

1996 DIPLOMATIC

23 June

Meeting with Michel Muller and Darcy Christen of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Jerusalem

Topic: Development in the Peace Process and the Human Rights Situation

SUMMARY

The visitors noted that their organization's role is changing within the framework of the peace process and with the development of human rights violations in the PNA autonomous areas. They stated that the ICRC has always taken a strong position against Israeli measures, especially in terms of the Geneva Convention. They have continuously condemned the closure and the infringement of Zone A despite the agreements between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi said that the ICRC has not issued equally strong statements condemning Israeli attacks on Palestinians as it did against the Palestinian suicide bombings. He added that there should be more immediate statements that respond to events. He noted that there was a constant stream of statements from Bosnia and that there ought to be from Palestine as well.

Darcy Christen responded that the ICRC has been extremely busy behind the scenes in an effort to develop comprehensive forms of dialogue. These efforts stressed that humanitarian issues must be addressed without always being bound to security issues. He conceded that the ICRC has not completed its mission operationally, but went on to say that a new phase of the ICRC's role will be undertaken and that it will include a stronger presence in Geneva and more balanced statements.

Michel Muller interjected that the main goal of the ICRC is to uphold humanitarian laws, to assist victims and to guarantee the organization's access to them. Political maneuvers are not an immediate part of their mission. Thus, while violations are often observed, the ICRC often does not really have the power to affect this in practice.

Dr. Abdul Hadi suggested that the ICRC could monitor Israeli behavior more closely by officially stationing people or vehicles at checkpoints. This would pass an important symbolic message from the international community to the Israelis. He stated that this presence is more important than the ICRC realizes.

Darcy Christen noted that substantial progress was made regarding the passage of ambulances through checkpoints.

Dr. Abdul Hadi warned that a tense period is imminent, with clashes in

the Old City and closures of Al-Aqsa real possibilities. This will lead to a potentially critical human rights situation for which the ICRC must be ready. Israeli behavior over the past 29 years has provided many lessons, and human rights organizations must prepare to address problems as they inevitably arise in the upcoming period.

Darcy Christen agreed that there is a great deal of tension that may possibly explode. He added that another extremely serious problem is that of Palestinian detainees under PNA interrogation, especially after the last wave of arrests. Their situation is terrible and it is hard to obtain results from the PNA on this issue. He noted that the ICRC's goals are first and foremost humanitarian and thus the situation of prisoners in PNA detention is of critical importance, but the political situation is very sensitive and has hurt ICRC efforts.

Dr. Abdul Hadi asked whether the ICRC was in contact with PNA Justice Minister Freih Abu Meddein. *Christen* replied that this makes little difference, especially since some PNA officials are actively against the ICRC which, in their view, is interfering with Palestinian sovereignty. But he noted the helpfulness of Jibril Rajoub, who was willing to discuss controversial matters and to open his files to the ICRC. He reported that his organization has information from numerous families about relatives who have disappeared without there being any information about their whereabouts.