

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

Dé Céadaoin, 10 Nollaig 2014

Wednesday, 10 December 2014

The Joint Committee met at 2.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Eric Byrne,	Senator Michael Mullins,
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh.*
Deputy Olivia Mitchell,	
Deputy Dan Neville,	
Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,	
Deputy Brendan Smith,	

* In the absence of Deputy Seán Crowe.

DEPUTY PAT BREEN IN THE CHAIR.

BUSINESS OF JOINT COMMITTEE

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have received apologies from Senator David Norris, who is unable to be with us this afternoon. Draft minutes of last week's meeting of 3 December have been circulated to all members. Are the minutes agreed to? Agreed.

Palestine and Israel: Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel

Chairman: We are meeting in public session with representatives of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, EAPPI. In the past, the committee has met the representatives and we have great respect for their work. That is why we are meeting them. We will hear the representatives' opening statement before having a questions and answers session with the members. Ms Jenny Derbyshire will introduce the programme, Mr. Patrick Costello will give the main presentation and Ms Hilary Minch will also speak. I also welcome Ms Jenn Byrne.

I remind members, witnesses and those in the Visitors Gallery to ensure their mobile telephones are switched off completely for the duration of the meeting, as they cause interference with the recording equipment, even in silent mode. I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person or entity outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009 witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

It is a very appropriate week for the delegates to be here, given that the Dáil, in a Private Members' motion, is discussing the situation in Palestine and the need for the Parliament to recognise the State of Palestine. Last night, a number of committee members contributed to the debate and other members will contribute tonight. We would like to get an update on how the delegates believe we can move forward from here and we are delighted to have them here. I invite Ms Jenny Derbyshire to commence the proceedings.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for inviting us to appear before the committee. My name is Jenny Derbyshire. I have been an ecumenical accompanier twice, once in Jerusalem and once in Bethlehem and have just returned from the West Bank where I had been for a week. I was able to visit a new placement in the Jordan Valley. I wish to introduce Mr. Patrick Costello, who will speak after me, Ms Hilary Minch, and Ms Jen Byrne who has visited the West Bank earlier in the year. We have all been ecumenical accompaniers and have all been there this year.

As the committee may be aware, the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, EAPPI, is essentially a human rights observer programme established ten years ago by the World Council of Churches. Observers are recruited from various countries around the

world and live and work at seven locations across the West Bank. We used to be in Gaza but since the blockade of the Gaza Strip that has become impossible so that we are no longer in Gaza. We were there for between three and four and a half months. Observers are recruited from the UK and Ireland by Quaker Peace and Social Witness in London. We are all volunteers. My role is that of volunteer advocacy co-ordinator. Previously the position was held by Mr. Joe O'Brien. To date 30 Irish people have served in the field for EAPPI. The committee will probably realise when it hears us today that overall, the position is getting worse in the West Bank but I think that will reveal itself.

Our role as EAPPI observers includes offering protection through non-violent presence, monitoring and reporting violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, supporting acts of non-violent resistance alongside local Palestinian and Israeli activists. That we work with Israeli activists as well as Palestinian is important in terms of the strength of the programme. We also engage in advocacy to bring about the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Our advocacy is also part of our protective presence, particularly for the Israeli peace groups. Our core principles are guided by international law and human rights. I shall hand over to Mr. Patrick Costello.

Mr. Patrick Costello: I have recently returned from the EAPPI placement in Bethlehem where I lived and worked for three months. There are a variety of chores which include supporting Palestinian children with access to education, observing the situation at checkpoint 300 in Bethlehem which is one of the largest in the West Bank. One of the main chores is working across the Bethlehem Governorate supporting the local villages. Two of the most pressing issues which are inter-related with these villages are the actions of the Israeli Government in terms of settlement building and the actions of the settlers themselves. I shall speak about those two issues which are inter-related but I will split them into Government actions and the settler actions.

Bethlehem is about 5 km from Jerusalem and is cut off entirely from Jerusalem by the illegal separation barrier that runs across the north of Jerusalem and down to the east around Beit Jala so that it is sandwiched and is open only to the south and to the east. During my time in Bethlehem the Israeli Government announced the confiscation of 4,000 dunams of Palestinian land. This was described by the Israeli NGO, Peace Now, as the largest land confiscation in over 30 years. The land would come from the areas surrounding five Palestinian villages, Al Jab'a, Surif, Wadi Fukin, Husan and Nahalin, all of which we worked in and had close contacts. When this was announced we reached to these villages to find out what was happening on the ground. We called our local contact, Nasser El Din in Al Jab'a who was incredulous. He said this could not be happening here as they have already taken all our land. We arranged to meet him the next day or the following day and he admitted that it was happening, that they were taking their land. They had already taken so much of the farm land in the village but they were coming back for what was left. He was heartbroken. He said, "We struggle to save money for years to buy one dunam of land and they come and take 4,000 in the blink of an eye". All of this land is lost. It will soon be surrounded by state land which will eventually become a new settlement. These confiscations have been accompanied by road closures, closing the road that connects the village to its neighbouring village Surif. Road blocks were being put on them in the name of security cutting Palestinian freedom of movement.

One of the other villages badly affected was Wadi Fukin in the north of the Bethlehem Governorate which is already squeezed between the Green Line and the Settlement of Beitar Illit. The Settlement of Beitar Illit rises above it, similar to Benbulbin, as a giant hill with about

45,000 settlers living in it compared to a population of 1,300 in the village of Wade Fukin. The head of the village council, whom we met on numerous occasions, Ahmed Sukkar, explained that most of the land being confiscated was land further down the valley that was the village farm land. This village, like most Palestinian villages, has huge levels of unemployment and relies on agriculture and selling the produce grown in the fields. Some 70% of the village's economy is based on selling what is grown on the farm land, land that will soon be lost. This will utterly devastate the village. Given its position, squeezed between the Green Line and the Settlement, Ahmed Sukkar described it as similar to living in a giant prison.

It is important to realise that the confiscation of the 4,000 dunams comes on the back of the confiscation of 1,000 dunams in the region in April. Between the two of these and lands previously taken, such as the lands Nasser El Din mentioned, there is a huge contiguous piece of land that stretches from Beitar Illit to Gvaot right down to Kfar Etzion which was one of the first settlements built in the region in 1967. The president of the Gush Etzion Council was very positive about what was happening. Gush Etzion is the settler council and essentially he is the settler mayor in the area. He described with great joy in the Israeli press how Gvaot was going to be a new city for the settlers in the Gush Etzion area. With the confiscation there was constant expansion of the settlements. Beitar Illit was building a new hill to continue its growth. Ifrat settlement was growing constantly while we were there. There was never any type of settlement freeze whatsoever.

The Jerusalem municipality announced the building of 2,500 homes in Givat Hamatos which is just inside the Green Line but north of Bethlehem, so it is in the area where land is already lost on the other side of the wall. In the past few days before the Government was dissolved before the election, the finance committee diverted huge moneys into settlement buildings away from other services such as education and quickly dissolved parliament so that nobody could do anything about it.

It is important to remember that these settlements are illegal under the Geneva Convention. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states clearly that "The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies." This expansion, coupled with the land confiscations undermines the ability of these villages to survive, pushing Palestinians off the land, which is also illegal under Article 49. The continued growth of settlements is not just a threat to the two state solution but is also an ongoing war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Ireland as a signatory of the Geneva Convention has a responsibility to act on war crimes. That was the Government action. We then had action by the individual settlers and the individual settler communities.

One of the obvious aspects is the growth of illegal outposts. These outposts are rudimentary settlements built by settlers. They are illegal under Israeli law as well as international law, but little is done to dismantle them. They can start as a tent or a trailer and slowly grow from there until there is a full settlement with buildings growing and taking over more of the land. The outpost covers more than just the footprint of the tent or caravan because they would set up a security exclusion zone around it. So they are very significant in taking over land.

One of the most significant of these outposts is KHALLET ANNAHLA, which is just south of the main municipal area of Bethlehem. This piece of land was under court dispute and instead of waiting for the court decision, settlers went and built a tent on land that was privately owned by a Palestinian farmer. This action was condemned by the courts. Things they had done, including opening a new road, were declared illegal. Still it was not dismantled by the army or police. There are no attempts to move it on. KHALLET ANNAHLA is very important because if a settlement

is built there it starts to cut off Bethlehem from the south. Bethlehem is cut off from the north and the west. Khallet Annahla and linking through to Tekoa provides a block at the bottom to block it off from the south.

To the east of Bethlehem there is a former Israeli military base. When the Israeli army left in 2006 the Palestinian Authority tried to acquire it to turn it into a hospital. It has been taken over by a group called “the women for Israel’s tomorrow” also known, as the women in green. They are attempting to establish a presence here calling the development “Shdema”. Their website refers to the importance of Shdema as providing a contiguous path from Jerusalem to Har Homa, a large settlement in east Jerusalem just north of Bethlehem, into Shdema and down to Tekoa and Nokdim, which are slightly further south. They emphasise that it is important to create a unified presence of the settlements which would cut off Bethlehem to the east.

Around the Gush Etzion area, villages such as Wadi Fukinare are essentially surrounded by settlements. This is repeated across the West Bank in places such as Yanoun, but this is now Bethlehem that will be surrounded, cut off and choked. Bethlehem is one of the largest and most ancient of the Palestinian cities. It has always been a significant Palestinian city and will now be at serious risk of being surrounded by settlers and choked from any further growth or development. This is a significant deterioration and undermines any sort of two-state solution. If we believe a two-state solution is fair and want to work towards it, the settlement building will totally destroy it.

Alongside this are the violence and harassment we have witnessed from the settler community. As the settlements grow so do the violence and harassment from the settlers and the army. Article 27 of the 4th Geneva convention states that an occupying power has a responsibility to protect against threats and acts of violence towards civilians and their property. I have witnessed the failure to protect Palestinians from settler violence which constitutes a breach of Article 27 and this will be further exacerbated by the increased settlement expansion. There are clear violations of international law throughout the area.

Ms Hilary Minch: Little of what the members will hear today will be news to them. They are all well informed and many of them have travelled to Palestine and Israel in recent years and months. Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan has recently returned from Yanoun. They will have heard testimony from witnesses, including Palestinian civil society, Israeli human rights groups, politicians and church leaders.

In September I travelled back to the little village of Yanoun in the north of the West Bank, near Nablus where I had served for five months in 2011. When we previously appeared before the committee in September 2012, my colleague Emmet Sheerin presented the story of Yanoun. I love to speak about Yanoun because it is such a special place. It is a tiny village; it is the smallest surviving village in Palestine. It is at the end of a beautiful valley filled with flowers. It could be such a special place. It is surrounded on three sides by the settlement of Itamar and its associated outposts. In 2002 all the villagers of Yanoun were forcibly displaced after a long campaign of violence. People were shot. Animals were killed. There was vandalism. They were all forced to flee the village.

The people of Yanoun are very resilient and were determined to go back to their village. They were able to return with the support of international and, importantly, Israeli human rights activists who provide a protective presence. There is now a house in Yanoun where EAPPI has a permanent base. We will stay there for as long as is needed. I wish we could leave next week but we will stay for as long as we are needed.

The main problem facing Yanoun is that the villagers have lost most of their land due to the settlements. According to Rashed Murrad, mayor of Yanoun, before the establishment of the settlements, the villagers had nothing to be scared of, but now they live in constant threat of violence and forced displacement.

Since 2003, the EAPPI programme has had a permanent presence in Yanoun. During my five months in Yanoun I witnessed almost on a daily basis violence from the settlers, the pollution of the well where people got their drinking water, the Israeli army entering in the middle of the night with sound bombs, aggression, vandalism, but most of all the loss of the land. The farmers with their sheep and goats cannot even go to graze their animals or pick their olives.

In recent years it has become a little quieter in Yanoun. There is slightly less violence than previously, but unfortunately other villages in the region are experiencing much worse violence and levels of attacks. The important thing to say about the violence by the settlers is that it is often accompanied by the Israeli army. Settlers and the army work very closely together to intimidate and threaten the Palestinians on their land.

Our presence and the presence of Israeli human rights observers provide some breathing space but it is not a solution. The only solution for Yanoun, the other villages and Palestine as a whole is the implementation of international law which would result in an end to the occupation and the dismantling of the illegal settlements. Only then could everyone begin to live normal lives.

Every year, when I return to visit Yanoun, I drink the lovely sweet Palestinian tea with the women, eat delicious bread and cheese and watch the children growing up. Palestinians have said to me repeatedly, "What can we do?" There is an awful sense of hopelessness. People are devastated after the summer attacks on Gaza. It is up to us as EAs, as civilians and as parliamentarians to do the best we can to ensure that international law is upheld.

We have two main requests today. I will deal with the first one and Ms Derbyshire will deal with the second one. We urge the Government to unconditionally and immediately recognise a Palestinian state. We have heard indications that the Government will not oppose the motion being debated tonight, which is superb news. We also ask members to go a step further and speak on behalf of the committee that the Government should recognise Palestine and also write to the Minister in that regard.

I have a few points about the recognition, if I may-----

Chairman: I ask Ms Minch to be brief as I am trying to get some of the members in to ask questions.

Ms Hilary Minch: I can come back on this later.

Chairman: Yes. Ms Minch might come back to it because some of the questions will probably relate to what she wants to talk about.

I believe Ms Derbyshire has a second point.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: We will leave that there because what we have here just goes back over what has happened in the past two years regarding our call for a ban.

Chairman: It is much better that we have interaction between members and witnesses.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: Yes. I wish to state that Ms Byrne's experience relates particularly to military incursions and the arrest of minors, if anyone is particularly interested, and we can come back to the answers later.

Chairman: I thank the delegation. I call Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan and I shall let her contribute a few times if she asks questions.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I know the work of the ecumenical programme because the first time I travelled to the West Bank it was organised by Ms Minch and I was accompanied by a member of the programme in Jerusalem. Then we visited Bethlehem where we saw the checkpoint and the work done by the programme. Next we went to Yanoun which was the most amazing place. On the way there we visited a school and one in Yanoun where the ecumenical programme has a presence. In Yanoun we also had the most amazing lunch with a gentleman farmer who was the mayor at that stage. It is a great testament to those people and to the programme that such places still exist.

The organisation monitors and reports human rights abuses. What happens then? The delegation is here to talk to us but there is a frustration among Palestinian people and Israeli people at what is going on. The legal process takes so long. The case appears to be cast iron but there is no guarantee it will get anywhere.

I am particularly interested in the Bedouin in the Jordan Valley and their situation, in particular. There is a major waiting list of people wanting to join the programme. A lot of people in Ireland are interested in this matter. I wish to draw attention to the amazing work being done by the organisation such as in youth groups like in Arroed camp, theatres in Jenin and Hebron, and the heritage groups in Berzit. However, the Palestinian Authority could do more. I am not sure if the delegation can comment on the matter but I would like to hear their views.

Ms Hilary Minch: We feel the same frustration. We prepare reports, bear witness and go to the European Parliament. There are human rights organisations that are better placed than us to do some of the long-term legal work.

The Deputy asked what else can be done so I shall outline the big thing to do. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Israel will not act without external pressure being applied. Therefore, we should still pursue all the legal and human rights angles that we can but, in as friendly a way as possible, bring pressure to bear on the government of Israel that it must act and end occupation. One of the things we can do relates to the banning of settlement goods. We could make a decision not to trade with illegal settlements. Two key ways to put pressure on Israel is to recognise Palestine as a state and to balance things slightly for negotiations.

Ms Jenn Byrne: I shall speak a little about the Bedouin as the Deputy has said she was particularly interested in hearing about them. Over the past couple of years Israel has announced plans to forcibly transfer 12,500 Bedouin from areas around the E1 area of Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley to three settlements around the valley which represents a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions. Under the Geneva Conventions a grave breach is separate from a normal breach, not that one can ever have a normal breach of international humanitarian law. States who are party to the Geneva Conventions are obliged to take action to pursue the offenders who have permitted, ordered or orchestrated a grave breach and to try them in national courts. That provision ties member states to taking action.

The Bedouin lead very difficult lives because over 80% of its population do not have ac-

cess to water or electricity and over 50% are children. As the committee is probably aware, the Palestinian population is quite young but the percentage is even greater among the Bedouin population. When I worked in the region I was based in the northwest of the West Bank and I visited, along with the Palestinian Medical Relief Society, two Bedouin communities. One community was based close to a Palestinian village and had illegal water and electricity hook-ups but the other one could not access same. Our contact in the region told us that it is not that these communities did not have the money; it is that they cannot use it to develop themselves. In other words, any time they built anything it was demolished.

I was in the region as part of a medical relief society and our job was to provide basic medicines and diabetes medication. In these regions the Bedouin population must live cheek by jowl with their animals because they cannot build proper buildings to house their animals. One of the towns, Arab al-Abideen, is situated on a hill and effluent from the animals runs along homes so many people suffer from respiratory illnesses as a result. The town is in the shadow of Alfei Menashe which is one of the largest settlements of the Kedumim finger settlement blocs. The Bedouin can develop but their efforts are inhibited from doing so.

Chairman: Does Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan wish to contribute again?

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: Not now but I will do so later.

Chairman: I call Deputy Durkan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome our guests and thank them for coming along to speak to us. I have a question regarding the debate taking place in the House during Private Members’ time in which, apparently, there is unanimous willingness to assist in a positive way and to try to put international pressure on the various combatants, for want of a better description, and various positions. To what extent does the delegation think that Ireland, as part of the global community, can be a positive influence on the Israelis, Hamas, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority with a view to establishing a forum? Is it possible, at this forum, for these organisations to begin to air their grievances, re-establish the peace process and reach an understanding which is fundamental to anything that happens in the region, of each other’s willingness to allow the other to exist?

Chairman: I suggest we allow the organisation answer the Deputy’s question and then I shall get back to him again. There is a lot to answer.

Mr. Patrick Costello: If we are going to accept the two-state solution then we need two states. Therefore, we need to look at settlement building and to recognise the Palestinian State. Also, if one looks at our experience in Northern Ireland, we need an honest broker to work between them. The European Union, Ireland or another country like Brazil that does not have skin in the game and is neutral could provide proper mediation. Those are the kinds of things that we as a nation and the Government can ask and push for at European and UN levels and internationally. They are the sorts of things that we need to do to get both sides together.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: At the moment Israel benefits from the occupation in terms of the settlements which must be addressed before negotiations can move on.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I have visited the region on more than one occasion and I have seen little progress made over a 35-year period. Therefore, I wonder if it is possible or feasible to achieve a settlement.

In terms of the potential for a two-state solution, one will discover when one visits the area that there are three or four states so I am not sure there will be success. That question has been raised during debates in the House and I have raised it before. I have looked at the situation on the ground and have two questions. Is it feasible to continue pursuing the line that the international community has pursued? How effective is such a policy? To my mind, it is not an effective solution. To what extent has either side moved towards to accommodate each other? Are they willing to accept an international forum to deal with the situation? Are all sides willing to accept such a forum?

On one of my visits to the region it was suggested to me that we could create a tunnel between Gaza and the West Bank, Hebron or whatever. That is one of the suggestions put forward and I am not sure it is based on reality. It made me wonder how feasible some of the proposals have been.

Finally, a President of Egypt and Prime Minister of Israel were assassinated following their efforts to bring about a settlement. They were virtually isolated by their own people who did not go along with their proposals. How does the international community exert sufficient influence to convince the opposing parties to recognise that it cannot go on forever - or can it go on forever? We have had a recent meeting with representatives from that area who appeared to suggest that, from an Israeli point of view, they intended to hold fast forever if necessary. I do not think that is feasible. Nor it is feasible to expect that any kind of arrangement can be reached that will accommodate all parties or any party if that contingency position is adopted by anyone.

Chairman: Thank you Deputy Durkan. Does anybody want to comment on the Deputy's last points?

Ms Hilary Minch: I appreciate what the Deputy is saying about one, two or three states and the reality on the ground, but we are not talking about two equal sides trying to negotiate. We are talking about people who have been living under military occupation and have had their homeland taken. We are talking about the Palestinian refugees. It is not two equal sides, and in 1988 the Palestinians declared a state on just 22% of what was historic Palestine. This huge historic compromise was made before the Oslo accords. There has been a solution available since then but no negotiations have worked because, as Councillor Costello mentioned, there has been no proper pressure brought to bear on Israel. There have been no sanctions. UN Security Council resolutions and the UN Charter have all been breached and in our capacity as EAPPI we----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Did former US President Bill Clinton not bring----

Chairman: Hold on, just to finish.

Ms Hilary Minch: In our position as EAPPI we are not particularly promoting boycott, divestment and sanctions, but there are so many things that can be done within the EU and the economic framework to send a message to Israel that its actions - its breaches of international law and human rights - are not acceptable. The recognition of a State of Palestine will not change things on the ground but it does help in the negotiations between Israel and Palestine, and that is why it is so important. Whatever the final outcome is, one, two or three states, at least we are recognising that the Palestinian State in whatever form it takes has a right to exist.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I accept the point Ms Minch makes, but if something has not

worked for 30 or 40 years or whatever the case may be, it is not likely to work in the immediate future at least. With no disrespect to all the Oslo accords or whatever, or to Bill Clinton, who made huge efforts in that area to coerce the opposing factions to come together, I believe the time has come to look at other possibilities as well.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the witnesses. The type of testimony they have given and the work they are doing are hugely important and it is important to recognise that today. I thank them for coming back and giving us the briefing. It would also be appropriate for the committee to extend condolences to the family and comrades of the Palestinian minister and leading member of Fatah, Ziad Abu Ein, who was killed in a confrontation with soldiers. Ar dheis Dé go raibh sé siúd.

It is still very plain that there are huge violations of international law and human rights. I welcome the motion that is being tabled in the Dáil. It would appear that it is going to get support.

Chairman: Do you have a question, Senator Ó Clochartaigh, please?

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Certainly, in a second, I will have two questions if that is okay.

Chairman: That is no problem. We can answer one and I will come back to you again.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: The ban on settlement goods is a hugely important campaign which would have an economic impact and might work quite well in moving things forward. How is the movement on this campaign building? Is there support building across the EU on this issue?

Ms Jenn Byrne: I came back last month from an advocacy week in the European Parliament, where we had representatives from 15 EU member states talking to their MEPs. We also met with the European External Action Service and talked to them about the plan to ban settlement goods at EU level. It is stalled and is going nowhere - that is an honest answer. It is up to individual member states to take that action as it will not be done at European level.

Chairman: If nobody else wishes to comment on that I will allow the Senator another question.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: I hope the initiative might be taken on by the Government here once the motion has - hopefully - been passed in the Dáil and the Seanad. On the issue of the upcoming Israeli elections, do the witnesses think there is any chance a progressive government could be elected that would change policies on settlements and land grabs?

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: I have just been there. I suppose the general view is that it seems unlikely. The Palestinians are amazing in that they continue to try to have hope, but I think at the moment they are not feeling very hopeful.

Chairman: I will let the Senator in again because his questions were answered fairly quickly.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: No, I am fine, I have no more questions.

Deputy Eric Byrne: I welcome the delegation and applaud the work they do. They are very brave people. I think I may have met some of their people in Columbia also in very poor

conditions. I congratulate them on their Christian enthusiasm.

As a Christian organisation, could the witnesses offer us an opinion as to whether the Christian population is in decline in this important religious region of the Middle East? Why might that be?

I think Ms Derbyshire may have said that things are getting worse in the West Bank, which is controlled by Fatah. Let us say Fatah is gone and Hamas is gone and we are left with the Palestinian Authority. While I will be voting in support of Ireland recognising a Palestinian State, I would like to ask whether the witnesses believe the Palestinians in the new authority are unified sufficiently to be able to run a state?

The witnesses speak in terms of settlers, or do they speak in terms of religious settlers? Who are they? Are they people moving to better accommodation from the existing Jewish Israeli population or are they settlers being brought in from Ethiopia, Russia, Lithuania, Moldova or wherever?

It contributes to my frustration when we are looking for this honest broker - Councillor Costello mentioned countries like Brazil - that in the real world surely it has got to be accepted that the power brokers are America and Germany. Much as we would like to fly a flag on behalf of the Palestinians by granting recognition of their state, is it at this point a viable state run by a government of the Palestinian Authority?

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: I think we probably all have things to say on that and there were quite a few questions. I will address the one on the Christian population because I have just been at a conference in Bethlehem organised by the Palestinian Christians. Yes, they are shrinking, and one reason they give is that they generally have more connection with the outside world and more opportunities to leave. Palestine is under huge pressure economically as well as politically and the people who have the option to leave tend to be the ones who are leaving. They express solidarity with their Muslim brothers and sisters all the time and regard themselves as all Palestinians working together. That is the message I am bringing from them.

On the Palestinian Authority, people always disagree with their governments. The Palestinian Authority needs to be given the opportunity to govern and at the moment they are not being given that. If we recognise the State of Palestine there will be some movement forward.

Deputy Eric Byrne: My question is whether the witnesses think the authority is consolidated enough, because it is a merger, I do not know, of---

Chairman: The witnesses may answer the questions and I will come back to Deputy Byrne if he does not mind.

Ms Jenn Byrne: I would like to answer the Deputy's question about settlers. He was wondering where they come from and who they are. I will give him a figure first. The numbers range from a UN estimate of 550,000 to an estimate by Peace Now, an Israeli organisation, of 650,000 settlers between east Jerusalem and the West Bank. They are made up of both ideological and economic settlers. The ideological settlers believe the West Bank and all of the greater area belong to the Israeli Jewish population as a mandate from God. The economic settlers, who also make up a large number, move there because there is currently a housing crisis in Israel and they receive economic incentives from the Israeli Government to move. That cannot be discounted. Whatever their make-up, the settlements are illegal under international law. Outside of this there are more than 100 settlements that are recognised by Israel and more

than 50 outposts. Outposts tend to be havens for the more radical ideological settler and some of them comprise a caravan here or there, while others have populations of several thousand and these are the ones that orchestrate the majority of the settler attacks and violence against the Palestinian population.

Ms Hilary Minch: I wish to respond to a number of points raised by Deputy Eric Byrne. The Christian population of Palestine has declined dramatically and the main reason Christians give in research for the decline is the occupation. They are being driven from The Holy Land, from Palestine because of the economic impact of the occupation.

In relation to the situation on the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority and, in some ways, Hamas-Fatah are not so relevant because the whole of the West Bank and Gaza are under military occupation. A certain amount of administration work is done by the Palestinian Authority and the different parties, but Israel has absolute control over the land, the sea, the air, over who comes in and goes out, over taxes and trade. The level of administration work that can be done is very limited. The Deputy asked whether the Palestinian Authority was ready to govern, but we should give it a chance. The World Bank published a very interesting report in which it talked about the different elements of governance that needed to be in place for a state to be run. It is in no doubt that these elements are in place such that Palestine could be run as a state.

Chairman: Ms Minch referred to the Palestinian Authority, but there are great differences between Hamas and Fatah, particularly when it comes to violence. Does she think they can overcome these differences and govern in a democratic way?

Ms Hilary Minch: To govern in a democratic way is the key issue. It is up to the people of Palestine to elect who they want to have in government. In 2006 there were elections on the West Bank and in Gaza and more than 55% of the population voted for Hamas. Whatever personal feelings people have about Hamas and the kind of party it is, it was democratically elected and universally boycotted by the rest of the world. It is not up to us to interfere in internal Palestinian politics as to who should rule; that is for the Palestinian people to decide. They should have their own free and fair elections.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I must apologise, as I was delayed at an earlier meeting. I am sorry that I missed the presentation.

On the honest broker about whom Councillor Patrick Costello spoke, the European Union has been a generous donor in the rebuilding of Gaza on a number of occasions. Does Ms Minch sense a willingness on the part of the European Union from her interaction with the Commission to move on and be as forthcoming on the political side? A number of weeks ago the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, told us he believed the European Union had to take a more proactive role in the Middle East peace process. Has there been any indication from the new High Commissioner and the External Action Service that they will take a more proactive approach?

With regard to the ban on settlement products, am I correct that only a small number of countries, perhaps northern European countries, have a ban on such products? Is there any indication that the European Union has a regulatory framework in place for a ban on such products should it decide to activate it? I remember that a number of years ago the former President, Mrs. Mary Robinson, and the former US President, Mr. Jimmy Carter, at an event in the capital city spoke about the need to have in place a realistic ban on products from the settlements.

In view of the massive expansion of settlements that has taken place - one of the largest acquisitions of territory took place on 1 September or 1 October last - how viable is a two state solution based on the 1967 borders?

Chairman: I will ask the delegates to answer those questions, but I will come back to the Deputy again if he has other questions to ask. Some of his questions have been answered, but I ask the delegates to update him.

Mr. Patrick Costello: I will respond briefly to the final question on settlements. I have been working in the area where 4,000 dunums of land were seized. It has not yet been built on. If there is sufficient action and external pressure, no settlements will be built on it. We need to act - strongly and quickly - in order that there will be no settlement building and to maintain a viable Palestinian state. One of the problems is that Bethlehem can be choked. Any chance of peace can be choked. That is why the issues of recognition and settlement need to be acted on quickly. There is still hope, but time is running out.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: The message we want to get across is that the matter is really urgent. It is just viable. I think my colleagues, Ms Minch and Ms Byrne, have points to make

Ms Hilary Minch: Members have asked rich and interesting questions and I hope our responses are doing them some justice.

The European Union is a significant donor to Palestine, but it is worth remembering that since the attacks on Gaza during the summer when more than 50,000 houses were destroyed not one of them has been rebuilt more than 100 days later. None of the international or EU aid promised to Gaza has made any difference on the ground. That is because Israel decides who and what comes in and out Gaza. All of the money available means nothing if Gaza is under siege. I do not know what is happening at EU level, but Ireland must do as much as it can to persuade its EU partners to introduce a ban on settlement goods. It can look at the existing mechanisms and the EU-Israel association agreement which gives Israel and other non-European countries tariff free access to the European Union. Article 1 of the agreement talks about the human rights obligations of all parties and if these obligations are being breached, there is a mechanism for cancelling or changing the agreement. I do not think we have to look for new things to do, but we need to use the mechanisms we have available to create a sense of urgency and the will to do something. As Deputy Bernard J. Durkan said, after 65 years the situation is getting worse and we have an obligation and a duty to do the best we can.

Deputy Brendan Smith: It is easy to pledge funding for a project that we know will not be drawn down, but I presume that is not the ethos of the European Union when it makes commitments and pledges. To Ms Minch's knowledge, when the European Union, on behalf of its 500 million citizens, makes a pledge to provide much needed funding to relieve the desperate plight of so many innocent people, is there any interaction between it and Israel to try to remove the blockages in order that pledged money can be drawn down to build facilities and homes for the Palestinian people?

Ms Jenn Byrne: I can speak about aid projects between 2001 and 2011. A parliamentary question at EU level was asked about the funding provided. During that period €49 million worth of EU funded and member state projects were destroyed. A question was raised whether member states and the European Union could claim back some of the money from Israel. A motion to claim it was put to a vote, but the vote went against it. There is no will at EU level to ask for reparations to cover the cost of the destroyed EU funded projects. That lack of will

extends to removing barriers to EU aid. When one walks around the West Bank - I have been on the West Bank and in Gaza - one sees signs everywhere on US Aid, EU and EU member state funded structures, but that does not mean they are safe. Water towers donated by the Swedish Government were demolished. We can talk about this, but the political will is not there. I believe this has to come at a member state level and not an EU level, because there are big players such as Germany which will vote against it.

Deputy Brendan Smith: With regard to Ms Minch's comment and the fact that the recognition of Palestine will not, unfortunately, change things overnight, we all know this, and we are all supportive of the motion before the Dáil at the moment and the motion that was passed by Seanad Éireann. I made the point last night in the Dáil that the one difference it makes is that it gives some parity of esteem to Palestine in negotiations. This is one important aspect of it.

Chairman: I wish to follow up on one question that was not answered. We spoke about the honest brokers and the EU, but what about the Americans? They have big influence in that region. Does Mr. Costello think they could do more?

Mr. Patrick Costello: America provides approximately \$3 billion in military aid to Israel. This is generally in the form of vouchers to buy military equipment from US military companies.

Chairman: Outside of military aid, what of political dialogue and trying to get a solution?

Mr. Patrick Costello: My general point is that America is a key ally, and essentially has skin in the game. The military aid, because it is tied to US companies, is essentially a \$3 billion subsidy for American companies. There are too many vested interests associated with the Americans because of that subsidy and because of those \$3 billion worth of connections.

Chairman: Would Mr. Costello accept Secretary of State Kerry went out of his way to try to do a deal there?

Mr. Patrick Costello: We talk about labelling settlement products. Boycott, divestment and sanctions are recognised as legitimate forms of protest. If America was serious, it would be looking at boycott, divestment and sanctions, the most significant of which is its \$3 billion worth of aid. Throughout its time in negotiating, this has never been reduced or even threatened to be reduced. Coming back to Deputy Durkan's earlier point, Bill Clinton may have used moral pressure, but until this gets backed up with action, there is no pressure. It is the same with us. We can sit here and talk, but until it gets backed up with action, there is no pressure.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I do not accept that Bill Clinton just put on moral pressure. He put a huge effort into bringing the sides together and into establishing a platform for a peace process, and I say "a platform". He was very disappointed and clearly indicated so. The possibility of American aid in the form Mr. Costello is talking about being brought to a halt is fairly slim in the circumstances. I do not think that is going to happen in the short term. What other means can be found? Given the Americans have the goodwill, and the moral support they give, to bring about the setting up of a platform again for peace discussions, what else is there? The Oslo Accords do not seem to be working. There has been no great progress in any direction. Since I was a small lad, and that is not today or yesterday, the situation is the same. How can we achieve progress?

Ms Hilary Minch: In response to Deputy Durkan's valid point about what else we can do, I was talking to my eight year old niece, telling her in very simple terms about Palestine. She

was looking at a picture I had. Her answer was: "Could they just not stop taking the homes?" Essentially, she was asking could they just not end the occupation. There is a solution available. Israel needs to end its occupation of Palestine. If it is not going to do this willingly, which clearly it is not, we, the Irish people and the Government, and the EU have so many things we can do to put pressure on Israel. There is the EU-Israel association agreement, and the banning of settlement goods at the very least. At UN level, the UN Security Council should have acted, and it will not, for reasons we understand. I agree there is no peace process. The longer the talks go on, the more land Israel appropriates and the worse the situation becomes for Palestine. It is a horrendous situation. I do not want us to be back here in two years time, still talking about the empty peace process and the lack of freedom and human rights for Palestinians. There are so many mechanisms at our disposal and we should be using them, talking to our MEPs and talking to the other governments in Europe. We should also be acting unilaterally on the settlement goods and the recognition of Palestine.

Chairman: I want to follow up on Hamas. Deputy Mitchell also wants to come in. Does Ms Minch think Hamas is a real obstacle to any peace initiative given it does not recognise Israel?

Ms Hilary Minch: I would not agree with that. I am not here as a representative-----

Chairman: I want to get a balance on the whole thing.

Ms Hilary Minch: The thing to go back to is that there are political parties in every country whose ethos, background or charters we might not like. However, if they are democratically elected and they are the representatives of the people, it is necessary to engage with them. This is the situation we are in. Whether we like them or not, they should be able to represent their own people. This is key.

Chairman: In terms of the non-recognition of Israel, does Ms Minch think this is an obstacle in moving the peace process forward? On a dialogue with Hamas, I agree with her.

Ms Hilary Minch: On the recognition of Israel, if we go back to 1998 when the PLO declared a state on 22% of the historic homeland, Hamas recognises that. Whether it is recognising Israel as a Jewish state or a non-Jewish state is not really the point. It recognises the state of Palestine as being on that 22%. That is recognising Israel on the remainder of the land. If we talk about different political parties and the parties in Israel, the Likud charter refuses to recognise a Palestinian state. It refuses to recognise any land west of the Jordan River as being Palestinian. The same could be argued for the Likud Party of which President Netanyahu is in charge. I do not think it is all that helpful to get into what the different political parties-----

Chairman: My point is any two-state solution is going to involve land exchange. It cannot happen otherwise, given the erratic settlements that are there at the moment.

Ms Hilary Minch: It is not for us to say what shape a future Palestine state should take or if it should be a one-state or two-state solution. We are not here to advocate for one or the other.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: There is little left to ask but I do wish to take up the issue of the viability of a two-state solution. This has been a policy we have pursued, that all peace attempts have pursued and it has got nowhere. In the past six months, things have deteriorated to the point where people are saying maybe it is not viable. Mr. Costello was talking about the chain, the wall and the settlements. Never mind politically, physically is a two-state solution viable? The Chairman was saying that Hamas will not recognise Israel as a state. The reality is that

Israel is already a state. The very fact that one aspires to a two-state solution is a recognition of this. Therefore, that is a dubious justification for not coming to the peace table at all. Irish and EU policy is shifting. They are now looking at recognising the state, or at least using it as leverage to try to bring Israel to the table. Is that a good idea? If we declare a recognition of Palestine, do the witnesses think that this precludes looking at other options if the two-state solution is no longer viable? Should we be looking at power sharing? Would we put the frighteners on Israel to come to the table with other possibilities?

Ms Hilary Minch: I thank Deputy Mitchell. She is right on the issue of the viability of a one-state or two-state solution. However, it is important to remember that the recognition of Palestine as a state based on the 22% of the land is the right thing to do, but it strengthens the hand of the Palestinians for negotiations. It does not dictate what the final outcomes should be. Many of the Palestinians and Israelis I have spoken to in recent months and over the years have mixed feelings as to whether they want to live in one state or two states. In some ways, it does not matter because what they want is equality and human rights in whatever state they are living in. Tonight's vote is not saying that this is going to be the final state of Palestine and that is Israel. That has yet to be decided. The important thing is for people to live with equality and human rights in whatever state.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Are we flogging a dead horse in constantly talking about this?

Ms Hilary Minch: We are a bit late. We should have recognised Palestine along with most of the world in 1988 so I do not think we are jumping the gun. We are very late to recognise it.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: I am not suggesting that Ms Minch is suggesting that. I am just wondering if we are going in the right direction. Would it be better to use the threat of it as leverage rather than actually do it? I am not convinced. This is something that is being discussed all over the EU at the moment. It is not just in Ireland.

Senator Michael Mullins: I welcome our guests. If our Government recognises the state of Palestine, will it matter one iota seeing that so little progress has been made over the past 60 years, as has been referred to? My question, which was partially answered earlier, related to humanitarian aid and the rebuilding of all the buildings that were destroyed. Is there any significant move that can be made by the EU to ensure that the pledged aid that the various member states have indicated that they are prepared to provide can start to filter through, start the rebuilding process and begin to restore some sort of normality for the people who are suffering most and who are living in appalling conditions?

I have not visited Palestine so I do not quite know the extent of the settlement goods but could the witnesses quantify the economic value of the settlement goods? What would it mean or how big a hit would the producers of settlements goods take if there was a ban on settlement goods?

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: I have an extract here from a report that was produced a year or so ago. The Israeli government estimates that the value of EU imports from settlements at around €230 million per year compared to €15 million from Palestinians so it is very significant. It would also be politically significant in terms of Ireland or Europe saying that it will not give support to the settlement project.

Ms Jenn Byrne: I have two things to add to that. Senator Mullins asked what state recognition would mean. This applies to Deputy Mitchell's question as well. On a Palestinian citizen

level, it would mean hope. The fact is that settlement expansion and violence are whittling away at the hope of the Palestinian population and this is leading to a rise in tensions. We have not had an intifada in over a decade and I am getting worried. I know that older members of the population remember the harshness of the second intifada quite well and are afraid of a third one. I know that what we need to give the Palestinian population to relieve tensions is hope. I believe that state recognition is our way of giving them hope. I can tell the committee that after Sweden recognised Palestine recently, there was an upsurge in morale that was observed by EAPPI volunteers. It is something that Ireland could definitely do to make the situation on the ground better for the Palestinian population.

Chairman: Deputies Maureen O’Sullivan and Eric Byrne want to come in.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I will be very quick. A few weeks ago in the West Bank, I was very struck by the number of Palestinian people who have moved away from the two-state solution and who talk about a one-state solution. Part of it is their loss of faith in the Palestinian Authority. Part of that is also because no elections have been held. That is not doing the Palestinian people any good. They need hope from their own politicians as well as politicians outside Palestine.

Deputy Eric Byrne: Ms Minch said that we missed the boat and that we should have recognised the state of Palestine before now. It is questionable because I pose to her the following question. What difference would it have made? Today, we, hopefully, have the merging of Fatah with Hamas and one now has the Palestinian Authority. Hamas will not release its authority at a governmental level to the Palestinian Authority. There are terrible tensions here. Let us call a spade a spade. It is important for the Palestinians that we give this moral support tonight. However, would the witnesses not agree that if every country theoretically looked at a map and said that they recognised that state, without a government that is resourced and capable of running it, we would be putting the cart before the house? Surely, we should be resourcing the Palestinian Authority, which is the representative body of the three different zones. If we do not have a government that is capable of running the place, should we not put our resources in the direction of empowering and resourcing it and having it consolidate with a view to being internationally recognised as a potential or actual government of a state that all the countries in the world have recognised?

Ms Jenn Byrne: I have a counter question. If the Deputy thinks it has not happened, does he think it will happen with a continued occupation and that we can resource a government that does not have the ability to govern? Outside Area “A”, the Palestinian Authority lacks any authority and then has only limited authority. During Operation Brother’s Keeper, the Israeli military entered Area “A” and performed military activities and arrested people in Palestinian cities that were supposed to be under Palestinian Authority control. No matter how much we try to build capacity to make a government that can govern accurately, widely and effectively, we need to make sure it is happening in a place where it could utilise its capacity to govern. At the moment, the occupation inhibits that. No matter how much one builds up the Palestinian Authority, it cannot govern under occupation. That is as clearly as I can put it.

Chairman: My question relates to tonight’s vote. We must be clear about what is happening. It is the Parliament, more than likely, which will recognise the state of Palestine. The Government has said that it will recognise the state of Palestine when the time is right. Could Ms Minch tell me whether it is case of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” in respect of recognising or not recognising the state of Palestine? I am talking about every country. Is there a danger that recognising the state of Palestine could lead to more violence on the ground

as we have seen in the past and a failed state? If we do not recognise it, are we not letting down the people of Palestine in respect of their entitlement to statehood? Are we caught between two stools?

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: It is obviously really hard for us to know. Any of us who have been there and I think the committee has probably been there as well-----

Chairman: We have been there a number of times. We went there last year. First of all, I went to Gaza and Israel with the then leader of the Opposition, An Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, and Deputies Billy Timmins and Alan Shatter. The committee has gone on a number of occasions. We went last year to the refugee camps in Jordan. We think Jordan has an important role to play in the peace process. It is a very poor country and is affected by what is happening in the Middle East. We also met the chief negotiator for the Palestinians, the Palestinian foreign minister and some senior politicians in the Knesset in Israel. There was no foreign minister in place in Israel at the time so we did not get an opportunity to meet them. My question relates to the future. If this thing was simple to solve, it would have been solved many years ago.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: What I was going to say, and I am sure the Chairman has heard the same, is that it is very important to the Palestinians to have international recognition. As Ms Minch in particular has said, the issue is inequality. We have recognised the state of Israel so we should recognise the state of Palestine. It is then to some extent up to them to move on from there.

There were two points in respect of the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli group, Breaking the Silence, met the committee in the summer. Am I correct? I was once on a tour given by Breaking the Silence, and the ex-soldier leading the tour stated he felt the Palestinian Authority is not given enough credence for what it is doing to hold the line with regard to non-violence. It has managed to keep a lid on a very difficult situation and he felt it should at least be given recognition for this. It has also established institutions. I know there is much wrong, but it has made great progress. There has been a loss of faith in it. When I was there I heard more people speak about a one-state solution, but what undermines this is the declaration of a Jewish state and what is going through the Knesset at present which has led to the downfall of the government. Recognition of the state of Palestine is important in terms of equality and for it to move forward from there.

Ms Hilary Minch: I remind the committee that in 1980, when the Bahrain declaration was made, Ireland became the first European state to declare that the Palestinian people had a right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state of Palestine. Who are we to deny someone else's right to self-determination? A very important point to remember is this is what Palestinians are asking for. They are also asking for their freedom and an end to the occupation. In a statement the Palestinian Christian leaders said:

[S]end our urgent message to the whole world and particularly to Europe: We are yearning for justice and peace. Recognizing Palestine and defining Israel's borders is a first step towards that goal....We believe that recognizing the State of Palestine on the 1967 border is the first step towards changing the current status quo. Banning settlement products and divesting from companies and organizations linked directly or indirectly to the Israeli occupation is also a must. 66 years after the beginning of the Palestinian Nakba and 47 years after the occupation, it is time for the State of Palestine to be free and become a full member of the United Nations. That is why we call upon European governments to fully endorse the just Palestinian quest for freedom and independence.

Chairman: I see where Ms Minch is coming from with regard to the ban on settlement goods, and she spoke about €230 million worth of goods. A ban will not be effective unless every country in the European Union makes it effective, and this will not happen. Europe is very divided with regard to the Middle East and the foreign ministers will tell one this. The gesture is more symbolically than economically effective. I do not want to mention particular countries, but countries such as Germany will not ban settlement goods.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: Sometimes if a particular country takes a stand, it is more likely that other countries will follow suit. We are seeing this with regard to recognition, which is starting to gain momentum. The same could happen with settlement goods. Someone has to start somewhere.

Chairman: Yes, but this issue has been going on---

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: It has been rumbling for a while.

Chairman: It has been with the committee for a number of years.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: It has been tossed between national governments and the EU.

Chairman: That is the problem.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: It is now back with the national governments, so it probably is time to urge the Irish Government to take a stand on it.

Ms Jenn Byrne: On a very basic level, settlements which have been recognised as illegal by international law are not an industry with which we should do business. If we support the founding principles of international law, we should not be dealing with settlements.

Chairman: What do the witnesses think of the new EU policy guidelines being worked out at present with regard to the labelling of goods from settlements so they are not misrepresented to consumers as having come from Israel? Is work ongoing at EU level in this regard? Is this a first step with regard to what the witnesses are proposing?

Ms Jenn Byrne: Ireland has released the guidelines on businesses dealing in settlements as well as settlement goods, but not all countries have done so. Most countries are not labelling their goods and there have not been strict regulations stating countries must do so. There is also the fact that labelling something as coming from a settlement does not mean people will not buy it or that they are aware of what settlements mean.

Chairman: They would have a choice.

Ms Jenn Byrne: They would have a choice, but perhaps they would not know what it means. My mother did not know about Israeli settlements until I went there. Consumers may not understand the ramifications of their choices. If they see Israel OPT they may not understand it. Will we endorse it so people have the choice to fund something which is internationally recognised as illegal?

Chairman: Would it be seen as a first step, given the divisions which exist with regard to the ban on settlement goods in the European Union at present?

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: If the EU could agree to label goods, it would be a great start.

Chairman: Yes.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: However, it would not prevent Ireland introducing a ban.

Chairman: That is true.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: This would be a great step forward.

Chairman: We have had a very good interactive debate between committee members and the witnesses. It is good to differ, challenge and ask questions. It is important to probe what is happening in Israel at present. I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: We have raised two issues on which the committee could take action.

Chairman: One of the issues about which the witnesses spoke is very straightforward and will be dealt with this evening and it will be unanimous. The ban is an ongoing issue for the committee. As I stated, a ban on settlement goods can only be effective if the EU as a whole acts. Otherwise it will not work. We have had motions on it previously and we have put them to the Minister. With the approval of the committee, we can write to the Minister about this meeting and outline the two issues raised by the witnesses.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: That would be great. I thank committee members for their interaction.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for coming before us. There will be further debate on this issue. More than likely, somebody from the Israeli government will put a different point to us in the new year, as the committee must be balanced and hear everybody's viewpoint. We certainly take on board what the witnesses have said today.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: I thank the committee very much for having us.

Chairman: They have given us a very comprehensive view of their workings and the effects the illegal settlements are having.

Ms Jenny Derbyshire: We thank the committee members for their interest and time.

The joint committee when into private session at 3.55 p.m. and adjourned at 4.05 p.m. *sine die*.