Return Conference in London

by Itimad Musa

What is the practical significance of the Palestinian right to return? This was the theme of the Return group's conference held in London on June 9th. The Return group is an independent forum of anti-Zionist Jews and non-Jews whose aim is to promote a critical discussion of Zionism in theory and practice. The conference, entitled «The Palestinian Right to Return: Dream or Practical Politics?,» brought together a variety of discussants who shed light on the many important aspects of the Palestinian right to return.

The long arm of the Zionist «security» apparatus also made itself felt at the conference. Chairman Don Betz pointed out in his opening remarks that it was necessary to have two separate tables for the discussants to protect the Israeli citizens participating in the panels from the Israeli «anti-terror» law which makes it illegal for them to share a forum with a member of the PLO. There were other more severe restrictions from the Israeli authorities affecting the conference. Maha Nassar, director of the Palestinian Women's Committees, was not granted a laissez-passe by the occupation authorities, preventing her from traveling to London to participate in the conference. Ms. Nassar's absence was doubly noticable as she was the only woman scheduled to formally participate in the conference. Michel Warschawsky, director of the Jerusalem based Alternative Information Center, was also unable to attend as the appeal to his conviction of providing typesetting services to an illegal organization is still pending (see DP no.38).

Mr. Betz, who is also chairman of the International Coordinating Committee of the UN Non-Governmental Organizations on the Question of Palestine (ICCP), also addressed the issue of his participation in the conference, as there were unnamed parties who opposed it. In this regard, Mr. Betz stated that although the ICCP advocates a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its work is guided by UN resolutions, including the one providing for the Palestinian right to return. In addition, he expressed his belief in the importance of forums such as the Return conference where people with differing views on the conflict and its resolution can engage in dialogue.

The first speaker was the representative from the PLO office in London responsible for foreign relations, Bassim Al Jamal, who relayed greetings to the conference from the PLO. Mr. Al Jamal emphasized the centrality of the right of the Palestinian people to return to their homeland, for without this right independence, freedom and democracy are empty words and meaningless ideas. He also pointed out the significance of the conference being held «under the shadow of Soviet Jewish immigration» to Palestine, which he characterized not as people freely choosing to live in a certain country, but rather a compulsory migration entailing replacing the Palestinian population with Soviet Jewish immigrants. «Such a strategy is no less than a blatant attack on our very existence as a Palestinian people, and cannot fail to inflame tension and hatred between the two sides,» he said. He ended by saying that without ensuring the Palestinian right to return there can be no peace in Palestine, and on this basis affirmed the need to struggle together to achieve peace.

Introductory remarks were made by Roland Rance, editor of *Return* magazine. Mr. Rance read out the Return group's platform which states:

—the Palestinian people, at whose expense the state of Israel was established and continues to exist, have the right to return, to self-determination and to their independent state on Palestinian soil;

—the Palestine Liberation Organization is the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people;

—the state of Israel does not represent all Jewish people, neither legally, morally, nor in any other way;

—the Zionist structure of the state of Israel is at the heart of the racism and oppression against the Palestinian people, and should be dismantled.

He then explained that this was the second conference the Return group has organized, the first one having been held in 1988 under the title, «The Case against Zionism: Zionism and Jewish Identity.» That conference covered one part of the Return equation, dealing with Zionism as it relates to Jews and Jewish identity. This conference was meant to cover the other part of the Return equation, dealing with the effects of Zionism on Palestinians.

Picking up on the point made by Don Betz concerning ICCP's support for the conference, Mr. Rance pointed out that although the Return group does not necessarily favor a two-state solution, such a solution does not necessarily conflict with the right to return. And it is ending the injustice done to the Palestinians, particularly those refugees in the diaspora and the occupied territories, which will put an end to the conflict. To illustrate this point, Mr. Rance mentioned a letter received by the Return group from a liberal rabbi in Israel who supports a two-state solution. His letter expressed dismay at the Israeli left for ignoring the issue of the right to return, which they mistakenly view as in conflict with their advocacy of a two-state solution. This only serves the purpose of the extreme right-wing in Israel by denying a major injustice.

In addition to the discussion panels, a small collection of anti-Zionist publications was exhibited at the conference. The collection, including articles from *Israel Imperial News, Matzpen, Khamsin* and *ISRAC*, was a miniature catalogue of the history of anti-occupation and of anti-Zionist thought in Israel dating from 1967. As

Editor's Note: In the last issue of *Democratic Palestine* we mistakenly reported that Michel Warshawsky is a political prisoner in Israel. In fact, the appeal of his conviction is still pending. We regret this error.