

**ADDRESS BY Ronnie Kasrils MP, Minister of Water Affairs and
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TO PALESTINE SOLIDARITY CONFERENCE

LONDON 30 NOVEMBER 2002

It is an honour to be invited to speak at such an important conference

Our world is a dangerous place with the threat of war over Iraq and unresolved conflicts in several hot-spots. Yet no conflict is more acute than the suffering of our Palestinian Brothers & Sisters where the longest running military occupation continues with seemingly no end in sight.

I speak as a former military commander in the struggle against apartheid.

Now, in our free non-racial South Africa, I am in the Cabinet as Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry. I speak here in my personal capacity and I am proud of the role my government is playing to help find a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Water and forestry are important to understanding the Israeli oppression of Palestinians. I shall return to this in due course.

We in SA know about racial oppression.

We fought it and defeated it because it was unjust

We fought it to be free to rebuild our country

Yet let me declare without hyperbole that the violence of the apartheid regime, as inhuman as it was, “was a picnic” (in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu) in comparison with the utter brutality of Israel’s occupation of Palestine.

I refer to the whole of Biblical Palestine from which Palestinian Arabs have been driven or are struggling to survive from the 1948 ethnic cleansing to the violence in the occupied West Bank and Gaza today.

We did not see tanks with guns blazing protecting armoured bulldozers reducing homes and bones to dust.

We did not see helicopter gunships “taking out” militants with their families, children and their homes with calculated precision!

In South Africa we did not see the destruction by bombing of apartment blocks such as Rafah in the Gaza Strip where children were sleeping. We did not see town centres such as Jenin and Ramallah razed to the ground reminiscent of the bloody suppression of the Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Second World War.

We experienced the brutality of repression and the suffering it caused. We also saw the brutalisation of young white soldiers who, with white South Africans generally, were brutalised. We saw in apartheid South Africa the traumatising of our whole society. Britain’s Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs sees the same thing in Israel. He comments on the corroding of the society by the brutal occupation and how it is undermining the highest ideals of Judaism.

We see the same suffering under apartheid paralleled in the lives of generations of Palestinians. We see the suffering of people prevented from going to a doctor; of ambulances being stopped and of pregnant women forced to give birth at checkpoints. We saw similar things in South Africa but not on such a scale for such long periods of time. Military checkpoints and curfews in South Africa were sporadic, 24 hours duration, not months on end, and nowhere near as infamous.

We know about checkpoints and fences from the bantustanisation of our country with artificial boundaries, with migrant labour, with a Group Areas Act that determined where people could live and work.

There are no prizes for guessing who had the best and who had the worst of land and property and jobs.

Israeli state policy has always been to drive all Palestinian Arab people out of their land of birth, where their ancestors lived and tilled the soil for centuries

The boundaries of the state have steadily expanded until 22 percent of it is nominally left to the Palestinians. Under apartheid the indigenous black majority were left 13% of the land – the whites had seized the rest.

There are about one million Palestinians who are citizens of a supposedly democratic Israel, but they are denied many rights of citizens. They may not acquire land or property.

“92 % of the land falls under the administration of the Jewish National Fund, and cannot be sold to non-Jews. Result: the Israeli Arabs who make up 19% of the population own only 4% of the land.” (The Jewish Telegraphic Agency.)

Where will their children live when they are adults and need a home in which to raise their own families? Apartheid operated something similar under the Group Areas Act and Land Act.

Israel has been created by land theft on a grand scale

This theft has been accompanied by falsehoods:

“Palestinians abandoned their land and effectively gave it to Israel,” in 1948. A monstrous lie that hides the massacres, deliberate destruction of villages and ethnic cleansing. They claim that invading Arab states broadcast instructions for the Palestinians to flee. The BBC monitoring archives records not a single such call.

General Dayan admitted that there was not an Israeli village or settlement that had not been built on an Arab village. The Arab names of the villages have been obliterated from maps as they were physically obliterated and their people driven into exile.

This theft of land continues to this day. Palestinians are remarkably generous, prepared to accept the 22 per cent of their own land in the West Bank and Gaza as the basis of their independent state, yet Israel continues to colonise more land.

Zionist settlers, some who were Russian or American citizens yesterday, lord it from settlement hilltops in that emasculated 22 per cent area and then defend the newly stolen land with the backing of the Israel Defence Force's enormous firepower.

The theft of land has serious economic consequences. In an area as water-stressed as Palestine, land without water is useless.

Israel has stolen over 80 percent of the Jordan waters and the West Bank aquifer system for their economy, destroying the Palestinian economy in the process.

Israeli consumption of water per capita is six times that of Palestinians. The illegal Israeli settlers take twelve times more water than Palestinians for their swimming pools and garden sprinklers while Palestinians struggle to survive in the hot desert climate. For me this is one of the starkest, most iniquitous comparisons with apartheid.

Over 700,000 olive and orange trees have been destroyed by the Israelis. This is an act of sheer vandalism from a state that claims to practise conservation of the environment. How appalling and shameful!

The Israelis say they do this for security reasons: to build apartheid like razor wire fences and military roads.

But the real reason is to destroy the Arab economy and make the Palestinians destitute. To ruin them. To drive them away through sheer destitution; a form of ethnic cleansing.

Trees require water. Israel with the help of the Jewish National Fund, supported by Zionists all over the world, has created new plantations and forests, and new lakes, for leisure activities and water sports.

These facilities have been created on stolen land. They have been created with stolen water. They have been created at the expense of the blood and tears of countless Palestinians.

Israelis claim that they are the chosen people, the elect of God and find a biblical justification for their racism and Zionist exclusivity. This is just like the Afrikaners of apartheid South Africa, who also had the biblical notion that the land was their God-given right. Like the Zionists who claimed that Palestine in the 1940s was “a land without people” for “a people without land” so the Afrikaner settlers spread the myth that there were no black people in South Africa when they first settled in the 17th Century. They conquered by force of arms and terror and the provocation of a series of bloody colonial wars of conquest. The Zionists propaganda machine was more efficient in covering up such outrages, than their apartheid counterparts.

There are other things we South Africans recognise in the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination and human rights. Human beings when oppressed tend, sooner or later, to struggle for freedom. Repression of that just struggle leads to resistance. Often the more brutal the repression the more intense the resistance. The repressed are demonised as terrorists to justify ever-greater violations of their rights. We have the absurdity that the victims are blamed for the violence meted out against them. Both Apartheid and Israel are prime examples of terrorist states blaming the victims!

Every successive Israeli Government has practised forms of repression and use of military power to impose their will. The depths of violence and systematic brutality have been reached during Sharon's bloody rein. We saw the same crude attempt to find a military solution in apartheid South Africa. That attempt failed, just as it will fail in Palestine. But at what cost in

human lives, in pain and suffering on all sides, Arabs and Jews alike? It is not the victims who are to be blamed but the perpetrators of colonial style conquest. The blood of Palestinian and Israeli victims are on Sharon's hands, and the Zionist programme.

I now speak with another hat. As a person who was born Jewish, I am morally obliged to speak out against what is being done by the Zionist State of Israel to the Palestinian people since Israel claims to act on behalf of Jews everywhere. I must cry out, as I do with other like-minded South Africans of Jewish descent: "Not in my name!". I am certain that the attempt to destroy the Palestinian people will fail, just as oppression failed in South Africa. The courage of the Palestinian people coupled with the courage of the Israeli war resisters and progressive Israelis, will be victorious.

Whites who opposed apartheid, including young soldiers who were war resisters refusing to make war on South Africa's black people, were called traitors by the apartheid authorities and their supporters. I declare for Not in My Name in South Africa that criticism of Israel's Zionist expansionism is not anti-Semitism. It is an affirmation of the humanity we share with all people.

This conference will not be a talking shop and we South Africans are inspired by the dedicated work of the British Solidarity Campaign on Palestine.

Together we must work for international action in solidarity with the Palestinian people, be they in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel or the Diaspora.

The people of Britain and the world helped through anti-apartheid mobilisation to isolate apartheid South Africa. You were part of our struggle by isolating the apartheid regime politically, economically, diplomatically, socially, culturally and militarily.

By isolating Israel we will bring about a solution to the conflict in the interest of Jews and Arabs alike, so that all can be spared the present agony and grief and together find peace, security, friendship and reconciliation. South Africa is an example of what is possible.

We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Israel's troops and settlers from the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

We demand that Israel negotiate in good faith with the acknowledged leaders of the Palestinian people.

We demand that they cease their claim to decide who those representatives should be!

The revolutionary alliance of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions has committed itself to solidarity with the Palestinian people in their struggle for self-determination, for freedom and dignity in their own independent state, and I bring greetings from that mighty alliance.

Blacks and whites in South Africa, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindi and indeed from all religious groups, and non-believers, are uniting behind the call of Palestinians and those Israelis who want a just solution in the Holy Land. We want to be part of a powerful international movement of solidarity with Palestine and with the peace movement in Israel.

I am proud of my government's stand on the rights of the Palestinians and in support of peace in the region. To quote our Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aziz Pahad, "The international community must step up assistance to both sides in building a common vision for a peaceful future in spite of the bleak reality on the ground."

Let this conference be the platform for a powerful boycott campaign on par with the Anti-Apartheid campaign.

Isolate Israel!

Boycott Israeli products! Support the call for financial and economic sanctions.

End all military ties!

Cut social, sporting, cultural and academic links!

Act in solidarity with the Palestinian people, and in support of peace.

We brought down apartheid and freed South Africa. We liberated all South Africans. Even die-hard racists today say they have never slept so peacefully. We can do the same for the blood-soaked Holy Land.

Free Marwin Barghout and all political prisoners now!

Palestine must be free.

Peace and security for all in the Holy Land.