



World Humanitarian Day

What does World Humanitarian Day mean to the Palestinians?

19 August 2017

Around the Globe, people are caught in perpetuated conflicts caused by wars, poverty, economic inequalities, political instability and others; causing millions of civilians to flee their homes and countries. Similarly, and since 1948 Palestinians continue to endure persistent dispossession, fragmentation, and military occupation. This year, the United Nations launched a campaign that highlighted the situation of the Peoples under conflict like Palestine, demanding the international community to do everything in their 'power to protect civilians in conflict'. According to the United Nations, since 2003 World Humanitarian Day (WHD) is held annually on August 19th to 'pay tribute to aid workers who risk their lives in humanitarian service, and to rally support for people affected by crises around the world'.

The Assassination of Count Bernadotte – UN's First Mediator

The UN Mediator in Palestine, Count Folke Bernadotte was appointed by the United Nations on 20th May 1948 in the context of the Palestine question. A devoted humanitarian worker, Count Bernadotte arrived in Palestine after having chaired the Swedish Red Cross, where he had heroically rescued over 20,000 people from the horrors of the Holocaust, including thousands of Jews.

In September 1948, during the Palestinian Nakba, he wrote several reports, one stated:

“The exodus of Palestinian Arabs resulted from panic created by fighting in their community, by rumors concerning real or alleged acts of terrorism, or expulsion. It would be an offence against the principles of elemental justice if these innocent victims of the conflict were denied the right to return to their homes, while Jewish immigrants flow into Palestine, and, indeed, at least offer the threat of permanent replacement of the Arab refugees, who have been rooted in the land for centuries.”

The last significant action taken by Count Bernadotte was to secure a truce during the 1948 War. But his life was ended when an Israeli terrorist group called the 'Stern Gang', commanded by Yitzhak Shamir, who later became Israel's Prime Minister, assassinated him in Jerusalem on September 17th 1948, one day after Count Bernadotte's report was finalized. Despite his assassination, his reports served as the basis for UNGA Resolution 194 (11th December 1948) reaffirming the right of return and reparations for Palestinian refugees. The impunity granted to Israel over the assassination of Count Bernadotte has marked decades of Israeli indiscriminate attacks against civilians and UN personnel.

Israel's Disregard for its Responsibilities under International Humanitarian Law

Israel systematically violates its obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL), including the protection of the civilian population Israel occupies. Israel's settlement industrial-complex, including its illegal settlements, annexation wall, movement restrictions, and settlement enterprise continue to violate Palestine's sovereignty and the Palestinian right to self-determination, in contravention of the UN Charter and numerous UN resolutions on the matter.

Such Israeli policies have severely disturbed and hindered the invaluable humanitarian work conducted by the UN, international organizations, the European Union, civil society, and other States. This is not only the case in Gaza, which is under an illegal siege and occupation, but also in and around Occupied East Jerusalem where vulnerable populations in so-called Area C, equivalent to 61% of the Occupied West Bank reside. Aid workers suffer from constant harassment from Israeli occupying forces and illegal settlers. Over the past few years this situation has worsened with an increase in policies of forcible displacement, mainly through home demolitions and confiscation of humanitarian aid.

Israeli Attacks Against Palestine Refugees and UN Shelters in Lebanon.

When Israel occupied Lebanon in 1982, it allowed for the barbaric massacre of thousands of Palestinian civilians in two refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, administered by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). This was one of several crimes committed by Israel during its occupation of Lebanon. In 1996, Israeli occupying forces deliberately attacked a UN shelter in the southern Lebanon locality of Qana', killing 106 civilians under UN protection and severely injuring another 116, including 4 UN Peacemakers. Israel was never sanctioned for any of its crimes against civilians committed in Lebanon.

Israeli Attacks against Gaza

During its latest major attack on Gaza in 2014, Israel deliberately attacked Palestinian hospitals and UN infrastructure, including schools that were being used as shelters. In almost 50 days of systematic attacks, Israel killed 2,145 Palestinians, including 581 children. In reference to the attacks on UN shelters, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon stated, "It is a matter of the utmost gravity that those who looked to them for protection and who sought and were granted shelter there had their hopes and trust denied". Almost 70,000 civilian buildings in Gaza were either damaged partially or totally destroyed. Seventeen hospitals were damaged, 34 health clinics closed, 50 health clinics were damaged and 16 ambulances came under attack. There were at least 136 UNRWA schools that were damaged, including 3 massacres committed by Israeli bombardments of UN shelters. Though the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry concluded that there was evidence of war crimes committed by Israel in Gaza, no action has been taken since then to hold Israel accountable.

Incitement Against UN workers and Civil Society

The Government of Israel continues to incite against the role of the United Nations, including personal attacks and smearing campaigns on UN officials, from UNRWA spokespeople to the Humanitarian Coordinator. Such attacks include, attempts to dismantle UNRWA, which provides humanitarian aid and other services to millions of Palestinian refugees, banning entrance of UN officials conducting fact-

finding missions from entering the country, one being the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, among other UN officials.

Such smear campaigns, have also targeted Palestinian, Israeli, and international civil society organizations that work in the fields of humanitarian aid and human rights. Internationally recognized groups such as Al Haq, Amnesty International, B'Tselem, Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam, and the World Council of Churches, have been targeted by such campaigns. In the context of such attacks, there are reported death threats against human rights defenders, in addition to the regular obstacles imposed by the Israeli occupation to their work, including denials of entry into Occupied Palestine and confiscation of humanitarian aid.

Attacking Aid Workers with Full Impunity

Israel's utter disrespect for its obligations under international humanitarian law have been consistent with the culture of impunity it has been granted by the international community. Since the assassination of Count Bernadotte in 1948, Israeli attacks against civilian populations under occupation and aid workers have only increased. Incitement against the humanitarian work of these organizations are a staple of Israeli diplomacy and policies.

Despite its systematic and ongoing violations of the UN Charter, Israel has not only been treated with impunity, but has been rewarded: Outrageously, Israel chairs the Sixth Committee of the UN (Legal matters) and is seeking a seat at the UN Security Council.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian people continue to demand their rights as a protected people and to fully exercise their inalienable rights as recognized by the United Nations. This demand was emphasized during the recent events that took place in Jerusalem, which were the result of ongoing unlawful practices by Israel. All of which calls on the International Community to take immediate and active steps towards securing the inalienable rights of the Palestinian People.



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