

Lecture by UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen Koning AbuZayd

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Palestine refugees: realities and possibilities

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you this evening. I feel I must preface my remarks by stating that I have no weighty academic thesis to offer tonight. The reason for this is simple: to understand the reality of Palestine refugees and to act to resolve their plight does not demand lofty cognitive functions or extraordinary diplomatic vision. What it requires is a basic sense of justice and humanity and the courage to bring these to bear in international action.

My colleagues in UNRWA and I consider ourselves privileged to be entrusted with the mandate to support Palestine refugees and to advance their human development interests. At the time UNRWA was established in 1949, there were an estimated 800,000 Palestine refugees. Today, they number well past the four million mark and have just commenced their 59th year of forced exile.

Over nearly six decades, our work in education, primary healthcare, social services, microfinance and infrastructure, has given us an intimate view of daily life for refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territory. Tonight, I offer you a few simple reflections that are informed by UNRWA's long acquaintance with Palestine refugees and inspired by my own experience of living and working in Gaza for the past six and a half years.

For the majority of Palestinians – refugees and non-refugees alike – reality is a complex and painful mix of extreme and uncertain conditions which they feel virtually powerless to alter. I find it striking that in many respects, contemporary Palestinian reality resembles the very circumstances that surrounded their ejection from their homes fifty-nine years ago. The 1948 conflict has been well

documented from a variety of perspectives. There is no shortage of records vividly describing the careful preparation and planning that preceded the conflict; the ruthlessness with which it was prosecuted and the atrocities committed. And while we may debate the question as to whether armed conflict was inevitable, the records convincingly show that the forced displacement of 800,000 Palestinians was hardly accidental. It seems to me that that the way the war was conducted then, as well as the complex interplay of international with Palestinian politics; the pain and humiliation inflicted by a harsh occupation; the uncertainty of what tomorrow might bring and the inability to influence their own destiny – all of these are still very much with us. These features are as real for the Palestinians of today as they were for the refugees of 1948. I hope to return to these parallels at the end of my talk, so please keep them in mind as we consider some aspects of the reality that Palestine refugees experience in their daily lives.

T.S. Eliot, the venerated poet and dramatist, who incidentally received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, said: “Humankind cannot bear very much reality”. In the Palestinian context, this quote is much more than a mere figure of speech.

There are many dimensions to Palestinian realities, of which the images that are projected through the media capture only a part. Those of us who live and work in Gaza and the West Bank have many opportunities to observe daily Palestinian life quite closely. And I can testify from personal observation that, particularly over the past twelve months, the living conditions of Palestinians -- as well as their personal dignity -- have declined considerably. I see more children without shoes (grown out of the old, can't afford new). Increasing numbers of our school canteens are closing shop as fewer children can afford the shekel or two it takes to purchase a pencil or a snack. Marriages are being delayed for lack of funds. The average age for males to marry last year was 30 years, compared to 24 before the intifada. Five thousand donkey carts are now carrying goods previously transported by vans or trucks and 25 donkeys are newly imported

from Israel every month for this purpose. Jewelry is now being bought by shop owners from customers rather than the other way around.

While our presence on the ground allows us valuable first-hand insights, our observations and perceptions are limited by the very fact that we are, at the end of the day, external observers. I often wonder about the deeper damage, the injuries that are all the more profound because they are hidden from the naked eye. Like children everywhere, Palestinian children amuse themselves by playing at roles that reflect the reality of life around them. I cannot forget the first time I watched Palestinian children, no more than seven or eight years old, acting out funeral scenes at playtime on a school day. The performance was detailed and chillingly realistic. You would never guess -- or perhaps you might -- that the dominant figure in this tragic theatre was a small boy who played the part of martyr. As the "martyr" was carried towards his resting place in a solemn procession of his peers, the girls wailed loudly in the role of mourners to the accompaniment of boys firing imaginary rifles. This funeral scene is given sharpened poignancy when it is performed as part of school ceremonies that are otherwise dominated by joyful, carefree performances by children and creative expressions of the tolerance and human rights education UNRWA has added to the local curricula. I leave you to imagine what the "funeral scene" says about how the dire conditions of today are shaping future realities for the Palestinian people.

There are aspects of Palestinian conditions that are regularly conveyed to us through the media. In large part, these tend to focus on the dramatic instances which demonstrate that death, injury and violations of human rights have become a part of Palestinian lives. I assume these aspects are familiar to you and I shall not dwell on them. However, I would like to comment briefly on two features that have become central to the reality of Palestinians today. These are: the impact of armed conflict on civilian lives and the effects of systematic policies that limit the movement of Palestinians and constrict their livelihoods.

Events in Beit Hanoun in early November last year afford a ready illustration of the impact of armed conflict on civilian lives. In that intensive military offensive to halt the launching of Qassam rockets from Beit Hanoun into Israel, the principal method of warfare was the firing of tank shells into a densely populated civilian residential area. In the course of six days, 68 Palestinians died – including five children and five women – and more than 150 Palestinians were injured. On the seventh day, 19 Palestinian civilians were killed and 54 were injured when a cluster of Palestinian homes were struck in a thirty minute burst of artillery fire. All but one of the fatalities were members of a single family - the Al-Athamneh family. One Israeli soldier was killed and another one injured. We estimate that \$17 million dollars of damage was done to refugee homes, agricultural land and public buildings. It is, of course, impossible to place a dollar value on the terror that the people of Beit Hanoun experienced during this incursion. It is impossible to imagine the psychological and emotional trauma the children of Beit Hanoun endured, much less the grief that the bereaved had to bear. The official explanation for this gruesome incident was that the carnage was the result of human or technical error.

For many years, armed conflict and its destructive effects have been a constant presence in the lives of Palestinians. What “constant presence” really means was explained to me by a refugee family I visited in Rafah at a time when an incursion was in progress. They told me – with no irony and without exaggeration – that they, like many families, had had no sleep since the *intifada* began in the year 2000. The threat of injury or death was not the reason for this, they patiently explained. Rather, they were deprived of sleep by the constant cacophony of conflict: the invasive sounds of rifles, pistols, artillery shells, explosions, bulldozers demolishing houses, low-flying helicopters, F16 jet fighters and sonic booms.

I have cited events in Beit Hanoun in November 2006 as a particularly tragic illustration of the price paid by civilians when the restraints and limitations on the conduct of war appear are apparently ignored. Under international law, as I understand it, civilian lives, livelihood and property must be protected in situations of armed conflict. And yet the reality in Gaza and the West Bank is that on too many occasions, this protection is disregarded, ineffective, or placed at the mercy of “human or technical error”.

It seems to me that the occupied territory has become a place in respect of which our conscience and our sense of humanity have developed a curious syndrome. Where Gaza and the West Bank are concerned, our collective conscience is afflicted by lengthy periods of paralysis. We seem to have become insensitive to all but the most extreme incidents or situations. We keep pushing upwards the threshold of what we regard as “serious” or “grave” enough to justify our concern – let alone our action. Our senses have dimmed, and we have become so accepting of the deteriorating state of things that we impulsively applaud any measure that is presented as progress, even when such measures are demanded by international law or already agreed by the parties. After every three steps back, we are pleased when we take one step forward. We take comfort in accepting minimal improvements and use them as convenient excuses to refrain from demanding full compliance with international law. All too often, this state of affairs manifests itself in our failure to act. And our failure to act is the principal contributor to the extreme conditions that characterize Palestinian reality.

There are numerous examples of the syndrome I have described. Let me take an instance from a few years back. Those of you who have followed events since the *intifada* erupted may recall the international reaction of shock and dismay when Israeli bulldozers first demolished one Palestinian home in Rafah. With each successive incursion, more and more homes were demolished and there was less and less international reaction. Within a matter of months, what began as a harsh aberration became an accepted practice. The international

community simply retreated to the sidelines and allowed thousands of Palestinians to be rendered homeless. Those who did react, and provide UNRWA with generous funds to re-build all the demolished homes, were the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, countries often falsely blamed for not sufficiently helping their Palestinian brothers and sisters.

For a more recent example of this syndrome of silence, consider the loud expressions of outrage in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy that befell the Al-Athamneh family. And contrast that with the silence that followed when the fact-finding missions, created to witness and record the events in Gaza that followed the capture of the Israeli soldier in June, 2006, were aborted when the participants were unable to obtain visas.

As you all know, a *de facto* sanctions regime has been imposed on the occupied territory since early 2006. That this unusually strict regime has continued for so long is another illustration of our increasing insensitivity to the realities confronting Palestinians. The withholding of payments to the Palestinian Authority and the freeze in donor support for its budget are threatening the Palestinian Authority's ability to govern. Although the collapse of the current PA government may very well have been the intent of some parties, this has not happened, as we warned early on.

A uniquely harsh element of the sanctions regime is the non-payment of salaries to over 165,000 public servants at all levels. This has had devastating effects, impoverishing individuals and the Palestinian economy as a whole. To avoid destitution, refugee families who were self-sufficient twelve months ago have been forced to turn to UNRWA for emergency assistance in the form of food aid, cash assistance and three-month job placements. The pressure on livelihoods and the stresses of survival have stretched the Palestinian body politic to a breaking point where economic desperation, political tensions and family feuds have become virtually indistinguishable. The European-sponsored Temporary

International Mechanism has grown to the point where some workers are receiving at least partial salaries, but it is neither designed nor sufficient to keep the economy afloat.

I would be remiss if I did not say a word about the impact on Palestinian lives of the West Bank barrier – a structure that has been judged to be illegal under international law – along with its draconian regime of barrier gates, checkpoints, curfews, permits and restrictions of movement. With 58% of the barrier completed, it is now some 406 kilometers long, a truly massive structure. It snakes across the landscape dominating the eye and the psyche of Palestinians as surely as it strangles their livelihoods, economies and aspirations of statehood. Over 230 square kilometers (or 15%) of the West Bank's most productive agricultural land has already been isolated by the wall. Access to farms and grazing land has been made exceedingly difficult for some and impossible for others, thus aggravating Palestinian poverty and further contributing to stagnation of the economy.

The West Bank wall is a crushing, ugly presence on Palestinian land and in Palestinian lives. And yet it is not the only such presence. It is the physical manifestation of a severe regime of prohibitions. A reference that I find useful is a graphic map on the website of the United Nations Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). I commend it to you as a striking portrayal of how Palestinian living space is saturated by restrictions. Allow me to mention a few examples.

The restrictions are of various kinds. There are the no-go areas that apply to all Palestinians simply because they are Palestinians. Without permits, Palestinians are prohibited from entering East Jerusalem from the West Bank and from entering the Jordan Valley. They cannot enter Palestinian towns and villages that lie between the wall and the Green Line, an area we call the seam zone. Palestinians are prohibited from transporting any form of commercial or personal

cargo across checkpoints. I should mention that the number of physical barriers in the West Bank rose by 30% in 2006 to reach 540 by the beginning of this year.

There are other kinds of restrictions that depend on from where Palestinians originate or currently reside. Again, without what is called “coordination,” Palestinian males between the ages of 16 and 45 are prohibited from leaving Gaza. Gazans are prohibited from obtaining residence in the West Bank and vice-versa. Palestinians from Jerusalem are prohibited from entering the West Bank, and West Bank residents cannot set up residence in the Jordan Valley. [show Amira Hass’ recent article—four pages of “Impossible Travel.”]

If you are tiring of the words “prohibited” and “forbidden” and “cannot enter”, then imagine what it is like not merely to hear these words but also to live under these conditions. And while you are imagining the humiliation and frustration of Palestinian life, do bear in mind that the regime is complemented by constant military patrols and incessant search and arrest operations. The number of arrests of Palestinians, particularly young males, is one of the most tragic and largely unnoticed (except by their families) dimensions of their reality. In a September 2006 report to the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the occupied territory, John Dugard, noted that arrests are frequently “accompanied by destruction and trashing of property, beatings, the unleashing of dogs into private houses, humiliating strip searches and early morning raids.”

At the beginning of this year, 10,000 Palestinians – including 116 women and 380 children - were believed to be held in Israeli detention. A further 345 were held in pre-trial interrogation centers. Add to this number 820 Palestinians in administrative – that is, non-judicial - detention with the possibility of unlimited extensions every six months.

While Palestinian lives and dignity are being crushed by the wall and a repressive regime of restrictions, something else is taking place on the other side. We see a steady and very deliberate increase in the number of Israelis moving in to build permanent homes on vacated Palestinian land.

Palestinians have historically expressed their determination to resist occupation as "*sumud*" which roughly translates to "steadfastness". *Sumud* is still alive, but sadly, the cumulative weight of today's harsh realities is slowly beginning to unravel the social fabric and to erode Palestinian fortitude. These worrying trends are shown in a steep rise in violent crime over the past twelve months. A recent UNDP report informs that, according to Gaza Police records, more crimes were reported in 2006 alone than in the entire period since 1948. With regard to emigration, anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more Palestinians are opting to leave the occupied territory to begin new lives in countries in the region and in places as far afield as Norway and Sweden, USA and Canada, Australia and New Zealand. At the end of 2006, a Deputy Minister of the Palestinian Authority went on record to say that 10,000 Palestinians left the occupied territory for good between July and November of that year. He also noted that 45,000 emigration applications were pending with various embassies and consulates. Another recent UNDP report, noting that the business and professional classes are "packing their suitcases" and emigrating, warned that these trends may be becoming irreversible.

If these are indeed the realities, what then can be said about the possibilities? What are the courses of action that could begin to turn this crisis around? I see possibilities in a number of related areas, some of them mentioned in the January reports of the U.K. Parliamentary Select Committee on International Development and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the oPt, John Dugard. Some of these possibilities include giving a more central position to questions of Palestinian rights; placing more stringent limits on the conduct of armed conflict in the West Bank and Gaza; reinforcing and extending

humanitarian assistance as a stabilizing influence; and seizing opportunities presented in the present climate to move towards a less adversarial, more inclusive approach to dealing with the Palestinian people and their leaders. Let us look briefly at each of these possibilities in turn.

At the beginning of my talk, I stated my conviction that we need to reaffirm justice and humanity as the basis for international action in respect of Palestinians. It is one of history's cruelest ironies that the Palestinians were forcibly exiled in the same year that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. International law demands and obligates all States and their agents -- without exception -- to behave towards Palestinians (as toward all others) in ways that recognize their humanity and promote the realization of their rights. It would be fair to say that increasingly over the past several years the discourse on Palestinians has been framed around territory, borders, security and -- especially since 2001 -- by the war on terror. While discourse on the rights of Palestinians as human beings has not been entirely absent, it has not been given the centrality that it deserves. I believe that it is possible to remedy this. Re-introducing rights and freedoms into the forefront of the discussions could inform the discourse in several useful ways.

It would highlight the fact that -- as intended by the drafters of human rights instruments who were themselves States -- respect for the human rights of Palestinians is compatible with the security of any state. No argument of state security can in and of itself justify human rights violations. And no State that habitually violates human rights can possibly feel secure.

Greater focus on individual rights would draw attention to our obligations to protect Palestinians in the present, pending a just resolution of their plight. It often seems to me that the emphasis on comprehensive solutions at some indeterminate future time tends--somewhat perversely--to deflect attention from contemporary assistance and protection needs. We must recognize that

Palestinians are entitled to the enjoyment of rights and freedoms today, and promote that enjoyment to the fullest extent possible. Prospects for a peaceful settlement are dimmed in an atmosphere poisoned by sustained violations of human rights. By the same token, promoting the protection of Palestine refugees can help create an environment conducive to a political settlement.

Giving a central place to rights and entitlements could also expand the range of international mechanisms that could be brought constructively to bear on the Palestinian issue. The aborted fact-finding missions of December last year are an example of a rarely used but potentially very effective method of establishing facts and clarifying the circumstances surrounding events. There may well be scope for exploring the further development of fact-finding methods that are linked to international action.

Such methods, while grounded in existing international law would aim to fill the evidentiary gaps that often appear when violations occur. Equally important, they should include processes for ensuring that the evidence that is gathered is acted upon. At the moment, the function of documenting violations in a credible and authoritative way is performed mainly by UN Special Rapporteurs who visit Gaza and the West Bank periodically. We might look at the feasibility of a resident body of fact-finders with the skills and expertise to document violations more frequently and more systematically. They could be empowered to look at patterns and trends of abuses with a view to advising on possible lines of accountability under international law. Such a scheme could lay the foundations for ultimately invoking international juridical processes together with the weight of international public opinion to discourage -- if not prevent -- further violations.

We should be under no illusions, however. The isolation of Gaza and the West Bank is not accidental. The occupying power is not in the habit of facilitating the work of fact-finders of any kind. Considerable political and diplomatic pressure

would be required if a monitoring or protection mechanism were to have any chance of getting off the ground.

The toll taken on Palestinian civilians by armed conflict raises serious questions about the efficacy of the protections offered under international humanitarian law. These protections should normally follow from adherence to certain well-known principles. Combatants should exercise restraint in the conduct of armed conflict, and in the choice of means for prosecuting conflict. In making judgments on proportionality and military necessity, combatants are expected to give precedence to avoiding death or injury to non-combatants and their property. Given the poor record of compliance with these principles, I believe the time has come to define more rigidly, and publicize more widely, the means and methods of warfare that should be permissible in the occupied Palestinian territory.

If we bear in mind that Gaza and the West Bank are among the most densely populated areas in the world, we must question the legitimacy of the use of artillery and other imprecise weaponry of large caliber. I am raising a question about whether the use of such weapons should not be expressly prohibited in the context of the occupied territory. One argument in favour of a prohibition would be that in the specific circumstances of Gaza and the West Bank, the use of imprecise weapons of large caliber cannot be reconciled with principles of proportionality and respect for civilian lives. I recognize that it would be a great political and legal challenge to establish such a prohibition. I believe however, that this is a challenge worth accepting.

Another possibility is to improve the quality and impact of existing humanitarian services and to extend assistance to vulnerable groups who currently have no humanitarian support. In the occupied territory as elsewhere, poverty and destitution contribute in no small measure to militancy and radicalism. Humanitarian assistance does more than enable Palestinians to survive the harshness of their environment. It is a tangible symbol of the international

community's concern for Palestinians; it helps to mitigate their sense of isolation and ultimately contributes to a stable environment. With poverty and unemployment rates at their current levels, there is enormous scope for reinforcing the work of UNRWA and other humanitarian agencies. In this regard, I should mention that we are engaged in an effort to arrest the decline in UNRWA's services and to raise standards across our programmes. We are conscious of the need to do more, especially for refugee children, youth and those who are rendered vulnerable by poverty and unemployment. We are also striving to persuade our donors to go beyond their present levels of generosity as there are many areas where gaps in humanitarian assistance can be directly attributed to a lack of funds. A case in point is our \$246 million dollar Emergency Appeal for 2007 – our largest ever – of which only \$17 million dollars have been pledged so far.

Humanitarian agencies should also seize opportunities to expand direct assistance to people in need who may not be refugees. For instance, we could establish assistance schemes for farmers, fishermen, artists, craftsmen, builders, artisans and other occupational groups whose livelihoods are hit particularly hard by restrictions on movement and by the depressed economy. I have in mind fishermen who cannot take advantage of the sardine season, because the Israeli Defence Force strictly confines them to a one kilometer limit off the coast of Gaza. I also have in mind strawberry farmers, whose harvests are going to waste as we speak on account of restrictions on, and obstacles to, export of goods from Gaza.

A closely related area where positive action should be possible is the implementation of the November 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access (or AMA). This Agreement seeks to facilitate the movement of Palestinian people and goods between the West Bank and Gaza and also between the occupied territory and Israel. The Agreement contains detailed commitments on both sides to keep border crossings open; to allow free passage of bus and truck convoys;

to remove checkpoints and barriers in the West Bank; and to continue discussions on re-opening an international airport and a seaport in Gaza. The AMA was based on the very sound principle that freedom of movement and better economic opportunities for Palestinians would translate into improved security for all. Unfortunately, over more than a year since it came into force, the Agreement on Movement and Access has been largely ignored and has had a negligible impact on Palestinian lives. Part of the Agreement's value lies in the very specific and tangible measures on which the parties agreed. I would suggest that these measures should be the basis for engaging with the parties around practical steps that are not overtly political, but which could bring significant relief to Palestinians and their economy.

I would like to turn our attention to the possibilities that we see in the arena of relations between Israelis, Palestinians and the international community. For the sake of clarity, I should emphasize that I speak to this arena not only by virtue of UNRWA's expertise and presence on the ground, but also based on UNRWA's role as a global advocate for the care and protection of Palestine refugees.

I take the view that recent events in the occupied territory suggest a number of possibilities. I would like to share with you some thoughts that I expressed last week in a statement to UNRWA's Advisory Commission in Amman.

Palestinians are at a critical juncture where they are struggling to present a united front to the world. The question on every Palestinian's mind is whether the unity government will in itself undo the knot with which the international community has bound the Palestinian Authority since early in 2006. To put it another way, will the considerable effort made by all sides (including the Saudis) at Mecca be acknowledged and rewarded? And will the Agreement be used as a platform for persuading Israelis and Palestinians to make compromises in the interests of peace?

The inter-factional fighting that raged across parts of Gaza posed a genuine threat to the existence of the Palestinian Authority as a viable entity of governance. It also confronted Palestinians with the sad, even frightening possibility that the fountainhead of their strength and survival, namely the social fabric of communal trust, kinship ties and family loyalties, was at grave risk. Palestinians had to confront the shocking – and, I might add embarrassing -- realization that their vulnerability to destruction could come—not only from across the green line—but also from within.

The Mecca Agreement was fuelled by this realization and it represents a courageous step back from that abyss. I cannot emphasize this strongly enough. There are a number of reasons why the Agreement was a real achievement. The first instinct of both parties was to settle their contest by force of arms; both were equally convinced that victory on the battlefield was achievable. The stakes and potential spoils were so high that both sides were prepared to absorb the collateral costs in civilian lives, in political support within their respective constituencies and in international public opinion.

Both sides seem to have calculated that given the degree and duration of the occupied territory's isolation, international concern would be muted and therefore manageable. I must say that they were quite right. You will remember that calls to halt the internal conflict were subdued at best. It is pertinent to bear in mind that internal conflict in Gaza had strong elements of a modern proxy war and that the hard attitudes of the protagonists reflected the views of their backers. It appears that these backers were prepared to provide arms, ammunition and encouragement in copious quantities.

The agreement to form a national unity government was reached in spite of these strong impulses to continue along the path of conflict. Is this not an example worth following? I think it is. I do not suggest that this Agreement is perfect. The point I am making is that the effort to form a national unity government

challenges us to match the courage shown by the parties and their willingness to accept compromises on positions about which they hold strong convictions. Could this be an appropriate time to relax the international community's strong insistence on isolating the current leadership of the PA? Could this be an opportune juncture to examine the possibility of establishing more flexible conditions for accepting a Palestinian partner at the negotiation table? I suggest that an affirmative answer to both questions would be in the interests of peace for Palestinians and Israelis.

It is time we had the courage to abandon the policy of isolation and replace it with an approach that is more conducive to peace and stability. Only tragic consequences will follow if we continue along the present path of isolating the Palestinian Authority and arming one side against the other. Political actors must find the wisdom and the will to cultivate leaders and people of reason and compromise on both sides. They must speak not only to the Palestinian leaders, but also to the millions of Palestinians whose greatest desire is to enjoy a normal, peaceful existence as part of a prosperous, modern global community.

Just before I left Gaza Saturday, we received reports of a series of incidents that illustrate this point. Local villagers -- ordinary Palestinians with no political agenda -- had spontaneously driven off militants preparing to fire Qassam rockets into Israel. The underlying implications are clear and quite strong: there are Palestinians who are weary of this war and ready for peace and it is to these Palestinians that we must appeal.

Abandoning our combative, adversarial approach will help to restore the credibility of the international community and to reassure all sides that it is possible to achieve peace by peaceful means. I am not alone in suggesting that this is the way to go. In a report released on 28 February, the International Crises Group asserts, and I quote: "Mecca is a prerequisite for a peace process, not an obstacle to it". As you know as well, several European leaders have flagged the

need to move away from outright rejection of the national unity government. I concede that these statements from Europe are for the moment somewhat tentative in tone. Still, I believe that it should be possible to build on them to create a wider consensus on the need for a more inclusive, supportive approach to the Palestinian Authority.

I hesitate to impose the words of a President of the United States upon an Oxford audience. However, as I prepared for this evening's talk, I came across a statement that is so pertinent that I found it irresistible. In his address to the opening session of the April 1945 San Francisco conference that established the UN Charter, President Truman made an observation, in his typically homespun manner, which in my view holds much wisdom for political actors on Palestinian issues today. He said: "Differences between men, and between nations, will always remain. In fact, if held within reasonable limits, such disagreements are actually wholesome. All progress begins with differences of opinion and moves onward as the differences are adjusted through reason and mutual understanding". I commend these words to everyone with a genuine interest in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The words have particular resonance for those in whose hands lie significant economic, military and political power. For with that power comes an awesome responsibility to promote for all peoples the high ideals upon which so many international instruments, global institutions and national constitutions are founded. This power should be exercised in favour of Palestine refugees and Palestinians as a whole.

To conclude my remarks, I return to a thought I shared at the outset about how the realities of today mirror those of 59 years ago. I have spoken about the very worrying impact of armed conflict on Palestinian lives and about how the *de facto* sanctions regime has created poverty and stifled livelihoods. I have referred to the destructive impact of the West Bank wall and the fierce regime of restrictions, arrests and prohibitions of which it is an integral part. I have mentioned the exodus of Palestinians compelled by the severity of their circumstances to seek

new lives in other countries, and remarked on how, as Palestinians depart, Israelis move in to build their homes on Palestinian land. I have also commented on the how the penetrating silence of the international community speaks volumes about our collective failure of conscience.

You may wish to take a step back and to consider that beneath the headlines, statistics and dramatic fatalities, there is a striking historical continuity in the systematic approach to use overwhelming and disproportionate force in the name of security; to separate and exclude Palestinians from the mainstream; to eject them from their land; and to occupy Palestinian land. To segregate; to exclude; to eject and to occupy: that was the sequence of events in 1948. The very same sequence defines Palestinian reality today.

I see in these parallels a dire warning. The pattern of repression has persisted for decades because it serves powerful interests that are still very much with us today. If we continue to languish in our apathy and failure to act, it is easy to predict that the future will hold more horrors for the people of Palestine.

I also see in these parallels a stern admonition to the international community. The Palestinian quest for statehood is just. That quest is recognized in international law and demanded by all precepts of fairness and humanity. As an international community, we have pledged, in UN resolutions and various other ways, to support the people of Palestine in their quest. Although we have precious little to show for the 59 years that have elapsed, the Palestinian cause is not a lost cause. My plea is that we can and should seize the opportunities that exist at the present time and thus fulfill our promises to the people of Palestine.