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RIGHTS ADVOCACY FLOURISHES IN PALESTINIAN COMMUNITIES, SAYS NEW REPORT

February 12, 2007, Jerusalem and Washington DC: A new report on human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) finds that human rights advocates are active in villages throughout the West Bank and Gaza, and calls on aid donors to support this “exciting” development with money, networking and technical assistance.

The report was produced for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation by Iain Guest, Director of the Advocacy Project, who visited the OPT in late 2006 and met with over 60 groups and individuals.

The report is issued after a year of turmoil in the territories following Hamas’s election victory in January 2006. Palestinians have been put under enormous pressure by the Israeli siege, warring militia, and the embargo on Western aid to government institutions. 70% of all Palestinians are living below the poverty level, according to the UN.

In spite of the burden on them, the report portrays Palestinians as law-abiding, socially cohesive, and actively engaged on behalf of human rights in villages. “Community initiatives have emerged throughout the OPT, often in response to the Israeli siege,” it says. “Many use a rights-based approach to solving local problems.”

The report says that while these advocates are strong in motivation and highly effective at meeting local needs, they lack resources, technical skills and a formal knowledge of their legal rights. This gap, it says, could be filled by professional Palestinian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which have been criticized during the crisis for being “elitist” and detached from the daily tribulations of ordinary Palestinians.

“Professional NGOs should develop alliances with community-based defenders, help them to provide services from a rights-based perspective, and disseminate their message out to the world,” says the report. “This would allow NGOs to build respect for human rights at the grassroots and develop a constituency among Palestinians, without compromising their essential role”.

Supporting community advocacy would also require a drastic change of approach by Western donors, which tend to fund city-based professional NGOs that have a high profile and can manage money. The report urges donors to channel more small grants to community advocates, without strings attached and with minimal reporting requirements.

The report singles out workers and women as examples of how this new strategy might work. After successfully advocating for greater political participation for women, the Palestinian women's movement is now "on the defensive" from Hamas, which is using its political power to promote an Islamic agenda. Instead of confronting Hamas at the political level, says the report, women's groups should work more in villages, where there is growing demand for women's services and "women's empowerment."

The report also hails the emergence of a grassroots movement of unemployed workers, who have gone on strike to demand their rights and claim back pay with help from the Democracy and Workers Rights Center, an NGO based in Ramallah and Gaza City.

In one of its 15 recommendations, the report praises co-operation between Israel and Palestinian human rights groups. But, it says, donors should resist the temptation to fund "people to people" projects which bring Israelis and Palestinians together for its own sake, and support partnerships that are built on common interest and practical concerns.

While the report argues the case for human rights, it also points out that human rights can never substitute for political action: "Israel must be made to understand that its policies are creating violence and lawlessness in the OPT – and this is a task for politicians. Inside Palestine, the current crisis can only be resolved by restoring the rule of law and democratic government. This, too, is a political challenge. Human rights work can never substitute for the rule of law, but it can build respect for the principle."

* To read the report visit <http://advocacynet.org/files/839.pdf>

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