area. . . .

Probably, ghetto is a word that reminds us so much of atrocities in the past. But what other word can you use for Qualquiliya, which is a little, peaceful, agricultural town in the northern and western side of the West Bank. . . . the land size is about 900 acres. This town is totally enclaved with the wall around it, with one exit for 43,000 Palestinians. Most of the agricultural land is around the city; so in order to cross to your land, if you are in the northern part, you have to travel all the way to the south, to go through the Israeli checkpoint, which is only eight meters wide. We are talking about a wall which is eight meters high—24 feet high—and two meters wide. This is a wall, not a fence.

Last week there was a hearing at the Congress, where Colin Powell testified on the State Department budget; a Congressman asked him about it, and he said: "A fence for us means that if you build something inside your house, inside your land, it is a fence. But when you build it inside someone else's land, this is a wall. You are grabbing their land, stealing their land, with a wall." . . .

I hope these numbers give you a glimpse of what the conditions on the ground really are. Each time I am there in Palestine, I ask myself: "How can these people carry on?" And I assure you here, these people are not willing to give up, and they will not give up, simply because they believe in their

cause, they believe this is a just cause, they are fighting not only for freedom, but they are really fighting to be, to live, just to live. To live as a human being; they are not living as human beings.

I hold a Palestinian VIP passport, we don't have a diplomatic passport—and sometimes I have special treatment at the borders, so that I don't have to go through the same as everybody else. But . . . I insist on going through the normal procedure that other people go through. . . . And each time you cross that border between Egypt and Gaza, I think 100 suicide guys can be easily recruited from that experience. You go through an experience that is unbearable, and unbelievable, for the 21st Century. People sometimes wait in the desert, with no cover, for two or three days to cross a border, . . . simply because the Israeli authorities cannot provide service for more than 200-300 people a day. And we have thousands of people who travel. . . .

The fear that is inside these Palestinian guys is tremendous, it is unbelievable. When you find yourself forced, against your will, inside a room, with bodyguards around you—it happened to me once. And they keep asking you these stupid questions: "Where do you live? What is your phone number? Would you like to work with us?" They blackmail people. Sometimes they say they will send you back, they will not allow you to travel. This is systematic. We are not talking about just one incident.

The 'Disengagement Plan'

Let's move now from the dark side to the bright side—I don't know if it is bright, anyway it is a political scene. I'm sure you are all aware of the Road Map . . . that was introduced last year to both parties, the Palestinians and the Israelis. The essence of that map is to get us out of this cycle of violence in phase one, to reach a ceasefire. . . . Phase one is very challenging to the Palestinians, because it means the end of all resistance, it means the end of all violence. But at the same time, it requires that both leaders come up with an unequivocal statement of stopping all kinds of violence. . . .

Well, we've done that ten times, and each time we come up, they say, well that's words. They have discredited the President of the Palestinian people, Yasser Arafat. Ten times he came on TV and asked for a ceasefire. This ceasefire cannot be achieved in any way without an Israeli commitment. According to the Road Map and phase one, it says: "The Government of Israel takes no action that undermines the trust, including deportation, tax on civilians, confiscation and demolition of Palestinian homes and property, as punitive measures, or to facilitate Israeli destruction of Palestinian institutions, and infrastructure"—specified in the Tenet Plan.

So it is clear that if we aim to reach a ceasefire, Israel has to stop all this action that undermines our authority as a Palestinian Authority, to convince our people that this road that Hamas is taking is not good for the Palestinian people, is not achieving the hopes of the Palestinian people. But yet, the Israeli government—of course you know Abu Mazen, who

was our previous prime minister, was very much committed to the peace process, and to the Road Map. We managed to get an agreement, a ceasefire agreement, with all Palestinian groups, for 50 days. For 50 days Israel witnessed the most peaceful time ever in their history. . . . In these 50 days, weekly, systematically, Sharon ordered his troops to go into Palestinian towns, to demolish houses, to carry on with assassinations. He made every effort to make Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority fail.

And now, [Sharon] is coming with a disengagement plan, a great gift to the Palestinian radicals, not to the Palestinian moderates. A great gift to those who want to see the destruction of the state of Israel, who believe that resistance is the way forward, not the table and negotiations, which is the Palestinian Authority. If he would have given Gaza to Abu Mazen at the time, I can *assure* you that things would have been so great, that the people would have had so much trust and hope in Abu Mazen—that Abu Mazen is the way, Abu Mazen will get us our country back. But Sharon, of course, refused to do that, and he made Abu Mazen fail, systematically, with the assassination policy, that he continued.

So, where is the Road Map? I don't like to fool you, and tell you that a disengagement plan is coming into the Road Map. But I think Sharon's intention is very clear; it is to replace the Road Map. . . .

[Sharon] is not willing to talk to us about it. And our official position on this disengagement plan, is that we are against any unilateral steps. And this disengagement plan is a form of unilateralism. . . . Peace can only be made by two parties, it cannot be imposed by one party. Both parties should sit at the table and discuss it. And Sharon, until this moment, is refusing to do that, and sit with the Palestinians. . . .

However, we welcome any liberation of any Palestinian land, wherever it is, and we are ready to take control of that land, and that is our official stand.

On the disengagement plan, there is a leak I have, from *Ma'ariv*, the Israeli newspaper. They managed to get the leak from the prime minister's office. I really can't go much into details that we have, as the Palestinian Authority, from the plan that is offered at the table, and that is coordinated by the Egyptians. But in just general terms, it aims at leaving Gaza. And that is not a new initiative, by the way; it is an initiative that the Labor Party came up with 15 months or two years ago, when they came up with a plan called "Gaza First." But it was not Gaza last. What Sharon intends out of this plan is to be Gaza First and Gaza last. . . .

No Palestinian Civil War

[Sharon's plan] also aims at dismantling some of the outposts in the middle of the West Bank—we're talking about 660 settlers . . . only evacuating only 660 settlers from the West Bank. . . . They will not aim to destroy the settlements inside the Gaza Strip, and those settlements that they evacuate. They are talking to the British, to the Egyptians, to the

World Bank: Find a way of who is going to control the settlements. And they are not even talking to us about it. . . .

But from our perspective as the Palestinian Authority, no matter what Sharon's intention is, this will not lead to a war between the Palestinians themselves—between us and our people inside the Gaza Strip. That is why we have started engaging in a dialogue with Hamas, with Jihad, with Palestinian Fatah, with all Palestinian factions in Gaza. We have established a committee to coordinate any step. We have set up operation rooms in the Gaza Strip, that will include some Hamas and Jihad people. We will have them in one room, and we will try to coordinate the efforts with everyone inside the Gaza Strip in order not to lead to a civil war among Palestinians, which Sharon—I believe, my personal view—wants, where we start fighting each other, and then he says: "Well, these Palestinians do not deserve a country, do not deserve a state, they are fighting with each other, and they are not able to have a state by themselves." They have this, by the way, in their plan.

The challenge is, that facing this disengagement plan, this is actually a gift to Hamas; Hamas becomes strong in Gaza, Hamas will be in control, and the Palestinian Authority will be undermined totally. . . . So, we are trying not to allow this scenario to happen, by creating this dialogue with the Palestinian different groups, and coming up with a plan to take over Gaza Strip.

We have no idea what the intention of the Israelis is with this plan. . . . There are so many complications here: seaports, . . . airports, . . . borders. We are talking about the customs unions with Israel, we are talking about the economic situation, the legal status, so many issues that need to be sorted out, and talked about, with the Palestinians in order to reach an agreement.

[As yet] the Americans did not endorse it publicly; they are saying that we have provided Israel with so many questions, yet Israel did not provide any answers. That's why Sharon's visit to D.C. was delayed until April. . . .

I can tell you that the Egyptians are being used by the Israelis as interlocutors. . . . There is an Egyptian-Israeli committee on the one hand, and an Egyptian-Palestinian committee on the other—to coordinate this. And we are willing to coordinate with anything that will lead to the liberation of any Palestinian territory.

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