



Press release

**International Labour
Organization**
Decent Work Team for
North Africa
Cairo

Friday 3 June 2011

New ILO report on the situation of workers in the occupied Arab territories

Cairo (ILO News) –The annual report of the International Labour Office (ILO) on the situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories^{*} calls for replacing the current security logic “with a development logic, based on a long-term vision of the economic, employment and human security interests of all the women and men in the region.”

According to the report, despite some improvements in the movement of people, no significant change to the better regarding the situation of these workers has taken place during the past year. The report notes that such change cannot take place “unless the restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation, and the occupation itself, are removed.”

The report underlines that all parties “have to come to a decision sooner or later on the next steps. The Palestinian economy has reached limits which cannot be surpassed without agreement and action on the two major constraints it faces: occupation and separation. Palestinian state-building should not be stifled and allowed to run out into frustration and discontent.”

The annual report is mandated by the International Labour Conference. It has been submitted for three decades now to the Conference.

This year’s report refers to the many faces of separation resulting from the closure of Gaza, the effects of the Separation Barrier, the separation of East Jerusalem from the West Bank, the multiple separation measures enforced in the West Bank, and the separation of the Syrian citizens of the occupied Syrian Golan from their homeland. The report recalls that settlements are the primary cause of the confiscation of Arab land, restrictions on access and movement, territorial fragmentation, and depletion of natural resources.

In his Preface to the report, ILO Director-General Juan Somavia poses the question: “Can the divisions be overcome, physical and mental obstacles dismantled, and the human potential of the region’s millions of inhabitants released for the purposes of development? Or will this potential remain frustrated, with hope denied by conflict and a real development reduced to administering continuous humanitarian first aid?”

The findings of the report are based on a mission sent earlier this year to the occupied Arab territories and Israel, and the Syrian Arab Republic, to assess the situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories, including the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan.

While the report notes further improvement in the economic situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, it shows that growth is not evenly distributed because of the continued closure of Gaza, and consists in large part of catching up from a much-degraded base.

The unemployment rate has eased only slightly to 23.7 per cent in 2010, as higher economic growth has failed to translate into significantly improved labour market outcomes. The youth unemployment rate has remained at a staggering 39 per cent, the report says.

According to the report, the continued blockade of Gaza leads to four-fifths of the population having to survive on humanitarian aid, with the informal “tunnel economy” becoming the main driver of the surviving economic activity.

The report notes intensified restrictions on Palestinians holding residency permits in occupied East Jerusalem, with continued demolition of homes and cancellation of ID cards. It also notes that Israeli Government subsidized agricultural development in the Jordan Valley has been extended at the same time as access to water and land is restricted for Palestinians and their homes and other structures are demolished.

According to the report, the potential of the Palestinian Fund for Employment and Social Protection has to be maximized in order for it to effectively contribute to poverty alleviation, the provision of protection to the unemployed, and to securing viable alternatives for Palestinian workers who currently depend on work in the settlements for their income.

It also calls for an examination of the wage system, including the question of a minimum wage, effective mechanisms for settling the claims of Palestinian workers against Israeli employers, tapping the potential of women in a highly segmented labour market, and strong institutional arrangements for social dialogue in the future Palestinian State.

The report notes that “measures will be needed to accompany the building of a democratic Palestinian State with a strong social dimension. The fact that the State is not yet a universally recognized reality does not mean that these measures should not be undertaken now, as an integral part of the state-building process.”

Welcoming the increased movement of people in the West Bank, the report also calls for the easing of restrictions by Israel in East Jerusalem and Gaza. It further notes that peace negotiations have largely bypassed the situation of the occupied Syrian Golan.

According to the report, the prospect of change in the wider Arab region towards more democracy and openness should encourage the peace process. More particularly, the report calls for listening to the voices of young people in the West Bank and Gaza “calling for unity and an end to occupation.”

²/International Labour Conference, 100th Session, 2011
Report of the Director-General “*The situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories*”
International Labour Office, Geneva, 2011