REGIONAL MEETING FOR THE MIDDLE EAST ON THE INTERNATIONAL

DECADE FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

Speech by: Suleiman Qous

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First, I would like to thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for inviting me to this international gathering and offering me the opportunity to speak about my community in presence of these distinguished guests.

To begin with, I would like to give you a short briefing about the Afro-Palestinians Community, which resides in the Old City of occupied Jerusalem. They are the descendants of the African pilgrims to the Holy Land who immigrated from Chad, Nigeria, Sinegal, and Sudan.

In the 19th century, during the Ottoman reign, they served as guards of al-Aqsa mosque. However, by the end of their rule in Jerusalem, the Ottomans converted the current residencies of Africans into prisons for Arab protesters against the rule of the Young Turks Movement. However, after the British Mandate closed the prisons, the two buildings were rented to the Africans by the Islamic religious trust in Jerusalem.

When the Zionist movement started its activities to establish its state in Palestine, Africans engaged in the Palestinian resistance movement. From 1948 up until 2000, 16 persons from the community were killed by the Israelis including the female Fatimah Haj Hussein. The last victim was Usama Jaddah, 23, who was shot dead at the entrance to al-Makased Hospital on Mount of Olives, while on his way to donate blood for victims of the clashes between Israeli police and Palestinian protesters against the provocative visit of the late Israeli Premier Ariel Sharon to the premises of al-Aqsa Mosque on Sept. 28, 2000.

In 1967, the first Palestinian female prisoner was Fatimah Barnawi of the African community. After spending 10 years in Israeli jails, she was deported outside the occupied Palestinian territories. When PLO signed the Oslo Agreement with Israel in 1993, she returned to the occupied territories and established and commanded the Palestinian Female Police Force until her retirement a few years ago.

When the Jordanians ruled Jerusalem between 1948 and 1967, Africans were never granted their passports as other Palestinians of Jerusalem and the West Bank. Others of African descent were denied French passports on allegations that their countries of origin are now independent of French colonialism.

Accordingly, most members of the African community hold Israeli travel documents known as “laissez passer” that enables them to visit the countries that have diplomatic relations with Israel.

As part of the injustices that we suffered from our fellow Palestinians, particularly the first generation, they used to call us Abeed (Negros). But we finally succeed in making our Palestinian people refer to us as the African community. This is because of our role in the Palestinian resistance movement and because of our activities in Palestinian society.

This was obvious in 1997 when we began activities of our NGO, the African Community Society, which targets the entire Palestinian population in Jerusalem. Its mission is “to promote the Old City, empower and rehabilitate the children, youth, and women by improving their living conditions.”

As for support to our organization, we reject any conditioned funding that equates Palestinian resistance to the Israeli illegal occupation with terrorism. However, I would like to reiterate that our organization does not support violent resistance. We believe that our mere existence in that specific area in the heart of the Old City is part of the resistance. By the way, our organization locates between two Israeli police checkpoints that usually stop the passers to pose the notorious question: are you Moslem?!. And even if you are so, you might get your ID card seized until you end your visit to the area.

Finally, I am hopeful and confident that this meeting will achieve its goals, particularly strengthening national, regional, and international cooperation to promote and respect our rights as other human beings in the world.

Thank you.