

Human Rights Day Celebration in Gaza

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It was Dec 10, 1948 when the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Today this document is the most widely translated and perhaps the most referenced.

And as the international community and media around the world eagerly await the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR,) some communities still remain under the boots of domination and oppression. And no modern community has suffered more than the people of Palestine . This suffering has gotten worse since the Palestinian people exercised their democratic right and overwhelmingly elected Hamas- an entity that both Israel and the U.S. consider a terrorist organization- as its legitimate representative in January 2006.

UDHR is a powerful fusion of religious and secular principles whose aim is to uphold the existential values that sustain humanity. Its profound importance is based on its recognition of the fundamental rights of all human beings to breathe life in peace and through liberty, to have equal access to justice, and be able to live in dignity. However, UDHR is not without shortcoming. The document is simply a declaration not an international treaty that is binding. And this perhaps explains the inconsistency in its application and why the state of Israel could continue its inhumane treatment of the Palestinian people with impunity.

Ironically, several months ago, the state of Israel also celebrated its sixtieth anniversary. Some welcomed this historic occasion as a celebration of a triumph for justice while others bemoaned it as a glorified failure of the state of Israel to confront its bloody past and oppressive present!

In his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, documents horrific accounts that began with systematic extermination of villagers that continue today mainly by way of inhumane treatment, uprooting of communities for land grab, and economic strangulation. And as a result of a sustained media blackout, most of the world remains misinformed or woefully ignorant about the miserable condition in which the Palestinian people, especially in Gaza , live.

Some global leaders and Nobel Peace Prize laureates such as former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have, in one way or another, condemned Israel 's treatment of the Palestinian people.

"The world is witnessing a terrible human rights crime in Gaza , where a million and a half human beings are being imprisoned with almost no access to the outside world. An entire population is being brutally punished," wrote Carter in an article published by the Guardian

newspaper. The world “must not stand idle while innocent people are treated cruelly,” said Carter. “It is time for strong voices in Europe, the US , Israel and elsewhere to speak out and condemn the human rights tragedy that has befallen the Palestinian people,” he added.

Carter was accused of anti-Semitism for comparing the Israeli treatment of the Palestinian people to that of the old Apartheid system of South Africa in his book Palestine : Peace not Apartheid. However, he was neither the first nor the last high profile leader to make that comparison.

Buried through the pages of history are the words of Mandela when he, On Dec 4, 1997, in a speech delivered during the commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People said “... the UN took a strong stand against apartheid; and over the years, an international consensus was built, which helped to bring an end to this iniquitous system. But we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians”.

Moreover, Tutu, as a special UN envoy that led a fact-finding mission to Gaza last May, described what he witnessed as a “gross violation of human rights” that is contrary to the teachings of Holy Scripture. Depicting the daunting impact of the economic blockade, he said the Gaza strip was “forlorn, deserted, desolate and eerie place.” Furthermore, he talked about the children whose conditions are seldom covered in the evening news: “We were struck particularly by the absence of the sounds of children shrieking and playing.”

While they are far from making an immediate impact that would free the Palestinian people from its current misery, these vocal leaders have triggered a global, conscience-based movement that would continue the arduous struggle till Israel profoundly changes its treatment of the Palestinian people.

The latest to join these champions of conscience is Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann- the current president of the United Nations General Assembly.

Like those before him, he too compared Israel ‘s treatment of the Palestinian people to “the apartheid of an earlier era.” And like those before him, he too was accused of being “Israel-hater” and being driven by anti-Semitic motives.

Going public with what no UN high official has ever vocalized, and others would only whisper, d’Escoto addressed the de facto double standard that exists and how the world accepted an endless peace process that leads to no where. The failure to establish a Palestinian state made “a mockery of the United Nations and greatly hurts its image and prestige,” he said.

Recognizing the Israeli Palestinian issue as a case of yesterday’s oppressed people doing the same to others, d’Escoto said the cruelty of the Holocaust affords Israel neither a justification nor “the right to abuse others, especially those who historically have such deep and exemplary relations with the Jewish people.”

D’Escoto urged a paradigm shifting action that would end the human suffering and not just offer symbolic rhetoric. He called on the international community to consider stricter measures against Israelmeasures similar to those taken against South Africa in the 1980s that include “boycott, divestment and sanctions.”

Whether in Israel , Sudan , Ethiopia , Somalia or any where else, the vicious cycle of

oppression and human misery can only be broken when all people of conscience rise to resist it, and pressure the powers that be to heed the moral will of the people.

Abukar Arman is a freelance writer whose articles and analysis have appeared in the pages of various media groups and think tanks.

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