

European NGOs Meet on Palestine

The third UN European regional Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) symposium on the question of Palestine, and the sixth UN international NGO meeting on the question of Palestine, were held in Vienna, Austria, between August 28th and September 1st.

The European NGO symposium, which was organized by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, attracted over 100 NGOs. Among the speakers who addressed the symposium were Mikko Lohikoski, chairman of the European Coordinating Committee for NGOs on the question of Palestine; Jean-Marie Lambert, executive director of the International Committee for NGOs on the question of Palestine; and Yasir Abed Rabbo, member of the PLO Executive Committee.

Among the proposals presented to the two-day symposium were a peace march with international participation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, and an international student strike in solidarity with Palestinian schools, in an effort to pressure the Israeli government to reopen these schools.

The plenary sessions touched on the issues of the intifada, the international peace conference and implementation of Palestinian self-determination with emphasis on the role of Europe.

REGIONAL SYMPOSIUM FINAL DECLARATION

In the final declaration issued by the symposium, the intifada was posited as the main factor behind recent developments which help towards achievement of the goal of self-determination for the Palestinian people. Welcoming the results of the November 1988 PNC and the initiation of the PLO-US dialogue, the symposium expressed hope that «the US government will not use this dialogue as a reason to delay the preparations for the international peace conference...»

The declaration appreciated the recognition of the State of Palestine by some European states and called upon others to follow their example. The symposium participants consider that «Israel's continued refusal to acknowledge the most elementary rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to self-determination and right to return to their homeland, is ultimately contrary to the best interests of Israel.» Shamir's plan was labeled an attempt to «cover Israel's illegal occupation and intensified repression of the intifada....» and accordingly judged «totally unacceptable.»

The symposium expressed deep concern over the increased violations of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, and deplored «the grossly inadequate measures to control the violence of Jewish settlers.» The declaration appealed to the Security Council to consider the deployment of a UN peace-keeping force to safeguard the physical security of the inhabitants.»

WORKSHOPS

A series of workshops focused on the principles and practical means for carrying out solidarity activities in different fields.

One workshop focused on Palestinian trade with Europe: how the NGOs could assist in developing trade links between Europe and Palestinian producers and exporters. Among other things, it was decided that finance for income generating projects in the territories should take the form of direct investment rather than grants; this would confer a considerable degree of protection on these projects.

A second workshop bore the title: EEC and Palestine - Towards a More Constructive Policy. This group discussed public information, cooperation, twinning arrangements and lobbying activities to influence public opinion and government positions to be more favorable towards the question of Palestine.

A third workshop discussed the involvement of Jewish communities in Europe, noting that many Jewish individuals and organizations were active in the peace movement, but the Jewish communities as such were not. There was great diversity of opinion on this issue, but it was agreed that the starting point was promoting «dialogue with and within Jewish communities on the issue of the international peace conference.»

The workshop on building the Palestinian education system had the advantage of being attended by five educators from the West Bank and Gaza. A review of the state of Palestinian education under occupation concluded with assessing the new reality: «Under the impact of this enforced 'school vacation' the students went through a new socialization and cooperation process that confronted educators with a new kind of student population: A new understanding of self-reliance and rejection of dusty hierarchies. And the educators found that the previous curricula had too much 'book wisdom' and not enough societal relevance... Out of the old and new experiences, the demand for a new Palestinian educational system evolved. And there are concrete proposals towards such a new comprehensive and specifically Palestinian curriculum...»

The workshop participants discussed how international cooperation, sponsorship and volunteers could contribute to and provide a form of security for local Palestinian efforts in the educational field. Among the workshop's recommendations was that established partnerships between Israeli and