

UN Forum on Minority Issues
Geneva, 14-15 December 2010

Written submission by Mohammed al Korshan, representative of the West Bank Bedouin

Introduction:

I represent the Bedouin community in the West Bank. We are an original indigenous population which was displaced from our tribal lands in the Negev desert in 1948 when the State of Israel was established. Today there are 40,000 Bedouin in the West Bank, living here as refugees since 1948. From that time we have become a minority group which is continuously exposed to the threat of forced displacement and discrimination. Our traditional livelihood is pastoralism.

We are an isolated minority group in an occupied territory. We are no longer allowed to visit our relatives in the Negev. We are refugees belonging to a distinct ethnic group. The reality is that we live as a 'double minority' as both refugees and Bedouin, living in an area of the occupied West Bank which is trapped between the policies of the Occupying power and the Palestinian Authority. Our situation has significantly hampered our ability to exercise a broad range of rights. We face discrimination and are prevented from enjoying the minimum requirements of a dignified life.

Today there are approximately 5000 Bedouin families living in the West Bank, 2000 of these are living in United Nations refugee camps and Palestinian villages, and 3000 of whom live in an area called 'Area C' where they are struggling to maintain their traditional lifestyle.

(What is Area C?)

As a result of the Oslo agreement between the government of Israel and the Palestinians during the 1990's, Area C makes up approximately 60% of the West Bank and is under the full military and administrative control of Israel (while Area A and B are respectively fully and partially controlled by the Palestinian Authority). All residents of Area C are subject to regulations imposed by the Israeli authorities and are isolated from the majority of the Palestinian population.

Israel controls the land and **natural resources** in Area C. The rangeland and water that we depend on for our livestock has now become fragmented by the establishment of closed military areas, Israeli settlements, nature reserves, check points and the West Bank Barrier.

One permit system controls the **movement of people**, vehicles and livestock and another permit system controls our ability to build even the simplest of structures. Homes and animal shelters are demolished by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on a regular basis whilst Israeli settlements, illegal under international law, continue to expand in the same areas. These movement restrictions and the constant threat of **displacement** have

rendered seasonal migration impossible for us, and we are now watching the **collapse of our traditional livelihood.**

This deeply undermines our capacity to enjoy a decent economic life.

We request, through this Forum:

- **That, while a just and durable solution to the problem of Palestine refugees is pending, our existence as a minority group, living under occupation and in a conflict area, is recognised.**
- **To receive adequate recognition and protection without discrimination and that Israel as the Occupying Power, and the Palestinian Authority take measures that enable the Bedouin to enjoy a meaningful and effective economic life, including participation in public life and inclusion in development of policies that affect us.**
- **That appropriate access to natural resources and basic services and to decent economic opportunities.**
- **All this to ensure our survival, development and the preservation of our culture and traditional livelihood.**

1. Existence and Sustainable Livelihoods:

Due to building restrictions in Area C the majority of Bedouin refugees living there are **obliged to live in sub-standard shelter**, mostly constructed from corrugated iron, wood and scrap material. Our animal shelters are the same. Many communities still live in tents, and others live in caves. The same restriction forbids any permanent infrastructure so the majority of the Bedouin live **without basic sanitation with no water, toilet facilities or electricity**. Now that seasonal migration is no longer possible we need to settle in order to build our futures, but we **do not own the land** where we live and because it is part of Area C the Israeli Government has declared it 'State Land' which is fully under their control.

Centre of life, permit system and closures:

Since 2000 when the second *Intifada* started we lost contact with our centre of life - East Jerusalem. The closure system and its associated permit regime cut us off economically, socially and religiously from the life we had known until then. Until 2000 the majority of Bedouin men also had a strong and continuous second income from accessing work in Israel. As a result of the new regulations we experienced parallel isolation - being cut off from our centre of life and from our secondary incomes - all in one day. The impact has been both economically and psychologically disruptive.

Area C - pastoralists living under military occupation: Between poverty and dependency

As a result of the closures and our sudden inability to move outside the West Bank from that moment onwards, suddenly we had to depend on only one income again - herding in Area C, where the majority of Bedouin is obliged to live due to their pastoralist livelihood. The mechanisms employed by the Israeli authorities to control land affect every aspect of our economic lives. 70% of Area C is now forbidden to us and our access to natural resources has been crippled. Restricted movement caused by closed military areas, settlements, nature reserves, check points and the West Bank Barrier mean we are forced to buy fodder and water to feed our

livestock. We have entered into a spiralling debt system and are more and more dependent on humanitarian assistance. But humanitarian actors are also restricted by Area C regulations and any assistance is issued on an emergency basis, with no long term strategy. The herding livelihood in Areas A and B where the Israeli restrictions do not apply is still sustainable today.

Settlers violence – physical and psychological

There are 500,000 illegal settlers in the West Bank. Where we live with our livestock in isolated areas the counts of violence and harassment against us by settlers go un-witnessed and largely unpunished. If you live in fear for the safety of your family you do not think about investing in your future. Your economic life becomes day by day. When your existence in a place is threatened by danger and violence and your children are afraid and you no longer have access to natural resources to sustain your livestock, you move into survival mode and nothing in that state is sustainable.

Demolition, Forced Displacement and Forced Re-location:

In Area C we live not only in fear of settler violence and poverty due to our collapsing livelihoods; we also live in fear of demolition, forced displacement and forced re-location.

Here the Occupying Power has created an intricate permit system for building houses. If you do not get a permit you cannot build a house, or any structure. The permit system is expensive, lengthy and usually inconclusive so we cannot get permits, even for toilets, but at the same time our population is increasing and our children need to marry, and build their own homes. If this home is a tent or a palace built without a permit in Area C, it can be demolished. If it is a school or a health centre made of wood and corrugated iron to try to improve our children's health and education, it can be demolished. There are over 3000 structures that currently have pending demolition orders in Area C, including schools and health facilities.

Because of the rules on building in Area C our homes are not permanent structures. We still live in tents and metal shacks without running water or electricity, even though our seasonal migration is now no longer possible. There is a misconception about Bedouin sometimes – people think they do not want to settle. This is not true. Bedouin have always been only semi-nomadic, and have a strong concept of home and connection to land. But here in the occupied West Bank we are forbidden from building and from building a sustainable future for our families –which is the basis for establishing, developing and enjoying a dignified economic life.

The Occupying Power has verbally offered to re-locate us in 'purpose-built' villages. But the locations they suggest could not sustain even our animals; they are isolated and have no access to natural resources or basic services. They say they will make different tribes live side by side in these villages and that the time for tribal identity is gone. This is not the Bedouin way of life. First they demolish our homes and displace us, and then they say they will force us to settle without any understanding of our livelihoods, our needs or our culture.

We request, through this Forum:

- **To have adequate access to our centre of life (East Jerusalem) and to natural resources (rangeland and water), in order to allow us to develop an economic life within the respect of our culture, traditions and identity.**
- **That the Israeli authorities take legal action against the perpetrators of violence and harassment against Bedouin in Area C.**

- **That the discriminatory policies and practices imposed on us by the Occupation cease immediately. These illegal practices include home demolitions, forced evictions, forced re-location, the Wall and its associated regime and settlements.**
- **That our right to freely choose where to live be respected, and when our relocation and resettlement prove inevitable, we are consulted and have our needs taken into account in any relocation policy and planning regime.**

2. Work and Social Security

Social Security

The social security system is very limited for all Palestinians in the West Bank, regardless of refugee status. Unless you are employed by the Palestinian Authority you have **no health insurance or pension system**. Whilst this certainly affects our social security, we are not discriminated against as a minority group in this case because this affects all Palestinians. As Bedouin with collapsing livelihoods due to the restrictions in access to natural resources we have no access to credit or micro-finance enterprises because the level of our debts is so high that we cannot qualify.

Work pre-Intifada and work now:

Since we came to the West Bank the role of Bedouin in the Palestinian economy used to be very clear cut. There used to be three clear types of people in the West Bank -Herders, farmers and city residents. Each one had a clear role in the economic structure of their country. As the livestock dependent population of Palestine we would provide meat and milk products to the Palestinian markets. This was an accepted position and it worked well. Livestock markets were very strong here.

Since the beginning of the second *Intifada* in 2000 however our livelihood has moved into a state of collapse. We can no longer sustain the tradition. This has an immediate impact on market prices, which have spiralled out of control. The meat and milk products now available on the market are extremely expensive because we have to spend so much to produce them, and therefore people cannot buy. The rest of society blames the Bedouin for this inflation, as if we have chosen to destroy our livelihood ourselves. The resulting social isolation further adds to our marginalisation.

So as we watch our traditional livelihood collapsing, we ask ourselves what else we can do. But for thousands of years our tribes have depended on livestock management, and this collapse is happening so fast that we do not yet have alternative coping strategies.

For this reason, when we focus on access to work for the Bedouin minority in Area C of the West Bank we have to go back to the questions of access to education and all other essential services.

Access to essential services:

For many Area C Bedouin the loss of livelihood means they can no longer afford to pay for the school bus to transport their children to schools, or to access other basic services. This means, for example, that health issues remain unaddressed and school attendance is sporadic. Those children who do go to school on a regular basis come home to sub-standard shelter and a lack of infrastructure; the threat of settler violence and demolition is very distracting too. This all makes studying at home extremely difficult. The entrance marks required for higher education in

Palestine are very high. Our highest achievers are often not able to compete with the highest achievers from cities where they do not face any of the issues we deal with on a daily basis. Scholarship systems do exist, but city children always win them because they are results based and make no account for the conditions we live in or for minority representation.

Access to health services is also very scant. Mobile health services in Area C are limited and do not address secondary health for which we have to travel to urban centres. Without health insurance these services are expensive and many Bedouin now cannot afford the cost of the transport to seek a consultation, let alone to pay for treatment.

Without regular access to adequate health services and higher education we have little chance to compete in the West Bank labour market. These constraints are compounded by the historical discrimination that we face from the Palestinians in the labour market because we are both 'Bedouin' and 'refugees'.

While Bedouin are a minority group in other countries in the region, the situation we experience in the West Bank is unparalleled. In Jordan, for example, the government runs a scholarship system which includes places for Bedouin living in difficult conditions. In the West Bank this does not exist. We have no realistic chance to develop alternative coping strategies if we continue to be marginalised by both the Occupying Power and by the Palestinian Authority. As a minority group stuck between two separate legal and policy systems we carry the plight of double marginalisation; we are Bedouin, we are refugees and as residents of Area C we remain on the periphery of social security, service provision and economic systems of both Israel and Palestine.

We request, through this Forum:

- **To have adequate access to basic services including decent housing, health care, clean water, livestock markets, food and education.**
- **To remedy to the historical, structural and systemic discrimination against the Bedouin community currently living in the West Bank, including by promoting positive measures and affirmative actions to promote access to employment, income generating opportunities and market (including land, special credit, technology, vocational and skills training, information).**
- **That adequate access to effective education is ensured and the Occupying Power cease school demolitions and allows that schools are built in Area C; that a decent subsidised school transportation system is put in place; and that special scholarships programmes are developed to support Bedouin in higher education.**

3. Effective participation in economic and development policy making

Absence of representative body:

What do people, and minority groups in particular, need to be able to participate in policy making anywhere in the world? They need to get legitimate recognition as a group by the policy makers, they need a representative body with a spokesperson and they need consultation mechanisms. We as the Bedouin of the West Bank have none of these things. Stuck between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli military authorities we are not formally recognised by either side as a minority group, and we no longer have a representative body. We have no way to

represent ourselves with a unified voice at either civil society level, or the state level, and we are never consulted by either side on the policy level.

Why don't we have a representative body?

In 1948 we came to the West Bank as refugees from the Negev desert. Tribes and clans were forcibly splintered into smaller social units, often across countries, and the traditional leadership system began to dilute. Many clans lost the direct link to their leaders. Over 60 years of exile, Bedouin have had to create a new relationship with land. In the West Bank we are no longer able to live in clan areas spread across a clearly recognised tribal territory. We have to share land and resources with other clans, with other tribes and with local Palestinian herders too. Social problems resulting from this close proximity are causing our cohesion as a tribal society to weaken even further.

With the coming of the Palestinian Authority in 1993 a new leadership system was implemented in rural areas. This system appointed a network of *Village Councils* across Area C, but the appointed person was not always the leader that we would naturally have elected as Bedouin communities according to our traditional elective system. This caused further splits in social groups as the family of the traditional leader would rise up against the family of the newly chosen head of village council. By diluting our traditional leadership the PA system has unwittingly combined with the Area C restrictions set out by the Occupying Power to bring the Bedouin in the West Bank to a critical point in their history.

With no clear leadership system, no representative voice and increasing social fragmentation and internal friction, we are also witnessing the end of our traditional livelihood. The Israeli government is not helping us to preserve our culture. The Palestinian government is not helping us to preserve our culture, and we are not helping ourselves to preserve our culture.

We request, through this Forum:

- **That the Bedouin in the West Bank be officially recognised by Palestinian and Israeli authorities as an independent minority group currently living under occupation and in conflict areas, and thus deserving multiple protection - using this forum and other rights mechanisms to support us.**
- **Support to revive our traditional leadership system by re-creating a clan council in the West Bank with a traditional election process, using this council to represent the Bedouin population at the government level, participating in the policy making process with Bedouin representation in the legislative council.**