

## **REPORT WARNS OF A HUMAN RIGHTS “CRISIS” IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES, AND CALLS FOR GREATER INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY-BASED RIGHTS INITIATIVES**

At a time of growing crisis in the Palestinian Territories, Palestinian human rights organizations and their donors must focus more on defending human rights in Palestinian communities, and on restoring faith in the core values of human rights among Palestinians, according to a new report commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

The study was written by Iain Guest, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University and founder of the Advocacy Project, a Washington-based NGO which works with community-based human rights advocates in several different countries. Mr. Guest visited the West Bank and Gaza between October 31 and December 4, 2006 at the request of the Foundation, and met with over 60 organizations and individuals.

The new report follows a year of growing poverty, violence and political upheaval in the Palestinian Territories since Hamas swept parliamentary elections in January 2006. In recent weeks, scores of Palestinians have been killed in violent clashes between Palestinian militia. According to the UN, over 70% of all Palestinians are living below the poverty level.

The report warns that the collapse of government and climate of lawlessness makes human rights monitoring difficult and dangerous. In addition, Palestinians are increasingly skeptical about the relevance of human rights. Human rights organizations are widely viewed as “elitist” and detached.

In the face of this crisis, says the report, human rights monitors should focus more on building respect for human rights within the Palestinian Territories, as a way of building their own credibility and addressing the growing crisis facing Palestinians.

“This is not a call to stop lobbying for an end to Israeli occupation. More than anything else, occupation is responsible for the crisis in the Palestinian Territories, and international pressure remains the best hope of raising the Israeli siege. But the occupation is now extensively monitored, and the Palestinian case is well understood at the international level and within the United Nations,” says the report.

“The point is that there is an equally pressing task within the Palestinian Territories - to convince Palestinians that human rights has a place in their lives and that any future Palestinian state must be built on democratic principles. By democratic is meant the way people work together and take collective action.”

Among its 15 main recommendations, the report urges more support for community-based associations, which often use a rights-based approach to community development and so are natural allies in the human rights endeavor. The mission visited villages in the north and south of the West Bank, the Jordan Valley, and southern Gaza, and found many highly motivated groups of people addressing community needs in a democratic manner.

In spite of their strengths, these groups also lack resources, skills and contacts. This points to a new role for professional human rights monitoring organizations. In addition to their international advocacy, says the report, these organizations should channel small grants to community partners, provide technical assistance and distribute their message.

This will require a change of “organizational culture” on the part of NGOs and their donors. NGOs will have to acquire new skills, particularly in using information technology and building websites. Donors would need to provide more long-term program (as opposed to project) support for NGOs, and make small grants available to communities, with few strings attached.

The report singles out women’s rights as one example of the new strategy. After a decade of successfully advocating for greater political participation for women, the Palestinian women’s movement is now “on the defensive” from Hamas, which is using its new political power to promote an Islamic agenda that is hostile to women’s equality. 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 for the message of “women’s empowerment.”

In another recommendation, the report praises co-operation between Israeli 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 interests 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 Palestinian Territories – 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.”

**For the full report please contact: [info@fespal.org](mailto:info@fespal.org)**