

The Visa Revisited

Among the issues raised prior to the convening of the General Assembly was the question of whether or not the US should grant Yasir Arafat, President of the State of Palestine, a visa in order to attend the 44th session. In fact, Arafat hadn't requested a visa to the US, but nevertheless, with the turmoil which ensued last year over Shultz's refusal to grant him a visa, on the pretext that the PLO is backing anti-Israeli «terrorism,» and the subsequent transferring of the UN debate on Palestine to Geneva, it was a topic uppermost in many minds.

Many pro-Israeli organizations lobbied against a visa claiming that, «Mr. Arafat has not been cooperating with American Middle East peace efforts» (*Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, October 1989). This excuse is, of course, ludicrous since the PLO is trying to facilitate the peace process. If the denial of visas is based upon this criteria, then the majority of Israeli officials would be denied visas. Shamir blatantly violates US wishes and international consensus by continuing to build Israeli settlements in the occupied territories; he has excluded residents of East Jerusalem from his election plan and yet he is *cooperating* with the peace process? Another provocative question is simply that if the US can hold political talks with the PLO, then why can't it grant Arafat a visa?

Meanwhile, 136 members of Congress (58 members of the House of Representatives and 68 Senators) urged US President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker, to deny Arafat a visa if he should seek one to address the General Assembly. Claiming that Arafat has not lived up to his promises of last December to renounce terrorism and recognize the right of Israel to exist, they stated, «The PLO is on a collision course with the peace process. Arafat and the PLO must reaffirm and implement in deed and in word, the statement of just nine months ago» (AP, September 27).

Subsequently, the US State Department approved many visa applications for PLO officials. The play-up of the visa issue dominated the press due to US and Zionist efforts to use the concept of terrorism in an attempt to discredit the intifada and the PLO at the UN; and promote the Shamir plan.

Resolutions

Three resolutions concerning the Palestinian question were passed in the recent period. In late August, the Security Council adopted a resolution deplored Israel's expulsion policy, after the expulsion of five Palestinians from the occupied territories. The resolution passed 14-0, with the US abstaining.

A second resolution was passed by the General Assembly on October 6th, condemning «Israel's escalated brutal measures against Palestinian civilians» in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The resolution was passed by a vote of 140-2 (the US and Israel voting against) and six abstentions. The resolution also expressed «profound shock at the escalated brutal measures taken against Palestinian civilians, the indiscriminate killing of unarmed Palestinian civilians and the recent actions of ransacking the houses of defenseless citizens in the Palestinian town of Beit Sahour» (AP, October 9).

The third resolution was passed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), concerning economic development in the occupied territories (later in text).

Yet another resolution was taken up at the UN while the General Assembly was taking up the annual report of the credentials committee. This committee is the one which recommends the seating of all members of the world body. Libya raised a point of order, saying that Israel's credentials should not be accepted. This has been brought up annually since 1982 by different Arab countries, contending that Israel should be expelled since it is an international outlaw defying UN resolutions that call for withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories.

But rather than this point of order being discussed, Denmark submitted a resolution that there should be no discussion on this. The vote on the Danish resolution was 95-37, with 15 abstentions, as reported on October 17th. Last year's vote was 95-41 with seven abstentions. Although only the 15-member Security Council has the authority to expel or admit a new member, the General Assembly can bar a nation from participating in the assembly's work, as is the case with South Africa.

Still another resolution was submitted by Kuwait to the UN Security Council on November 7th concerning Israeli repression in the occupied territories. The resolution called for international delegations to the occupied territories to see first-hand the Israeli practices against the Palestinian residents. It also stated that Israel's actions are in violation of the 1949 Geneva Convention which calls for the protection of civilians in times of war. Citing examples of inhumane Israeli practices, the resolution named the siege of the West Bank town of Beit Sahour. The resolution called for Israel to return the confiscated property. The vote was 14-1, with the US using its veto to block the resolution.

The US has historically used its veto power to protect Israel from international isolation, and Israel has used this backing to totally disregard UN resolutions. The US has exercised its veto power 29 times since 1973, to block condemnations of Israel in the UN Security Council. The UN General Assembly has the power to pass resolutions, but is powerless to implement them. Nonetheless, UN resolutions are of immense importance in terms of moral support to the Palestinians on the international level.

UNESCO

Another arena of struggle, alongside the UN General Assembly's 44th session, was the month-long UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization) conference