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Successful Palestine National Initiative (PNI)

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Bethlehem, 2007-12-29: Some five hundred people, including members of international and Israeli solidarity groups, turned out for a conference organised by the Palestinian National Initiative in Bethlehem yesterday to support the strategic choice of popular non-violent resistance against Israel's ongoing occupation and its Apartheid system, including the Wall. Speakers included Dr. Mustafa Barghouthi MP (Member of Parliament), PNI Secretary General, Luisa Morgantini MEP (Member of European Parliament), Vice President of the European Parliament, Uri Avnery, Head of the Israeli Peace Bloc, Gush Shalom, and Victor Batarseh, Mayor of Bethlehem.

The core focus of the conference lay on sharing experiences of non-violent resistance, and seeking ways to expand on them to form the backbone of a popular, national non-violence strategy to end the occupation.

The PNI is the only political movement fully committed to a national strategy of mass popular non-violent resistance against the occupation and against Israeli Apartheid. In practice, this means actively supporting grassroots initiatives and the resilience of besieged communities, and linking together their isolated, non-violent struggles within a national movement to end the occupation. The PNI is seeking widespread levels of participation among Palestinians and direct solidarity from Israeli and international supporters to achieve national liberation.

Dr. Mustafa Barghouthi MP

Dr. Barghouthi delivered an impassioned speech at the conference, in which he detailed the practical manifestations of Israel's Apartheid system, and stressed the need to revive the spirit of non-violent popular resistance as part of a unified national strategy to end the occupation.

The MP commended the numerous non-violent initiatives already taking place throughout Palestine, called for heightened international solidarity with these actions, and reiterated the necessity of a nation-wide popular non-violent moment in ending the occupation.

Dr. Barghouthi also described that Palestinians under occupation are now facing a full-fledged Apartheid system characterised by systematic discrimination. While illegal settlers in the West Bank have access to unlimited supplies of water for example, Palestinians suffer from shortages. In practice, settlers consume 48 times more water per capita per year than Palestinians.

He added that Israeli companies bill their captive Palestinian customers twice that of Israelis, charging them 13 NIS per unit of electricity compared to just 6.3 NIS for Israelis, and 5 NIS for a unit of water compared to 2.5 NIS for Israelis.

Furthermore, while Palestinian income per capita is thirty times lower than that of Israelis, they are obliged to purchase goods at Israeli market prices, and are prevented from building their own independent economy in what Dr. Barghouthi described as "economic Apartheid."

Dr. Barghouthi also said that the siege on Gaza and the separation between the two parts of Palestine is yet another facet of Israel's Apartheid system, which is ultimately designed to dislocate Palestine into a series of disjointed Bantustans. He added that the refusal of Israel to grant permits to 750 Palestinian patients to seek life-saving medical treatment abroad was no less than racial discrimination.

He ended his speech by recalling the words of Nelson Mandela, who said that "the world's conscience will not sleep

peacefully until the Palestinian people are free and have their rights and dignity restored.”

Luisa Morgantini MEP

Luisa Morgantini recognised the PNI as “a voice of human rights and justice in the Palestinians’ struggle against the occupation.” She explained that she has been part of the solidarity movement with Palestine for twenty years, and that she continues to support the Palestinian struggle in her capacity as Vice President of the European Parliament. She added that she was inspired by the high turnout at the conference, which she saw as proof of the commitment to peaceful, non-violent resistance against the occupation. Morgantini underlined the importance of international solidarity in seeking the liberation of all Palestinians, and made specific reference to ending the siege of Gaza.

Uri Avnery

Uri Avnery opened his speech with an anecdote on his relationship with Dr. Barghouthi, saying “every time I see Mustafa I am in tears, not from emotion but from tear gas” referring to the two men’s frequent participation in peaceful demonstrations against the Apartheid Wall, which are consistently, violently repressed by the Israeli military.

On behalf of the Israeli solidarity movement and “Israeli patriots”, he apologised for the occupation and for all the terrible things done to Palestinians in the name of Israel. He said that he was ashamed of the blockade on Gaza, of the killing of Palestinians, of settlements and of the Wall.

Recalling personal experiences of Bethlehem, Avnery described his participation in demonstrations before, during and after the construction of the Wall. He also mentioned that his “heart bleeds” when looking at the “terrible monster” that is the illegal settlement of Har Homa built on Palestinian land near Bethlehem.

Avnery strongly expressed his belief that Israeli peace activists and Palestinians were partners in the struggle against the occupation. He added that in his opinion, the Israeli peace movement has not done enough to make this a joint struggle. He reaffirmed the demand for the creation of a Palestinians state with East Jerusalem as its capital, with no settlements, and where all peoples can move freely.

Successful Initiatives of Non-Violent Resistance across Palestine

The speakers were joined by several leaders of grassroots, non-violent struggles in villages around the West Bank, including Mohammad Al Khatib from Bil’in in West Ramallah; Mahmoud Zawahra from Al Masra in South Bethlehem; Yasser Salah from Nauman in Jerusalem; Sami Sadaq from Aqaba in the Jordan Valley; Nawal Abu Kheir from Jiftlick also in the Jordan Valley; a representative from Yatta in South Hebron; and Musab I-Deek from Nazlet Issa in Tulkarem; as well as George Rishmawi, Steering Committee Member of the newly created Arab Non-Violent Resistance Network, and Ehab Jariri of the PNI Youth Council.

The speakers described their non-violent struggles in their respective villages and towns throughout the West Bank, which range from regular, peaceful demonstrations against construction of the Apartheid Wall, to court action to contest the legal basis of Israel’s confiscation of land and other property, to supporting the resilience of the Palestinian people under the duress of the occupation.

Aqaba Mayor Sami Sadaq for example, explained how the community has faced wide scale land confiscation, movement restrictions, closures and de-development due to the presence of three Israeli military bases around the village, and its subsequent designation as ‘Area C’. He described how the community has struggled to survive under

these conditions with little support from the Palestinian Authority, by installing an electricity network, paving roads, and building health centres, schools, and kindergartens for example. He also described how the village council has launched a legal battle against the Israeli military's confiscation of village land and to seek the dismantlement of the military bases, and how it has sought to raise awareness of the situation faced by the village at the international level.

Nawal Abu Kheir, headmistress of the local secondary school in the isolated community of Jiftlick in the Jordan Valley said that the story of her community was one of 'steadfastness.' She described how the village is hemmed in by two notorious Israeli military checkpoints, and the impact these have had on the educational process in Jiftlick. Until four years ago there was no secondary school in Jiftlick and local children used to attend the secondary school at Beit Hassan. After the Israeli military established a checkpoint at Hamra near Beit Hassan however, girls were harassed by the soldiers and many local families stopped sending their daughters to school.

Community activists in Jiftlick knew that young people would be forced to leave the area to seek a decent education unless there was a good local school, and so they committed themselves to setting up a school. In 2003, they opened a school consisting of six large tents and forty students enrolled. Now the school has 130 students, and after a two-year battle to receive a building permit, a permanent school is under construction.

Arab Non-Violent Resistance Network

George Rishmawi spoke on behalf of the newly established Arab Non-Violent Resistance Network, which brings together organisations from Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, including the PNI. He explained that mass, popular non-violent resistance is a strategic channel to ensure widespread participation and inclusiveness in society. He reminded participants that non-violent resistance has multiple dimensions, spanning from direct action, to awareness raising, workers' strikes and the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign to end the Israeli occupation.

Popular Non-Violent Demonstration

Participants put words into action and took to the streets of Bethlehem after the conference, marching towards the Apartheid Wall which now encircles the city. They held a non-violent protest at the foot of a military watchtower, where Dr. Barghouthi and Ms. Morgantini addressed the crowds of demonstrators.

This peaceful protest concluded a day dedicated to the affirmation of mass popular non-violent resistance as a national strategy of the Palestinian people to end the Israeli occupation and Apartheid.

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Post-scriptum :

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