

Statement by Ammar Hijazi, First Secretary, Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations at the Thematic Discussion on Drought and Desertification (CSD-16), New York, Wednesday 7 May 2008

Thank you madam Chair,

The Palestinian People share the same challenges confronting neighboring countries in our region when it comes to drought and desertification. But as a people living under foreign occupation they face additional and very burdensome obstacles in utilizing their water resources and addressing the problems of drought and desertification. In fact, the scarcity of water and desertification burdening the Palestinian society are not solely the result of natural causes. Rather, they are the also a direct result of a systematic destruction of agricultural lands and resources by the Occupying power.

Drought and desertification in Palestine is due to scarcity of water, limited land and rapid population growth, but this harsh reality is further exacerbated by illegal actions undertaken by the Israeli occupation, including land confiscation, which has slashed Palestinian green lands, forests, and biodiversity from 4.3% in 1998 to below 1.5% in 2004. This dramatic loss of green lands and biodiversity is also due to the Israeli occupation's continued and methodical building of illegal settlements and the wall. Additionally, these punitive policies have entailed the uprooting of millions of trees, including 1.5 million olive trees. In other cases, like Gaza, Israeli occupation's military attacks, razing of land, and siege on basic commodities like fuel have turned 75% of Palestinian fields in northern Gaza into parched and arid deserts.

It must be absolutely clear that the illegal exploitation and degradation of the natural resources of the occupied Palestinian Territory by Israel, the Occupying Power, have also contributed to drought and desertification in Palestine. Here, allow me to remind that the illegal separation Wall in the West Bank will de facto annex approximately 46% of the West Bank's most valuable water resources, including the rich Western Aquifer and at least over 10% of its most fertile land. In fact the occupation power already uses 73 per cent of the water available from Palestinian West bank aquifers, while Palestinians are only allowed to use 17 per cent. In the Jordan Valley alone, 41 illegal Israeli settlements consume the equivalent of 75% of the water that the entire Palestinian population of the West Bank uses for domestic and urban uses. This has directly affected agriculture and the ability of various Palestinian sectors to viably undertake projects that require unfettered access to water.

Madam Chair,

The restrictive and punitive reality of the occupation also translates into a ban on Palestinians' ability to implement projects in the area of water and environment such as sewage treatment, especially in the Gaza Strip. Clearly this affects the Palestinian Authority's ability to cope with on-going challenges related to water availability, including the ability to use treated water for agricultural purposes.

This year's below average rainfall is not the main reason behind threats facing agriculture, livestock farming, and availability water. The latest OCHA and FAO reports confirm that "livestock farming in the West Bank was already under serious stress before the drought began due to restricted access to range land, occupation settler activity, increased price of water and fodder and a drop in market demands." As such, the viability of this important livelihood is under severe threat also because these farmers are denied access to over 30% of land area of the West Bank, in addition to Israeli occupation infrastructure, which occupies 41% of the West Bank.

Finally Madam Chair,

The world needs to uphold its commitment to save no effort in ensuring that children and all civilian populations that suffer disproportionately the consequences of armed conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies including foreign occupation are given every assistance so that their lives can return to normal and they can be empowered to look forward and work towards a better future. Palestine should not be the exception. Hence, we expect the full due support of the CSD and look forward to give special attention to these unique circumstances and challenges in the chairman's summary.