

**Message of His Excellency
Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, President
of the Palestinian National Authority,
Addressed by Mr. Ahmad Abed El Rahman**

Eng. Fadel Ka'wash, Chairman of the Palestinian Water Authority, Dr. Imad Khatib, Secretary General of Palestine Academy for Science and Technology, honorable guests, ladies and gentlemen.

First of all, allow me to welcome all scientists and experts and in particular those who came from America and Europe to participate in this important conference on water. I would also like to thank the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for their financial support to this conference.

Further, I show my appreciation to our brothers of the Palestinian Water Authority and Palestine Academy for Science and Technology for the efforts they exerted in convening this important conference on water.

Water in the Middle East is actually a core strategic issue for both Palestinians and Israelis. This issue is of fundamental importance in the final status negotiations between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Government of Israel. The water issue has been on the agenda since more than half a decade on the regional level as well as in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. Due to the failure in reaching an agreement on the water issue during the bilateral negotiations the water issue was subsequently listed as a final status issue. Nevertheless, the Israeli side acknowledged the Palestinian established rights to water in the interim accords, as well as a shortage of approximately 80 MCM of essential water resources. The Israeli acknowledgement of our water rights, however, remained words on paper as the Israeli practices, including

stealing our water, retaining almost total control of our water resources, the denial of our rights to the Jordan River water and the exploitation of over 85% of our renewable groundwater, continued. This excessive utilization has resulted in widespread high water salinity rates as well as in organic pollution in the Gaza Strip waters. In addition, one third of the West Bank residents are denied the supply of drinking water. The irrigated agricultural areas shrunk and we became dependent on water purchased from Israel to meet our needs. We buy more than 60% of water from the Israeli water company (Mekorot) at prices that amount up to 2.4 NIS per cubic liter.

The water situation is even more aggravated and endangers the Palestinian daily life due to the continuous Israeli construction of the separation wall that brings about destruction and ruin to the agricultural lands and water wells and due to the continuous construction of more Israeli settlements, which consume approximately 90% of Palestinian water resources. The remaining 10% of the Palestinian water resources by no means suffice to meet the Palestinian agricultural or drinking water needs. Therefore, we buy 35 MCM.

Israel exploits 665 MCM of our renewable water resources in the four groundwater basins by a system of deeper drilled wells that are scattered alongside the Green Line, Jordan Valley (Ghour area) and the coastal basin in Gaza. An Israeli person consumes 500 cubic meters a year as compared to 100 cubic meter consumed by a Palestinian. Thus, without the restoration of our water rights pursuant to international conventions, the water crisis will continue to aggravate year after a year. Furthermore, the area of agricultural land is diminishing to a critical point in the Jordan Valley and Gaza Strip. Over 250 Palestinian villages in the West Bank accommodating over 350,000 persons have no access to water supplies while the remaining areas have minimal access on an interrupted basis. In comparison, an Israeli settler daily consumes 800 liters. Thus, our position in the peace process with Israel stresses the fact that the construction of settlements and the separation wall will not allow to achieve security and just peace between the both parties. The settlements are constructed by the Israeli occupation force on our land in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem while Israel assigns our water resources to these settlements. This necessarily entails denying Palestinian peasants and farmers their water rights. Whereas the Israeli settler has a daily water supply of 800 liters, the average water supply for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is 70 liters

per capita. This clear exploitation and prejudice make it impossible to attain a permanent peace process between the Palestinian and Israeli side. The flourishing of the settlements on our land entails the devastation of our land and impoverishment of the Palestinian society. The long-, or maybe short-term, objective of such practices can be the “transfer” discussed publicly by fanatic extremists as a solution for what they call the Palestinian demographic threat. They never consider that security and peace between both parties dictate putting an end to settlement, uprooting the separation wall and enabling the Palestinian people to enjoy their water rights in order for them to build their own independent life in an independent state.

The Palestinians are entitled to plant and cultivate their land and to make it green once again as it has been throughout history. They are entitled to drink clean water that underwent a quality control, and should not be compelled to drink from collected waters, springs or containers that are all deemed unhealthy.

In view of the total Israeli control of our water resources, the agricultural sector diminished to less than eighty thousand dunums in the West Bank, while it was one hundred and sixty thousand dunums in the seventies. It is imperative to fully reinstate our water rights in order to invigorate our agricultural sector, which is considered the most important of the development sectors in Palestine. Access to our water resources in groundwater basins, springs, agricultural wells as well as to our share in the Jordan River will enable us to irrigate four hundred thousand dunums in the Palestinian heights and Jordan Valley. Agricultural development constitutes a solid basis to build the national Palestinian economy and a core pillar for permanent security between the Palestinian and Israeli side. The program to impoverish us in order to expel us from our land and the flourishing of settlements shall by no means bring about stability or security for the Israelis.

To sum up, water security is equivalent to food security. The realization of peace and security between Israelis and Palestinians is only attainable with a vision that involves the acknowledgement by Israel of our water rights; and addressing our needs to build our society, state and economy based on the acknowledgement of our political and national rights including the establishment of an independent state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem.

I say with this realistic vision - if it occurs - we can speak about peace and security between two parties. We find, in fact, that with the cease-fire and restraint agreement the conditions are enabling enough on more than one level to engage without any delay in final status talks on all pending issues including the water issue. We need to reach a just settlement on these critical issues based on international law and common interests between the two parties. Instead of continuing the current situation of bloody confrontations, occupation, settlements, and the denial of the Palestinian people of their national rights and natural resources. Undoubtedly, this situation makes talk about water wars in the Middle East realistic. In fact, I believe the purpose of this conference on water is not to talk about water wars but rather about water peace in the Middle East. However, talking about water peace does not imply accepting the current reality that denies us our national water rights. First and foremost, it is essential to acknowledge our water rights and to restore control over our resources as per international law and the common interests of both parties. Accepting the current reality and wasting time on deliberations about buying water from other places while we are denied our water rights, constitutes a wrong approach that aggravates the problem and further complicates it. I wish your time would allow you to take maps and researches and tour the West Bank and Gaza Strip in order to carry out a comprehensive survey on the grounds for the water issue between Israel and us. We heavily rely upon this significant water conference to help in our future negotiations with the Israeli side on the water file.

I take this opportunity to thank you all and wish you all the best.

I apologize for my lengthy speech.

Ahmad Abdulrahman

Representative of His Excellency, President Mahmoud Abbas