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**Remarks by U.S. Representative Betty McCollum
to the
United Nations Committee on the
Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People
November 12, 2020**

Good morning. I am pleased to join you today from St. Paul, Minnesota.

Ambassador Niang, I am grateful for the invitation to share my efforts to promote the rights of the Palestinian people with the Committee.

Ambassador Mansour, please accept my warmest greetings.

And, it is an honor to join my parliamentary colleagues, the Honorable Maria Arena and the Honorable Mandla Mandela.

As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, I am one voice and one vote representing a constituency of 700,000 people. I am also one of a small group of Members of Congress who vocally support Palestinian rights.

Palestinians deserve peace, security, human rights, and the right to self-determination. They also deserve a future filled with hope, opportunity, and prosperity.

The people of Israel also deserve peace and security. And, as you know, the U.S. government subsidizes Israel's security with billions of dollars in military assistance, a policy strongly supported by Congress.

Until recently, my government also provided the Palestinian people with economic and humanitarian assistance intended to foster conditions for a just and final negotiated peace. The goal has been a two-state solution with an independent Palestinian state. Advancing peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians was U.S. policy.

Under President Trump that policy no longer exists. The Trump administration expelled Palestinian diplomats from Washington and cut off economic assistance to the Palestinian people. My government has not only abandoned the Palestinian people, it has inflicted hardship upon them. This now includes efforts to permanently annex Palestinian lands.

My nation's president has broken trust and abandoned shared international values on issues where almost universal consensus exists – human rights, climate change, and advancing a just Middle East peace. These actions have caused significant damage to long standing relationships and to my country's standing in the world.

Yet, in politics, change is possible. The reality that a new U.S. president – Joe Biden – will take office in January offers hope. The U.S. will once again work with the world community, not against it.

Healing the damage and betrayal inflicted on the Palestinian people by President Trump will be difficult. If it is possible, it will require the new U.S. administration to prioritize respectful, substantive diplomatic re-engagement with the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian civil society. Actions and time will determine whether trust can be restored.

And, when the Biden Administration does engage, the Palestinian people deserve to have questions answered: After decades of military occupation, human rights violations, settlement expansion, home demolitions, and a de facto apartheid – is the Israeli government interested in a just peace?

And, another question: Have joint actions by the Trump administration and the Israeli government, along with the failure of the international community to protect Palestinian rights, extinguished the prospect for Palestinian self-determination?

These are questions that reflect reality, a reality that must be confronted by all who believe in peace, justice, equality, and security for the Palestinian people and the people of Israel.

My efforts to promote Palestinian rights started when a 2013 UNICEF report was brought to my attention. It was entitled “Children in Israeli Military Detention.” The report stated that *“Ill-treatment of Palestinian children in the Israeli military detention system appears to be widespread, systematic and institutionalized.”*

I trust UNICEF and their report opened my eyes.

Israel's systemic abuse and torture has been going on for years. Thousands of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank aged between 12 and 17 have been taken from their homes in the middle of the night by Israeli soldiers.

They are interrogated without parents or lawyers present; emotionally, psychologically, and physically abused; and, then held for weeks and months in pretrial detention, often unlawfully transferred to prisons and detention centers inside Israel. Israeli military courts are not independent or impartial.

Children face military judges that are active duty or reserve duty officers in the Israeli military. In this context, regardless of guilt or innocence, Palestinian children overwhelmingly plead guilty because it is the fastest way to get out of the system.

International law and international juvenile justice standards demand that detention be used only as a measure of last resort. The best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in all actions involving a person under 18 years old.

When it is normal for youth to be targeted for arrest, ill-treated, denied access to counsel during interrogations, and held in pretrial custodial detention, there is no justice and the system is not just.

Israel's system of military child detention is brutal, cruel, and unnecessary. It is a weapon of military occupation that imposes collective trauma and control over Palestinian families. It is a blatant violation of international humanitarian law. And, it has nothing to do with Israel's security.

In 2017 and most recently in 2019, I introduced legislation in Congress titled: "*Promoting Human Rights for Palestinian Children Living Under Israeli Military Occupation*" (H.R. 2407). This legislation places conditions on U.S. security assistance to any country, including Israel, and prohibits U.S. tax dollars from being used to support or enable the military detention of Palestinian children.

It is the first bill ever introduced in Congress to promote or protect Palestinian rights and it is unlikely to pass Congress. But the bill does have 26 colleagues as courageous co-sponsors and the support of nearly 50 human rights and civil society organizations, along with faith-based organizations representing Jews, Muslims, and Christians. We are using the bill to organize and activate civil society to inform and pressure lawmakers at a time when systemic racial injustice and disparities are priority issues.

Another issue of great concern is the threat of further Israeli annexation of Palestinian lands. A centerpiece of Israeli politics for some time, annexation continues to be a direct threat to Palestinians and their right to self-determination.

Because of the Trump administration's role in enabling this threat, in August of 2020, I introduced a bill called the "*Israeli Annexation Non-Recognition Act*" (H.R. 8050). The bill prohibits any U.S. government agency or department from extending assistance or legitimacy to any area of the Occupied West Bank annexed by Israel.

While groundbreaking, my actions are actually quite limited. I am simply working to ensure that U.S. obligations under both U.S. and international law are respected and upheld.

These two bills are also intended to send a clear message – a message to my colleagues, to the American people, and to the Palestinian people. In Congress, where Palestinian rights are ignored, I want the world to know that there are American political leaders who respect the rights and dignity of the Palestinian people.

Palestinian dreams for freedom, justice, equality, and self-determination are legitimate. Every Palestinian mother and father want a life free from military occupation and systemic discrimination for their child. And, every Palestinian child's life is precious.

It is my hope that Parliamentarians from across the globe will find common purpose and work together in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Parliamentarians have the power to shift the discourse and promote rights-respecting policies, foster constructive dialogue, and work towards a more peaceful future for Palestinians and Israelis.

I would welcome the opportunity to collaborate and work with parliamentary colleagues in such a manner.

Ambassador Niang, I am extremely grateful to this United Nations committee for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts and my work.

Thank you.