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Bethlehem 2000

Letter dated 28 September 1999 from the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People addressed to the Secretary-General

On behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I wish to draw your attention once again to a historic and momentous event that will begin in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem at Christmas 1999 and conclude at Easter 2001. Millions of pilgrims from all parts of the world will arrive in Bethlehem to mark the dawning of the new millennium and to celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. This unique millennial gathering should allow all of us to embrace the historic and cultural heritage of the city Bethlehem and to join hands in the spirit of dialogue, reconciliation and forgiveness, coexistence and peace.

In 1997, the Palestinian Authority launched the Bethlehem 2000 Project aimed at the restoration of religious and historical sites in Bethlehem, as well as the reconstruction of its infrastructure, so that the city would be ready to welcome its visitors in a meaningful and gracious manner. However, the years of conflict that have plagued this land have also taken its toll on Bethlehem, making its rehabilitation an enormous and daunting task. The generous support of the international community, therefore, has been and remains vital to moving the Project forward and ensuring that it is completed on time.

Recognizing the international significance of this undertaking, the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People in May 1998 requested the inclusion of an item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly (A/53/141).

Following a debate on the item, the General Assembly adopted, without a vote, resolution 53/27 of 18 November 1998. In the resolution, the Assembly, *inter alia*, expressed support for the Bethlehem 2000 Project and called for increased assistance and engagement by the international community as a whole to ensure its success.

During the past year, in response to the call by the General Assembly, the Committee has embarked on a programme of activities aimed at creating awareness of and promoting support for the Bethlehem 2000 Project. In cooperation with the Government of Italy and the Holy See, the Committee convened the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, which was

held on 18 and 19 February 1999 at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome. The Conference was attended by many high-level participants, including the Honourable Francesco Rutelli, Mayor of Rome; Sir Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary for Political Affairs and Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations; His Eminence Roger Cardinal Etchegaray, President of the Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and Head of the Holy See delegation; Mr. Jacques Baudin, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Senegal; Mr. Azeddine Laraki, Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference; Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director-General of FAO; and Mr. Lamberto Dini, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic. Among the eminent personalities who spoke at the Conference were the Honourable Luciano Violante, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, and the Honourable Domenico Fisichella, Senator, Vice-President of the Italian Senate and Representative of the Honourable Nicola Mancino, President of the Italian Senate. The Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Yasser Arafat, also attended the Conference and made an important statement.

The Committee delegation to the Conference was composed of Ambassador Ravan A. G. Farhâdi (Afghanistan), Vice-Chairman of the Committee; Ambassador Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla (Cuba), Vice-Chairman of the Committee; Ambassador George Saliba (Malta), its Rapporteur; Ambassador Mahawa Bangoura Camara (Guinea); Ambassador Nasser Al-Kidwa (Palestine); and myself.

A large number of eminent personalities from various parts of the world, including representatives of different religious denominations, addressed the following themes: celebrating the new millennium in a global vision of peace and reconciliation; and preparing for the millennial celebrations.

At the conclusion of the Conference, the participants adopted the Rome Declaration, in which they promoted the Bethlehem 2000 Project launched by the Palestinian Authority and highlighted the urgency of bringing economic recovery and prosperity to the Palestinian people. They welcomed the adoption by the General Assembly of resolution 53/27 and considered it a clear reflection of the world community's strong desire to bring the era of dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation to the people of Bethlehem and the entire Middle East. The participants also expressed the view that freedom of movement and unhindered access to the Holy Places in Bethlehem by the faithful of all religions and nationalities were essential to the city's revival.

In the context of the Conference, the Committee delegation, led by its Chairman, was received by His Excellency Dr. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, President of the Italian Republic, who expressed the readiness of his country to continue to make every effort aimed at bringing the peace process back on track. The delegation of the Committee also had an audience with His Holiness Pope John Paul II, who welcomed the Committee's endeavours and sent his blessings for the success of the coming celebrations in Bethlehem. During these important visits, Sir Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary for Political Affairs and Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, accompanied the Committee delegation.

In preparation for the Conference and with the financial assistance from the Government of Italy, the Division for Palestinian Rights, in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, had produced a background note on the United Nations involvement in the Bethlehem 2000 Project entitled "The United Nations and Bethlehem 2000".

The Committee has also undertaken to build up support for the Project during its international meetings organized in Windhoek (April 1999) and Cairo (June 1999), as well as at meetings with representatives of intergovernmental organizations. In the course of the

year, the Bureau of the Committee has held consultations on the various aspects of its programme of work, with special emphasis on the issue of Bethlehem 2000, with representatives of the European Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the League of Arab States.

A Palestinian exhibition entitled "Bethlehem 2000", which included works of art and photography from Bethlehem, was on display in connection with the annual observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, in November 1998, at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The exhibition was also displayed at the meetings organized under the Committee's auspices in Rome and Windhoek.

The United Nations system took an early lead in offering support to the Project. Since the beginning of 1997, the United Nations Development Programme has initiated a wide range of infrastructural improvements and the development of the tourism sector in close coordination with the Municipality of Bethlehem. The World Bank and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization have, through their active involvement in specific projects on the ground, greatly strengthened the viability of this initiative. The contribution of donor countries, the European Commission, non-governmental organizations and individuals has been essential to the success of the Project. What has been achieved so far is encouraging, but much more remains to be done. With the continued support of the international community, it is hoped that the goals of the Project can be achieved.

Bethlehem's message of universal peace and reconciliation resonates not only for the peoples of the region, but for all humankind. It is with this inspiration that the Bethlehem 2000 celebration should usher in a new era of understanding, tolerance and peace. The Committee wishes to take this opportunity to renew its call upon the international community to spare no effort in supporting the Bethlehem 2000 Project in order to ensure its success. The Committee is also hopeful that people from all over the world will come to the birthplace of Jesus Christ and join in the historic celebration in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter circulated as a document of the General Assembly under agenda item 36.

(Signed) Ibra Deguène **Ka**
Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the
Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People