Dynamic Central America Diaspora Vital for Building Bridges with Homeland to Support Self-Determination, Help End Occupation, Round Table Hears

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UN Meeting Coverage

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The Palestinian diaspora was integral to reviving the vision of a State of Palestine living alongside a peaceful and secure neighbour in Israel, speakers said today, as the United Nations Round Table on the Question of Palestine opened in Managua, Nicaragua, amid calls to make 2017 a year of renewed hope for ending 50 years of occupation.

Organized around the theme “Building Bridges with Palestinian Diaspora in Central America”, the day featured two panel discussions with Mayor Vera Baboun of Bethlehem and Maria José Torres Mach, former Deputy Head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.  Participants from the diaspora outlined the ways in which they were coordinating efforts to reconnect with the homeland and educate wider communities.

In opening remarks, Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine to the United Nations, said Palestinians had a responsibility — as countries, communities and representatives of regional and political groups — to deny victory to those seeking to defeat their spirit.  “This year, we need to redouble our efforts with a view to ending the occupation and allowing Palestinians to enjoy the State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital,” he added.  “We are determined to do that.”

The Security Council’s recent adoption of resolution 2334 (2016) had arisen from those efforts, he continued, noting that his delegation had fought for a year to legislate that text, which aimed to save the two-State solution.  He urged participating diaspora members to visit Palestine more, invest more and lobby the countries in which they lived to become more supportive of the Palestinian cause.  “It is your duty to do everything that you can,” he emphasized.  “We expect that from you in 2017.”

Denis Ronaldo Moncada Colindres, Nicaragua’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, welcomed participants by recalling that the friendship between his country and Palestine had been forged in a common struggle for independence.  Stressing Nicaragua’s support for all efforts to restore Palestine as a sovereign State within the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital, he said the Government had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Palestine on exploring mutually beneficial actions under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably in the areas of health, education and youth dialogue.  Denouncing Israel’s settlement policy as illegal, he expressed hope that today’s discussions would help to build the foundations of a lasting peace that would include Palestine’s entry into the United Nations as a full nation.

Dian Triansyah Djani (Indonesia), Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, welcomed a recent meeting of 14 delegations from the Latin American diaspora in Santiago de Chile, seeking to strengthen relations and promote Palestinian rights.  Hopefully today’s deliberations would help in preparations for the diaspora convention later in 2017, he added, noting that a new partnership between the Committee and the diaspora was taking shape from a shared desire to see the emergence of a truly independent and sovereign State of Palestine.

In a keynote address, former Prime Minister Said Musa of Belize urged Central American Governments to use all available means to help their respective peoples understand the plight of Palestinians so that they, in turn, could support efforts to persuade Israel to stop its behaviour.  He also advocated support for achieving that objective around the world by participating in the boycott of goods produced in illegal settlements, and by both recognizing and fostering relations with the State of Palestine.  He also joined the call for Palestinian leaders to create a unified national strategy for restoring the vision for national liberation.

Rounding out the opening segment, Agshin Mehdiyev, Permanent Observer for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), said today’s meeting exemplified the shared spirit needed to promote solidarity and positive change.  Encouraging the diaspora to build networks that would support Palestine’s social, political and economic progress, he emphasized the OIC’s unwavering support for that cause, as well as for Palestinian rights, independence and national sovereignty, based on a two-State solution.

Opening Remarks

DIAN TRIANSYAH DJANI (Indonesia), Vice-Chairman, Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, welcomed participants, saying today’s round table sought to stimulate exchange among diaspora members in Latin America and to identify ways in which they could contribute both to humanitarian relief and to ending the occupation.  The Committee, in cooperation with Nicaragua, aimed to help end 50 years of occupation and create a political horizon for peace, he said, emphasizing that the Committee would intensify its activities in 2017 and calling upon the international community to do likewise.

DENIS RONALDO MONCADA COLINDRES, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nicaragua, welcomed the spirit of solidarity demonstrated by the Committee and all representatives supporting the proclamation of 2017 as the year to end the occupation of Palestine.  Nicaragua supported Palestine’s inalienable right to exist as a free, independent and sovereign State, he emphasized, adding that today’s discussion would provide an opportunity to build bridges with other Latin American countries.  In that context, he reiterated Nicaragua’s commitment to Nicaraguan-Palestinian friendship, forged in a common struggle for independence, which, in Nicaragua, had occurred in 1979.  Reaffirming his country’s support for all efforts to restore Palestine as a sovereign State within the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital, he said it was just and necessary to end the occupation, cease the construction of settlements, lift the blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip and release Palestinian prisoners.  It was unacceptable that Israel was permitted to skirt resolutions and hide behind a Security Council veto while meting out abuses against Palestinians, he stressed.

Expressing solidarity with refugees, he cited a report titled “Gaza: 100,000 hours of isolation”, saying it outlined the impact of the blockade and Israel’s war on the enclave over the last decade.  Describing such aggression against Gaza as a collective crime that many international organizations had qualified as a crime against humanity, he urged States to ensure that funding was in place for the United Nations to ensure support for refugees in the Middle East, as well as for trade and investment efforts in support of Palestinians suffering under the blockade.  Nicaragua had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Palestine with a view to exploring mutually beneficial actions to be undertaken in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including efforts to improve health, education and open the door for youth dialogue, he said.

Concerning settlements, he declared: “We denounce the decision of the Israeli Government to build more than 6,000 houses in occupied Palestinian territory,” describing that decision as a flagrant and systematic violation of international law.  He pressed Member States to call for implementation of resolution 2334 (2016) — outlining the risks of failing to pursue the two-State solution — reiterating that the settlement policy was illegal, a major stumbling block to a two–State solution, and more generally, to a broad and lasting peace.  Noting that the Israeli status quo of recent decades had prevailed, he said States must urge Israel to end the occupation and the marginalization of Palestinian people, and uphold its international legal obligations.  Nicaragua hoped for a lasting peace based on international recognition of a State of Palestine that would enter the United Nations as a full nation, he said.

Mr. DJANI said 2017 marked the fiftieth year of Israel’s occupation; 50 years of Palestinian struggle for freedom, of unsuccessful international efforts to stabilize the Middle East and revive the vision of a Palestinian State alongside a peaceful and secure Israeli neighbour.  In acknowledging that unfortunate anniversary, it behoved the Committee to highlight the troubling situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

Noting that Israel continued to expand its illegal settlements, most recently approving 6,000 new settler homes in the West Bank in disregard of Security Council resolution 2234 (2016), he said that action compounded its demolition of an unprecedented number of Palestinian homes.  Israeli authorities openly discussed ominous plans to annex parts of the West Bank, which would be a “game changer”, signalling the end of the two-State solution.  The decade-long blockade of Gaza and the humanitarian catastrophe there amounted to nothing short of collective punishment, he emphasized.

Despite that bleak account, however, 2017 was also a year of renewed hope and opportunity for Palestinians in their quest to realize their inalienable rights, especially the right to self-determination, he said.  Recalling the Council’s adoption of resolution 2234 (2016) — reaffirming support for a two-State solution on the basis of the 1967 lines — he stressed that all Member States were obliged to ensure its full implementation, saying the Committee looked forward to the Secretary-General’s report on the matter.  In that context, he welcomed the recent meeting of 14 Latin American diaspora delegations in Santiago de Chile, which sought to strengthen relations and promote Palestinian rights.  He expressed hope that today’s deliberations would be helpful in preparations for the diaspora convention later in 2017.  “I am certain that today’s Round Table is just the beginning of a new partnership between the Committee and a very dynamic Palestinian diaspora in our common desire to […] secure the end of the occupation and the emergence of a truly independent and sovereign State of Palestine.”

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine, said Palestinians had a responsibility — as countries, communities and members of regional and political groups — to intensify collective efforts to defend the cause of Palestine and deny victory to those seeking to defeat that spirit.  The Security Council’s adoption of its recent resolution had been led by the Palestinian people, he said, adding that they had fought for a year to legislate that text, the objective of which was to save the two-State solution and remove obstacles from the path to peace.

Noting that “hysteria” in Israel was working to prevent the resolution’s implementation, he emphasized: “We will not allow that,” noting that the Secretary-General must submit a report on implementation.  Furthermore, the resolution’s operative paragraph 5 stated that there must be a distinction between Israel and the Occupied Territory, including East Jerusalem.  “They are not the same,” which opened the door for the diaspora to intensify efforts to delegitimize Israel’s colonization, he pointed out.  Civil society must also play a strong role, he stressed.

Fifty years of occupation and 70 years after General Assembly resolution 181 (1947) had led to the Nakba was “way too long” for Palestinians to be denied their national pride and access to their ancestral homeland, he continued.  “This year we need to redouble our efforts with a view to end the occupation and allow Palestinians to enjoy the State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital,” so that two States would live side by side in peace.  “We are determined to do that,” he said, urging members of the diaspora participating in the Round Table to visit Palestine more, invest more, and lobby the countries in which they lived to become more supportive of the Palestinian cause.

He went on to underline: “It is your duty to do everything that you can,” challenging participants, whatever their political ideology, to exceed the efforts of the Jewish community.  Noting that diaspora members were large in number and had prospered, he emphasized:  “Don’t forget for a second where your ancestors came from.”  Diaspora members were obliged to ensure their communities became more supportive.  “We expect that from you in 2017,” he said, adding that the Israeli Prime Minister and United States President were mistaken if they believed they could break the will of the Palestinian people.

AGSHIN MEHDIYEV, Permanent Observer for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to the United Nations, said the round table was an example of the shared spirit needed to promote solidarity, and a catalyst for positive change in Palestine.  The Palestinian diaspora should be engaged as a building block for social, political and economic progress because the current reality in Palestine was characterized by chronic unemployment and slow growth, among other ills, he said, pointing out that the OIC had encouraged building networks to support bridges among the Palestinian diaspora.

He went on to say that nation-building in Palestine should be based upon knowledge and skills absorbed effectively through a demand-driven approach that would foster the development of human resources, good governance and a strong private sector.  Welcoming the diaspora’s engagement in the State-building process, he said the OIC had consulted with various Palestinian institutions, notably a Christian ecumenical one.  Emphasizing the OIC’s unwavering support for the Palestine cause, as well as for Palestinian rights, independence and national sovereignty, based on a two-State solution, he also advocated an end to Israel’s occupation and settlement activities.

Keynote Presentation

SAID MUSA, former Prime Minister of Belize, said his father was Palestinian and 2017 marked 100 years since the Balfour Declaration, in which the British Foreign Secretary had declared the United Kingdom’s support for the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.  It also marked 70 years since the General Assembly had proposed plan to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab States, with Jerusalem as an international city.  It was also a time when the world appeared to be upside down, he noted, with those who had expelled people from their ancestral land and killed others who resisted were called victims, and those driven out and massacred were called terrorists.  “It is time to go back to basics,” he said, emphasizing that Israel had been built on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, with more than 700,000 Palestinians driven from their homes and thousands killed.  Called the Nakba, it was practised today with the same impunity as in 1947.  Recalling that General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 1948 stated that refugees should be allowed to return, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those opting not to do so, he pointed out that Israel refused to acknowledge that right of return, in part because it denied the Nakba.  “The Israeli story tells that the land was empty,” he noted, “a land without people for a people without land.”

However, Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) referred to Israeli settlements built on Palestinian lands occupied since 1967 as having “no legal validity” and demanded that Israel stop such activity, he pointed out.  Moreover, the 2004 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the segregation wall rejected Israel’s claim that the land had not been occupied but “disputed”.  The day before the Council resolution’s adoption, Israel had approved 566 illegal settlements in occupied East Jerusalem, and the day after, 2,500 more in the occupied West Bank, he noted, recalling that the Prime Minister had declared the text the “swan song” of the “old world” of bias against Israel.

“Belize is not part of the old world,” he declared, describing his country as the youngest nation in Latin America.  It recognized Israel’s violation of international law in building settlements in Palestine, and it was important to challenge the idea that denouncing Israel’s illegal action was constituted bias against Jews, which somehow had been made credible by invoking crimes against them in the 1940s.  In 2017, it was important to admit that whatever could be done was not nearly enough, whereas a contribution must be made, however small.  To promote peace in the Middle East, he urged Central American Governments to use all available means to make the truth known and to help their respective peoples understand the plight of Palestinians so that they, in turn, could support efforts to persuade Israel to stop its behaviour.

He went on to express support for the adoption of a United Nations resolution establishing the International Palestine Occupation Remembrance Day, with a view to explaining the facts and advocating for change.  He also advocated for boycotting goods produced in illegal settlements; joining the academic and cultural boycott of Israel; and both recognizing and fostering relations with the State of Palestine.  He joined the call by the Palestinians Human Rights Organizations Council and the Palestinian NGOs network for Palestinian leaders in Palestine and the diaspora to create a unified national strategy for restoring the vision for national liberation.  The experience of civil war and social upheaval in Central America had taught that there could be no lasting peace without justice for the oppressed, he continued, recommending a truth and reconciliation commission for Israelis to acknowledge their crimes.  He also called for seizing the momentum created by resolution 2334 (2016) to both end the occupation and ensure that Palestinians exercised their right to self-determination in an independent, sovereign and viable State.

Panel I

A morning panel discussion titled “50 Years of Occupation:  Impact on the Lives of Palestinians” featured presentations by Vera Baboun, Mayor of Bethlehem, State of Palestine, and Maria José Torres Macho, former Deputy Head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Ms. BABOUN said that being mayor since 2012 had given her insight into life under occupation.  Describing Bethlehem District as the largest in the West Bank, she said that its 200,000 people comprised 48,000 Christians and 160,000 Muslims.  Half the population was under age 29.  She displayed a map showing changes in the area, the northern part annexed to Jerusalem, and those inside the district covered by 19 Israeli settlements built outside the 1967 borders.  Area C — under Israeli control — now covered 66 per cent of Bethlehem District, she said, adding that, of that proportion, 40 per cent was a military zone and 20 per cent a natural reserve.  By-pass roads had been built on confiscated land to connect settlements, as had a “horrendous” wall separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem.  There were 39 checkpoints and four gates on all its borders.  “Being walled is a very critical issue,” she said, expressing concern about the psychological damage caused by acceptance of its presence.  “No nation should undergo such repression,” she emphasized.  The wall created two nations, one living inside its confines and another outside.  Stressing that peace must be built on equality, she pointed out that agreements under the 1993 Oslo Accords for the transfer of Area C to Palestinians had not been respected.  Resolution 2334 (2016) was about peoples’ lives and their capacity to suffer under repression, she said, stressing that it was not anti-Semitic, but rather a pro-rights decision for a nation that required justice.  The 2016 Bethlehem Diaspora Convention had paved the way for one held recently in Santiago de Chile, she said, declaring:  “We need your voices in Latin America to bridge to Palestine.”

Ms. TORRES MACHO said 1.6 million Palestinians were in great humanitarian need in 2017, surviving only through the provision of international support.  “This is a politically created crisis that would disappear with a political solution,” she added.  The entire situation could be described in one word:  fragmentation.  First, the West Bank and Gaza were not contiguous, which created geographic fragmentation, with the Palestinian Authority’s location in both Ramallah and Gaza adding to the complexity.  Families were also fragmented, with those in the West Bank better able to travel than those in Gaza, a 370-square-kilometre area the inhabitants of which would likely number 2 million by 2020 — half of them under age 18.  After the completion of the wall and the ascension of Hamas to power, the natural way for Gazans to leave had been into Egypt, she said, recalling that between March and April 2016, no one had been allowed into Gaza through the Rafah crossing, which had led to wait lists of up to 20,000 people.  “Imagine the impact this has,” she said.  Monthly crossings into Israel through the Erez gate had fallen from 43,440 in 2004 to 15,027 in 2015, while sea restrictions currently prevented 3,000 families from fishing, which made them dependent on aid.  The Kerem Shalom crossing had seen truckloads exiting Gaza fall to 301 in December 2016 from 777 in 2005.  In the West Bank, meanwhile, 150 settlements and 100 outposts housed 573,000 Israeli settlers, she said, adding that settlement regional councils covered almost all of Area C.  Additionally, 2,400 of that Area’s 5,000 square kilometres were outside the Palestinian Authority’s control, which meant they lacked control over water and other resources, she said.

In the ensuing discussion, speakers from Palestinian civil society and other organizations commented on those presentations, with one asking how the diaspora could receive information about campaigns in support of Palestinians in the occupied territory.

Ms. TORRES MACHO replied that she could put interested participants in touch with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other entities.

Ms. BABOUN added: “You have to organize yourselves in a systematic fashion,” which was why the Bethlehem Convention had been launched.  The most recent convention in Latin America had fostered understanding of where to go in the future.

Mr. MANSOUR encouraged diaspora members to attend the United Nations conference for civil society in June, saying that event would take on special importance with the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the occupation.  Those interested could access the website of the Division for Palestinian Rights or the Palestinian Mission’s social media account, which had a following of almost 20,000 people.

A speaker from Cuba, who said he represented both Palestinians and the Federation of Arab-American entities (FEARAB), stated that Palestinians had been the first Christians to follow Jesus Christ and that Jesus was himself a Palestinian.  He said that while he was agnostic, he had noticed confessions within Christianity that appeared to view Palestine as historically belonging to Christians, thereby lending legality to the occupation.  Noting that his father had wished to die in the land of his birth but had been prevented from doing so after the imposition of the British mandate, he said that was just one of many such stories among Palestinian Cubans.

A speaker representing the Palestinian National Council and describing himself as honorary president of Arab-American entities said one practical action was to protest Israeli actions and request reparations.  He urged the Palestinian diaspora to petition Israel — in embassies, the United States and elsewhere — on behalf of Palestinian prisoners because of its mistreatment of 7,000 prisoners.  He also suggested the suspension of security arrangements between Palestine and Israel.

Ms. BABOUN, on immigration, said that after 1967, Palestinians living outside Palestine had lost their national identity numbers and citizenship, and now required a visa from Israel if they wished to return.  However, diaspora members could not simply return as citizens.  Noting that a good number of the diaspora were from Bethlehem, she said there were now only 38,000 living in the district, whereas numbers in Chile and elsewhere had reached 300,000.  Bethlehem had held the first convention between Holy Land churches and those in the United States to discuss Zionism, she added.

Mr. MANSOUR said he had no problem with the proposals, including on freeing Palestinian prisoners.  On halting security cooperation, he said the Fatah Central Council had decided to sever that relationship and encouraged participants to lobby Palestinian leaders for implementation of that decision.  Furthermore, diaspora members should shift their thinking from what Palestinian leaders should do and lead the way to in making a difference where they lived.  “We need to be savvy and creative,” he emphasized, pressing those with connections to political parties to “make Palestine stand above” party differences and require Governments to support Palestine.  That was how Jews operated in different countries, he pointed out, adding that if Palestinians did likewise, they would be a formidable force.

Another speaker, the leader of a Palestinian community in Honduras, said “we have always had to swim against the current”, adding that he was ready to join efforts to ensure that Governments recognized the State of Palestine, and that 2017 efforts centred on ending the occupation.  Resolution 2334 (2016) should spur on the diaspora members, he said, urging them to consider how to better coordinate their activities.

A speaker representing the Palestinian community in Chile said the community had created the Bethlehem 2000 Foundation, driven by Palestinian women and girls.  Its “Gaza Love” campaign had raised $1.5 million, in part through advertising on road stops.  Another private initiative fostered investment in Palestine by investors of Arab and non-Arab origin, which would help to create jobs.  The group also focused on families, in coordination with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and had brought a case against three judges of the Supreme Court in Israel.  “An organized diaspora is one of the greatest contributions we can make to Palestine,” he emphasized.

Another speaker said it was practically impossible for Palestinians wishing to return to Palestine to obtain a visa, which impeded investment.  Describing his almost year-long efforts to do so, he said Israel feared the return of Palestinians to invest there.  Rejecting Israel’s imprisonment of Palestinians and its theft of Palestinian land, he said that his organization had given scholarships to 50 students in Palestine and was helping to build a school and a hospital.  There was a Bank of Palestine office in Nicaragua that sought Palestinian investors “from Chile to Mexico” so as to bring money into Palestine, he added.

Ms. BABOUN stressed in response: “We can create investment bridges.”

With the discussion drawing to a close, one speaker encouraged diaspora members to raise legal cases against the occupation as a message of hope and justice.  A participant who had led the Arab Union in Cuba stressed that, as a Cuban of Lebanese origin, “the cause of Palestine is my very own”, a point that he would continue to emphasize to ever member of his community.

Speakers Call for Harnessing of Palestinian Diaspora Influence in Central America as United Nations Round Table on Question of Palestine Concludes

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UN Meetings Coverage

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/gapal1383.doc.htm>

The United Nations Round Table on the Question of Palestine concluded in Managua today with diaspora members from around Central America supporting a declaration that called on them to step up cooperation in efforts to end the occupation and wield their collective power to influence Governments in defence of Palestinian rights.

“Time is of the essence,” emphasized Dian Triansyah Djani (Indonesia), Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, in closing remarks.  Describing 50 years of occupation as “50 years too many”, he said there was much work to do, noting that the Committee, alongside the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), would organize a conference on Jerusalem.

In a lively panel discussion on “Building Bridges with the Palestinian Diaspora in Central America to strengthen advocacy to end the occupation and rebuild Palestine”, participants offered suggestions on strengthening ties among Palestinian communities in Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba and Nicaragua, as well as Chile.

Several supported the creation of a Palestinian Chamber of Commerce that would enhance the diaspora’s ability to invest in Palestine, in part by allowing them to get around Israel’s demand for a visa that was “nearly impossible” to obtain.  Other diaspora members outlined efforts to ship goods into the Gaza Strip, lobby regional Governments against trade agreements with Israel, build intergenerational bonds within their communities, and learn from their Jewish counterparts in the region about becoming a formidable political force.

It was important to explore “who are Palestinians”, said panellist Muhammad M. Amro, Ambassador of the State of Palestine to Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras, who pointed out that the global diaspora comprised an estimated 7 million people.  While there were differences among them, “unity is our strength”, he said, encouraging efforts to build bridges, pursue justice and raise the profile of efforts for the creation of a Palestinian State.  Anniversary conferences provided opportunities to condemn Israeli actions, he added.

Looking to the past, Sergio Iván Moya Mena, Professor at the National University of Costa Rica’s School of International Affairs, provided an overview of the Palestinian diaspora in Latin America throughout the twentieth century, saying it had successfully lobbied countries to support the Palestinian cause.  Their unique case of economic success had led to a rediscovery of their identity.

Panellist Salwa Massis, former country representative of the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation in Guatemala, said she represented a new generation of the Palestinian diaspora which must sort out its own feelings about the meaning of being Palestinian.  She added that her generation reflected a mixed culture of two worlds — one Guatemalan and the other Palestinian.  “We can learn to have our own links” to Palestine, she emphasized.

Panel II

The afternoon panel discussion, titled “Building Bridges with the Palestinian Diaspora in Central America to strengthen advocacy to end the occupation and rebuild Palestine”, featured presentations by Muhammad M. Amro, Ambassador of the State of Palestine to Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras; Ismat Khatib of the Palestinian community in Nicaragua; Ghassan Salam of the Palestinian community in Panama; Sergio Iván Moya Mena, Professor, School of International Affairs, National University of Costa Rica and Coordinator of Centro de Estodios de Medio Oriente y Africa del Norte; and Salwa Massis, former country representative of the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation in Guatemala.

Mr. AMRO recalled that the late Yasser Arafat had often spoken about a nexus of revolutionary movements around the world, underscoring particular links with those in El Salvador and Nicaragua, which he had visited in 1980.  His Adviser on Latin America had helped to establish a study programme in Chile, thereby marking the beginning of the connection with the Palestinian diaspora.  Since Palestinian territory had been reduced over the years, the struggle to restore it continued, he said, noting that Palestine enjoyed the support of 53 United Nations resolutions, recognition by more than 138 Member States and diplomatic relations over 90.  Emphasizing the support that the diaspora could lend to those in Palestine, and to one another, he said it was important to explore “who are Palestinians”.  There were 7 million people in the global diaspora, and while there were differences among them, and with the Palestinian Authority itself, “unity is our strength”, he said, stressing that only when united could the diaspora awaken the region’s consciousness.  He encouraged efforts to build bridges and pursue justice, calling on round-table participants to raise the profile of initiatives focused on creating a Palestinian State; develop cultural, economic and other ties with Palestine; and convene anniversary conferences, which were also opportunities to condemn Israeli actions.

Mr. KHATIB proposed the creation of a Latin American association to address the question of Palestine, along similar lines to a chamber of commerce, that would help people invest in Palestine.  “Investing in Palestine is profitable as a business,” he said.  It would help everyone move forward in the cause of peace.  After 50 years of occupation, Palestinians sought alternatives.  Business people often grew tired of donating and “we need to have a business that helps to develop Palestine”.  The Zionist lobby had done its job and Palestinians must do likewise, he said, underlining that, from Mexico to Argentina, there was not one Palestinian who did not wish to invest in their country, nor a single Arab unwilling to contribute to that effort.

Mr. AMRO added that Latin American ambassadors to Palestine had met in Cuba to discuss the idea of a Palestinian Chamber of Commerce as a way to get around the difficulties that diaspora members encountered in entering Palestine.

Mr. MOYA said the first Palestinians to arrive in Latin America had been economic immigrants who had grown into prosperous communities.  Countries that had previously supported Israel had begun to reverse their positions thanks to intense lobbying by the first diaspora Palestinians, he said, adding that their numbers had grown in the twentieth century.  Palestinians from Bethlehem and its surroundings had established themselves in El Salvador; between 150,000 and 200,000 inhabitants of Honduras had links to Palestine, the highest proportion of any county in Latin America; whereas the small size of Costa Rica’s community was due to a 1904 decree that had limited the entry of “Arabs, Syrians, Turks and gypsies”.  He noted that, in Nicaragua, Palestinians from Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Ramallah and Jerusalem were Christians.  In Costa Rica, the Zionist perspective had been accepted without much scrutiny, he continued, saying “the idea that God was a real estate agent and the Bible a property deed would prevail for decades”.

He went on to point out that Israel had supplied arms to El Salvador and Nicaragua, while Honduras had transferred its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, violating United Nations resolutions and generating anger among Arab countries, which had broken diplomatic relations.  The Palestinian struggle’s fusion with those of Latin American left-wing guerrillas had created links between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and El Salvador’s Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and at the same time, Palestinian families in that country and Honduras had become an influential community, entering the finance, energy and media fields, including El Salvador’s *La Prensa*.  Panama “was not in the picture” today, an issue that must be tackled, as must the growing influence of a new defender of Israel — Zionist protestants who had turned the issue into a political cause.  In sum, Palestinian experience was a unique case of economic success that had led to the rediscovery of their identity, he said, encouraging diaspora members to take the diplomatic space away from Israel as a way to foster its global isolation.

Ms. MASSIS said she had been born to Palestinian parents in Guatemala, her father having left Palestine at age nine and her mother at age 24.  Guatemala had one of the largest Palestinian communities, she said, adding that they were mainly from Beit Jala, Bethlehem and Ramallah.  Describing the “Know Thy Heritage” programme that had allowed Palestinians to understand their homeland, she said “we can learn to have our own links” to Palestine.  The first generation reflected a mixed culture of two worlds — one Guatemalan and the other Palestinian.  She said she had travelled to Jordan in order to understand the Palestinian experience and recalled her efforts to cross the border into Palestine, which had taken eight hours.  The trip had made it clear that Palestinian culture was broader than something simply lived out at home; it bound Palestinians around the world.  She said that she had endless opportunities to work and study in Guatemala, unlike her counterparts in the homeland.  Underlining the power of seeing the separation wall with her own eyes, she said that she represented a new generation of the Palestinian diaspora which must sort out its own feelings about what it meant to be Palestinian.  She said her trip had made her aware that she was not simply someone living in Guatemala with parents who had an accent and a great cuisine, but rather, a Palestinian who wished to join the struggle for the homeland.

When the floor was opened for questions and comments, a Costa Rican civil society member described the efforts of religious and non-religious communities who believed that peace could only be achieved through mutual respect.  “Costa Rica has a Zionist stripe a mile wide” and nothing to say about Israel’s treatment of Palestine, he said, asking Mr. Moya about the possibility of the round table opening the door to a clash within the Central American Integration System, which was already split between Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama on the one hand, and the rest of the membership.

Mr. MOYA replied that Costa Rica had been an expressly Zionist State until 2006, adding that he saw the possibility of Palestine losing its recognition there.  Panama had not taken any steps in that regard, but while there had been mention of establishing relations with Palestine, no decision had been made.

Mr. AMRO noted that the League of Arab States had taken a number of initiatives to establish chambers of commerce in Europe, adding that the creation of a fund or chamber, as in Chile, could help to elevate Palestinian issues to the State level.

Ms. MASSIS added that Palestinians must also generate their own progress in order to achieve the desired results.

In a second round of comments and questions, one speaker reiterated that he would not stop fighting for a Palestinian State, the right of return and the release of Palestinian political prisoners.

Another participant described how the Palestinian community in Chile could work with others in Latin America, pointing out that there were an estimated 500,000 Palestinians in Chile.  There were several political, financial and social institutions in Santiago, as well as foundations, women’s groups and four youth organizations, one of them founded by the late President Arafat.  Chile also had 19 Arab members of Congress.

A participant from Cuba said the Palestinians diaspora in the island nation maintained deep and broad links with those in Chile.  Regarding Panama, he said the Arab-American Federation would hold its next meeting in Panama City this July as a signal to the President that it did not agree with what he was doing.

VERA BABOUN, Mayor of Bethlehem said in that context that in the coming week, the Knesset would vote on the “adjustment law”, which would legalize 4,000 settlement units and confiscate 800 hectares of land.  If passed, the Israeli civil law would be applied in the West Bank for the first time.

The Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the United Nations said he had never seen political activity as intense as Israel’s, which believed it would win the support of the new Administration in the United States.  Noting that Ecuador’s Permanent Mission had been the subject of unprecedented attacks by Israeli representatives at the United Nations, he said the General Assembly had nevertheless adopted more than 20 resolutions during its last session, signalling Israel’s isolation.  More than 180 States had condemned its practices, with the exception of the United States, Canada, Marshall Islands, Vanuatu and perhaps others, he said, emphasizing that while the Palestinian cause was entering the universal consciousness, many challenges required the diaspora to step up its efforts.

Closing Remarks

MARÍA RUBIALES DE CHAMORRO (Nicaragua) read out a draft declaration outlining the agreement of Palestinian communities in Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Chile, Cuba and Nicaragua to enhance cooperation among diaspora members and harmonize efforts to end the occupation.  They decided to ensure the highest level of participation in the diaspora meeting to take place later in 2017.  Further, they agreed to participate in civil society meetings during the New York event in June marking the anniversary of the Israeli occupation, pledging to strengthen efforts to work as a regional bloc to influence Governments, civil society and others in defence of Palestinian rights.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine, suggested adding to the declaration a reference to the two mayors present today.  The round table would give strength to all Palestinians, he said, emphasizing his certainty that diaspora members would do their utmost in 2017 to lobby for Governments to implement resolution 2334 (2016).

Mr. DJANI (Indonesia), Committee Vice-Chairman, pledged to work continuously to restore freedom to Palestine.  “Time is of the essence,” he said, emphasizing that 50 years of occupation was 50 years too many.  There was much to do, he added, announcing that later in 2017, the Committee and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation would convene a conference on Jerusalem.