

The changing character of East Jerusalem is an obstacle to peace

- The possibility of a viable two-state solution being eroded by settlement expansion, Palestinian home demolitions and deportations

Mary Robinson, Ela Bhatt and Jimmy Carter are in the Middle East to encourage support for a two-state solution, but also to highlight issues that stand in the way of achieving “a just and secure peace for all”. They conclude their week-long visit to the region on Friday. During their visit to the region they have held meetings in Gaza, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the West Bank.

Jerusalem, Thursday 21 October 2010

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Elders today visited the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan, where they learned that many homes are threatened with demolition to make way for the King’s Garden Archaeological Park. Many Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem have been evicted as settlements expand. Those who are politically active or speak out against the settlements face the threat of deportation and imprisonment. Experts and residents spoke to the Elders about the changing character of East Jerusalem as Palestinians are being forced out.

Elders’ delegation leader, Mary Robinson said, “Jerusalem lies at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and agreement on its future must also be at the heart of any solution. The changing ethnic and religious character of the city has regional and global implications. As Elders we try to bring hope, but I was shocked at the practices the Jerusalem authorities are being allowed to get away with. All kinds of clever methods are being used to surround and squeeze the Palestinian population – tunnels, settler houses, new roads, and now tourist attractions. A solution must be found that respects the human rights of all.”

The Elders met the Mayor of Jerusalem to convey their concerns about settlement building in the city and the expansion of the King’s Garden Park. Municipal services to the Palestinian neighbourhoods are extremely poor, with schools, water services and roads receiving a fraction of the investment of the rest of the city. They appreciated that the Mayor wants to improve the living conditions and education of Palestinians as well as Israelis, but they warned the Mayor that current planning policies are a serious obstacle to an Arab-Israeli peace agreement.

Representatives of the Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, who make up 20 per cent of the population, also met the Elders yesterday, and outlined the laws that discriminate against them as citizens.

Former US President Jimmy Carter said: “As I said to the Speaker of the Knesset today, Israel’s treatment of its Arab citizens and other minorities is very disturbing. These people have not enjoyed equal social, economic and political rights for decades. Now there are more than twenty proposed new laws that would further erode their rights. I am particularly concerned about proposals to require non-Jews to pledge loyalty to Israel as a Jewish state. I do not see how such an oath can be consistent with the rights of

Muslims, Christians and others who are not Jews. Israel is in danger of damaging its credibility as a democracy.”

Ela Bhatt, a pioneer in women’s economic empowerment and non-violent resistance said: “The situation here seems much worse than when we were here last year. Tension is very high and there is a lack of mutual trust, but I appeal to people not to resort to violence. This does not mean being weak. Non-violent struggle requires great courage and may mean that some people are hurt or even lose their lives. I believe that creative civil disobedience, with clear goals, will ultimately be much more effective than violence. The key to success is self-reliance. Nothing will change unless people organise themselves and reduce dependency on others. We need allies, but the strength must come from within. We have met Israelis and Palestinians committed to working for peace and that is heartening. I hope that this spirit of peaceful coexistence will spread.”

Yesterday the Elders met the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas and PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to discuss the stalled final status negotiations. Both leaders agreed that Palestinian unity is a priority. This issue also featured in the Elders’ meetings throughout the Arab region. The Elders raised concerns about human rights violations committed by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. They are hopeful that, through the leaders in Fatah, Hamas and other factions, the Palestinians will come together with a stronger voice.

On Friday the Elders will meet the Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, and will brief the diplomatic community on their trip.

In concluding their visit, the Elders urge people to surmount the corrosive effect of cynicism and complacency in Israel, the Arab world and in the international community about prospects for a durable two-state solution. Israel already enjoys a high standard of living and its powerful military appears to provide many Israelis with a sense of security. The Arab world needs to become more united on the Israel-Palestinian issue. The international community is complacent too. A greater sense of urgency is needed – as well as greater energy and commitment by all involved to find a just and secure peace for all.

For more information about The Elders’ work in the Middle East during their visit including media releases, blogs, photos and videos, please go to <http://www.theelders.org/middle-east>

For updates and media opportunities, please register at media@theElders.org

ABOUT THE ELDERS

The Elders are an independent group of eminent global leaders, brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007, who offer their collective influence and experience to support peace-building and help address major causes of human suffering.

The Elders are Martti Ahtisaari, Kofi Annan, Ela Bhatt, Lakhdar Brahimi, Gro Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Jimmy Carter, Graça Machel, Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu (Chair). Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi are honorary Elders.

Bio notes for Elders at press conference:

- Mary Robinson (delegation leader), former President of Ireland, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Ela Bhatt, Gandhian and founder of the million-strong Self Employed Women’s (SEWA) Association of India.
- Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States of America (1977-81)