

Session VIII

Case studies of Regional Discord
– Palestine and Myanmar

Ms. Salwa Duaybes (Palestine)

Activities for reconciliation in areas of conflict

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Peace and Reconciliation in the Middle East

The conflict in the Middle East started nearly 60 years ago with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 on 77% of the land of historic Palestine. The events of 1948 were preceded by years of systematic dispossession of land from its Palestinian owners into the hands of Jewish settlers which was carried out systematically by the Zionist movement as early as the late 19th century. During the 1948 war, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians either lost their lives or were forcefully displaced from their homes and land on which they depended for their livelihood and survival. Entire Communities were destroyed and families broken apart. The descendants of those families still live in appalling conditions in refugee camps scattered all over the region.

In 1967, the state of Israel acquired by force the rest of the country of Palestine further displacing approximately 325,000 Palestinians. The Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank came under Israeli military rule. The occupation has been oppressive, brutal, and dehumanizing. In June this year the Palestinians marked the 40th anniversary of the occupation.

While very few people today are argue for a reversal of the tragic events that took place in Palestine in 1948, consensus seems to exist that the establishment of a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip living in peace side by side with a secure state of Israel within the borders of 1967 is the only solution that can afford a just and lasting peace to the peoples of the region.

Peace and reconciliation in the Middle East have never been so badly needed, yet they have never seemed so remote. Peace talks have so far failed to put an end to the conflict and have only brought disappointment, misery and despair. Their failure is

mainly attributed to the fact that they have focused on relieving the symptoms of occupation rather than on putting an end to it. The result is: Neither a relief of the symptoms nor an end to occupation was achieved. Daily life on the ground has never been worse and the Palestinians continue to be denied their basic human rights including their right to self determination.

The humanitarian disaster which today drowns nearly half the Palestinian population in poverty and reliance on food aid is no doubt human-made. The dire conditions in the Occupied Palestinian territories are the result of four decades of serious human rights violations which have devastated the lives of those affected by them. Successive Israeli governments have adopted and implemented a number of measures against the Palestinian civilian population that have aimed to impoverish and dispossess an entire population in violation of international humanitarian law. The international community was largely silent and the Palestinians felt they were left alone in their struggle for freedom and dignity. Resort to equally wrongful acts and counter violence became more and more appealing and appeared to be the only "rational" practical response available.

In the Occupied Territories today while peace talks allegedly take place, punitive and preventive demolitions of houses are conducted routinely and without proper proceedings, administrative detentions and arrests of hundreds of Palestinians, including children, are conducted daily without charge or proper opportunities for appeal, tight internal closures are implemented, severely restricting movement of civilians within the West Bank and Gaza Strip and denying thousands of Palestinians access to medical and educational services and severely taxing their economic, social and religious lives, the construction and expansion of illegal settlements built on confiscated Palestinian land was actively pursued by all Israeli governments across the political spectrum. Thousands of kilometers of bypass roads were constructed to exclusively serve Jewish settlers which cut through Palestinian agricultural land separating the occupied territories into geographically disconnected areas. In recent years a separation barrier was constructed which snakes through Palestinian land and imprisons thousands of Palestinians into geographically disconnected enclaves isolating them from their agricultural land and water resources and disconnecting them from their natural communities.

In my country, no peace will bear fruit if the occupying power and its sponsors around the world fail to address the serious violations of individual and collective

rights of the Palestinians. For peace to have a chance and reconciliation to take root, an end to occupation must first be achieved. For that to happen, an immediate end to those practices must first be immediately implemented. Disrespect for the rules of international law and the failure of states to ensure respect for those rules has unnecessarily prolonged the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, prejudiced the prospects for a just and peaceful resolution to the conflict and fueled the unlawful use of force against innocent civilians.

In Korea, the same principles apply. Peace and reconciliation can only flourish in an atmosphere void of deprivation, violence and disrespect for human rights.

Churches all over the world cannot afford to be silent. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus, Churches around the world are more empowered to stand up for peace and justice. More often than not, state authorities and powerful regimes throughout history have chosen to be inspired by other doctrines and as a result humanity remains stuck with wars, internal conflicts and human suffering. The situations in Korea, South Africa and the Middle East are a few examples that come to mind.

Christian teaching is particularly strong in providing us with guidance in situations where we find ourselves provoked to act or, more importantly, when we are provoked to react. Concepts like acting with compassion and mercy are just a few examples of how we are expected not only to intervene in the world around us, but to intervene responsibly.

Churches and people of conscience are able to contribute to justice, peace and reconciliation wherever needed by first insisting that their own dealings with the powerful actors are conducted on sound moral and legal grounds. Keeping our own hands clean is our first obligation to ourselves and to others around us. Our strength comes from our adherence to principles that lie at the heart of our faith.

Everybody realizes it is intolerable when any authority exercises its power in violation of what is called peremptory norms of general international law. Tremendous human suffering will inevitably result. Those norms which were elaborated and codified in what is today known as International Law is the tool through which our values and care for the wellbeing of all peoples could be translated into effective action.

Disrespect for those rules is something people in the Middle East have in common with the Korean people. This is what the Palestinians have suffered from, and it is

what the Korean people have suffered from in many ways at different times in their history. Restoring respect for those rules is the only guarantee to putting us on the right track towards peace and reconciliation.

Neither the Palestinians, nor the Israelis nor the Koreans nor any of their leaders can afford to bear the consequences to the civilian populations of pursuing objectives, conducting struggles and managing conflicts outside the bounds of those universal rules and norms.

"Law enforcement" is essential for enabling the vulnerable and weak to remain engaged in the quest for peace when political winds blow in the opposite direction. It is the wedge that will prevent the reliance on counter violence when victims of lawlessness, violence and abuse find themselves on their own in the battle for a dignified peaceful life.

Participants of this conference face the challenge of "speaking truth to power" the challenge of making it difficult for governments to get away with practices that contradict obligations under the law and contradict the convictions and beliefs of those who elected them. It is my hope that this conference will inspire and empower us to face up to this challenge. The battle begins with each and every one of us.

Churches and ordinary citizens alike have a hand in shaping our future by giving strong clear signals to governments and powerful actors that restoring respect for the law and the principles behind it are at the top of their priorities. They can do so by making it difficult for governments to get away with decisions and actions or even statements that contradict the principles we all agree are necessary prerequisites for advancing our common human values as exemplified by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Those of us who are present and active in conflict areas face the double challenge of addressing not only governments and powerful actors but also ordinary members of our communities so that they may not fall into despair. No peace and reconciliation will be achieved before peace and unity within and among members of all faiths is first achieved. It is my hope that this conference will unite us to act effectively in this direction.

IN fulfillment of the above principles, and in pursuit of peace and out of a faith

commitment, Sabeel; a justice and peace project of Palestinian Christians in Israel-Palestine has formulated a set of principles by which Palestinian Christians, feel a just, secure, and lasting peace can be achieved in our region:

Firstly: A Theological Basis

Our faith teaches us that,

1. God creator and redeemer, loves all people equally (John 3:16, Acts 17:24-28).
2. God demands that justice be done. No enduring peace, security, or reconciliation is possible without the foundation of justice. The demands of justice will not disappear and the struggle for justice must be pursued diligently and persistently but non-violently (Jeremiah 9:23-24, Isaiah 32:16-17, Romans 12:17-21).
3. The Holy Land is God's gift to the Palestinians and Israelis. They must live justly and mercifully and be good stewards of it (Mica 6:8).
4. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is an inclusive principle that must be honoured and sought after (Mark 12:31). The Golden Rule continues to apply, "Do to others what you want them to do to you" (Mathew 7:12).
5. Faithfulness to God obliges us to work for justice, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing (Mathew 5:9, 43-45).

Secondly: A Moral Basis

1. We acknowledge the sufferings and injustices committed against Jews by the west, especially those inflicted in the holocaust. Nevertheless, they do not justify the injustices committed against Palestinians. Justice claimed by one people at the expense of another is not justice.
2. Since Israel has, by force, displaced the Palestinians, destroyed their villages and towns, denied them their basic human rights, and illegally dominated and oppressed them, it is morally bound to admit its injustice against the Palestinians and assume responsibility for it.
3. Since Israel acquired by force 77% of the land of Palestine in 1948, approximately

20% more than the United Nations had allocated, and established its state there, it is moral and right for Israel to return the whole of the areas captured in 1967, i.e. the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, to the millions of Palestinians who have yet to exercise their right to self-determination and to live in peace and security in an adequately sovereign, adequately resourced state.

4. Israel's "Law of Return" which allows any Jewish person to immigrate to Israel while denying the right of Palestinians to return to their homeland or be compensated for their loss, is discriminatory and unjust.
5. Sharing the sovereignty of Jerusalem is imperative to a moral and just peace.
6. Ideologies of militarism as well as the stockpiling of weapons are unwise and morally wrong. They sabotage the spirit and viability of peace and will not provide security either.

Thirdly: A Legal Basis

1. Occupations are inevitable outcomes of wars. They are temporary by nature. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are occupied territories and the Israeli forces must withdraw from them.
2. The Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories are illegal.
3. Israel's unilateral annexation of Jerusalem is illegal.
4. Violations of human rights such as home demolitions, land confiscation, torture, revocation of residency rights, movement restrictions, closures, and other unlawful measures are an insult to human dignity and contravene the fundamental principles of international law.

The Principles for Which Sabeel Stands

The people of the region—Palestinians and Israelis—both need and deserve a lasting peace and security. With peace and security in place, bonds of acceptance and friendship can grow. It is no service to either community to promote a peace which flouts international law, ignores justice, and ultimately cannot endure since this will

lead to continued bitterness and violence.

Sabeel strongly believes that if the following principles are to be withheld peace and reconciliation are to prevail:

1. Israel must admit that it has committed an injustice against the Palestinian people and must accept responsibility for that including responsibility for the refugees. This means that reparation must be offered to all Palestinians who have suffered as a result of the conflict since 1948 whether they are Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinians living in the west Bank and the Gaza Strip, or Palestinians living in the Diaspora. A just solution must be found for the Palestinian refugees based on international law. The road to healing and reconciliation passes through repentance, forgiveness and redress.
2. The Palestinians have a right to self determination and are entitled to their own sovereign, independent, and democratic state established on the whole of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. Israel must withdraw to the June 4, 1967 borders. No solution is acceptable if it does not guarantee the Palestinians' and Israelis' right to self-determination, independence and sovereignty.
3. Jerusalem's sovereignty must be shared by the two states of Palestine and Israel. The city must remain open for Palestinians, Israelis, and all. East Jerusalem can be the capital of Palestine while West Jerusalem can be the capital of Israel. Any agreement must protect the sanctity of the holy places and guarantee the rights of the three religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism on an equal basis.
4. All Jewish settlements, including those in East Jerusalem, are illegal under international law. All the settlements built on Palestinian soil since 1967 must be removed.
5. A peace treaty must be drawn up between the two states of Palestine and Israel guaranteeing the full sovereignty and territorial integrity of each including recognized borders, water rights and other natural resources.
6. Both states must fully guarantee the respect and protection of the human rights of all their citizens, including freedom of religion, in accordance with all international conventions.

Finally, at every turn, the principle of justice must be upheld. Peace initiatives must

be scrutinized through the eyes of justice. Unless justice is rendered and security achieved no peace will be achieved. A just solution must include an equal measure of justice and security for both sides to make it viable. Otherwise it will not lead to a permanent peace.

Justice alone guarantees a peace that will lead to reconciliation and a life of security and prosperity to all the peoples of the region. By standing on the side of justice, we open ourselves to the work of peace and working for peace makes us children of God.

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it"(Mathew 7:13-14).