

Constantin Dabbah

24 July 2010

Thank you again, my distinguished sisters and brothers. What Jim has mentioned, I just want to start from the end. Still, I'm not sure that I will get back on time. I need co-ordination, Er, as a Palestinian Christian, in fact er who had privilege to stand among this gathering, respectful gathering; I am moved and thanks to my host. My brother Harry, Jim and Patricia and others who made it possible to me, to come and meet with you and meet with others to bring our message of peace. Message of the Palestinian people in general and the ones in Gaza in particular. Jim has mentioned about myself, yes I'm a military man now and I need to retire very soon. I accepted this stay in Gaza even that I had the potential to leave in 1968 to become an Australian citizen but I prefer at that time to stay in hope that to see how can I help our people especially during difficult days. I work for the Mitannese council of churches, the Department of Services of Palestinian Refugees, I am the executive director of the program in Gaza. Then these council of churches have extended its support to the Palestinian refugees since it happened in 1948 and have established, had established area committees in the host countries. Host countries meant wealthy Palestinian refugees had moved after 48, after the conflict and war between the newly established Israeli State and the Palestinians and it is neighboring Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, West Bank, Gaza and even within Israel and Nazareth there is still a committee which takes care of those who were displaced within Israel, Israeli newly established state.

The programmes are defined in each area depending on the need and the facilities available to each area committee. In Gaza, we have focus in the beginning on revenue; I was not working by that time for the committee. And then after the evacuation of the Israeli army in 57 after first occupation the committee has taken another direction to help the Palestinian refugees especially the young people to go into training to help them to be self-reliant. And this continued until we were occupied again in 67, 5th June. The committee had found that er that are too many areas which need deep attention and mainly we take care of woman and children and since then with the support of ecumenical movement all over the world from Germany to Australia had given the opportunity to the committee to establish new family centers giving the treatment and education to woman and to the people living in those areas. And gradually, the need, the needs were more and for there was more attention from the ecumenical party all over the world to see how they can support this and thanks to this support, we were able to help more and more clinics open all over the Gaza strip.

In addition, that the educational programs were developed to meet the market needs and the young people; especially the drop outs from school whether women, both gender, and er men, they were given the opportunity for training; in order again to be self-reliant and to see how they can help themselves and their families. In addition, we have a director of programs as community development and educational loans to students who would be able to enroll at universities. This continued to be supported by various churches and church directed agencies in addition to the support we get from agencies in Australia co-coordinated by support provided by Australian Aid of which we are thankful and appreciative.

The population of Gaza is composed of 1.5 million, they live in a tiny place not more than 350 sq/km it is about, is about 45km in length and average of 6-7km in width. And this tiny place is considered maybe the most over populated and densely area on earth, we are about five thousand people in each square kilometre and this is actually too high. Additionally, we have been forced to have a "buffer zone" on the boarder with Israel of about half kilometre which we are prevented and prohibited, to enter or to use. Which means, already we decrease the number of space available for this 1.5 million. Of the 1.5 million, we have almost 2/3 who are refugees, who refuged in 48 in Gaza from villages surrounding Gaza town. And I am one of them with my family who under fire we were compelled to leave Haifa and to take refuge in Gaza. Since then of course, thousands and tens thousands of people have the same condition but maybe we were much luckier because we had, my father had his family in Gaza. They took care of us but thousands were living in tents and each tent could have two or three or more families just divided by curtains until United Nation Relief and Works Agency was phoned and took care of the refugees in the Gaza strip and other areas and provided support in the spheres of health, education and other reliefs which have been decreasing since then. Now if I come to Gaza, since 40 years and Jim has mentioned that ah after the elections of a faction which isHanas in Gaza one thing the elections they have the majority in the legislative council and since then we have no problems. This Hamas wanted to form a committee, and they had done, but the international community and Israel had boycotted and imposed a very strict siege on Gaza this time and place and the 1.5 million have since then been exposed to great sufferings, which could not be described . We were only allowed to have very few items of all the necessities which a human being needs and requires. Imagine 12 items composed of flour, milk and that's all. And the rest was scratched from the possibility of having them in Gaza. Accordingly, the Gaza strip had over 60% of unemployment rate. Has over 82% of the population depending on food even by NGO's or United Nations. 82% under the poverty line. The poverty line means that they could not earn more than \$1.00 a day.

And this is again because of the siege which prevented raw materials to come to Gaza They have not given the opportunity for any factory to work and have the employment, find a way to earn income.

It was very difficult to search materials. Jim mentioned during the last year and a half aggression on Gaza. Thousands of houses have been damaged and thousands of houses needed maintenance and um much more required

for new families to form new generations this was not possible at all and again this was because of the siege.

We had no possibility at all and recently after the flotilla and everybody I think knows what happened and Jim mentioned Israel became under pressure, they had agreed the Israeli government has agreed to soften the siege and to allow more items to get into Gaza and we laughed, we have more mayonnaise, more chocolates more ships. These items are not required; we do not need mayonnaise. We are not in Australia.

We are in Gaza. We need bread we need work, we need houses we need to build ourselves. We don't want to continue having charity. Unfortunately the international community has, I'm sorry to say, including Australia is not giving much attention to have the siege completely lifted on Gaza in order to be allowed to have all what we need and export what we have to export at least to the West Bank.

We have some vegetables which could be exported. We have some strawberries, good strawberries, some flowers which gives the opportunity to the people to work to have something come to be out of the rest; sorry to say 'beggars'.

We want to retain our dignity, we want to be free, we want to see that er we have a stand. We cannot continue to be under such conditions of captivity for so long. We are oppressed, we are humiliated, and unfortunately not too many people know of this.

We are in a situation which needs the support of the international community. The churches, you, everywhere who have faith in humanity you have faith in freedom you have faith in God to see where we can get involved. To have left this injustice inflicted on the people in Palestine and Gaza in particular. We as people in Gaza and West Bank and in Jerusalem. We aspire to be living in a state which recognizes our neighbours, Israelis. But as I mentioned several times that on equal footings we could not continue to be the oppressed, the victimized, the good Catholics, the slaves. This should be changed, and could not be changed because we are weak in one way or another. But we are strong; we have the strength in our faith. In our plight, in our victory at the end that we will survive and establish our Palestinian State within these boundaries. This will help that we save, bloodshed, lives, human beings, on both sides that we want to see we can live together, compliment each other and be good neighbours to each other. Not to continue under such conditions of occupation. Why we all know that we have one God. That we all are daughters and sons of this one God. And the one thing at all in my faith as a Palestinian Christian, is that God would not differentiate between his children at all. And I don't think you would to. You have the same belief.

Therefore we as Palestinians again, we extend our hands to our neighbours, to take care, to recognize the Palestinians and the land which was occupied in 1967 in accordance with the PLO recognition of Zion at the Oslo resolution which was not accepted by many, but we said, 'OK', this will be a concession in the hope that we will have peace.

But since the mid 1990's until now, the peace negotiations are continuing but no resolution. Every time we have a new cabinet in Israel and we start from square one. At the same time our land is being expropriated, in West Bank

mainly, and the colonies, they call them settlements, we call them colonies because it is not their property, and they bring in people while we are being expelled from those areas.

And we always call, that while in the old ages the Jewish people are always saying that we get out of the country, we always call our prayers to God that we stay in our country. We should not continue to be only residents. We are there whether Christians or Muslims, or Jews; are there to stay to be respected by each other and recognized by each other in order to see how we can both compliment each other while a just solution could be accomplished.

And again I appeal to you, who can have any influence on your MP's, or your Government, or the Church or any place, to see that this is happening and that a just peace would prevail in the region.

Now if I want to mention as Christians in Gaza, we have sworn in London that we are part and parcel of this society. We have no problems with our compatriots even under Hamas regime; Hamas governing Gaza.

Unfortunately the feelings are from the extremists, and the extremists are growing. We warned, the extremists are growing in number and they will create problems for all of us. Not only the Palestinians but also the Israelis, and even you will be concerned at the end.

You have troops in Afghanistan, and we don't want you to get involved in this, to have your troops to be sent to Palestine to fight what has been called 'terrorism'. Before this happens I think we should take preventative measures to see how one standard is applied and UN resolutions are going to be applied in our case. No country should be above the law, the International Law and Geneva Convention.

I again want to re-iterate my thanks for this great opportunity, and surely we will see movement from all orders, including your good selves to see how you can stand in solidarity with justice and peace.

Thank you.