Aboul Gheit’s address at the opening of the 50th session of the Arab Labour Conference in Baghdad

27 April 2024

Your Excellency Engineer Muhammad Shiaa Al-Sudani,

Prime Minister of the Republic of Iraq,

Your Excellency Mr. Ahmed Al-Asadi,

Minister of Labour and Social Affairs,

Chairman of the 50th session of the Arab Labour Conference,

Your Excellency Mr. Gilbert Houngbo,

Director-General of the International Labour Organisation,

Your Excellency Mr. Fayez Ali Al-Mutairi,

Director-General of the Arab Labour Organisation,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here in Baghdad with all of you to inaugurate the proceedings of the Arab Labour Conference, a momentous occasion laden with symbolic significance as the Arab Labour Organisation reconvenes in this historic city. It is a poignant reminder of our shared history, as Baghdad once served as the venue for the inaugural session where the Constitution of the Organisation was ratified. Today marks 59 years of dedicated efforts aimed at advancing workers' rights and upholding union freedoms throughout the Arab region.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the leadership and people of the Republic of Iraq for their gracious hospitality extended to us. My sincere appreciation also goes to the Iraqi Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, as well as the Arab Labour Organisation, for their invaluable contributions. I would like to express my thanks to all those involved in the meticulous preparation of this conference, which has been made possible under the esteemed patronage of State Prime Minister Engineer Muhammad Shiaa Al-Sudani.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Amidst our reflections on the strides made in enhancing social protection for workers and fostering a culture of union rights in the Arab region, it is imperative that we acknowledge a stark reality: a significant portion of our territory grapples with vastly different circumstances due to occupation. As we convene here, Palestine faces a relentless onslaught characterised by brutal attacks employing a variety of weaponry, exacerbating the deprivation of essential resources such as medicine, water, and food.

The atrocities inflicted by the occupying forces did not commence merely with recent events but span decades, marked by systematic efforts to dismantle Palestinian production sectors and exploit the resources of its populace through various means. One cannot help but question the morality of subjecting Palestinian workers, both men and women, to recurrent and degrading inspections during their daily quest for livelihood across their own lands. Is it conscionable for occupation authorities to confiscate the hard-earned wages of Palestinian labourers and detain them unjustly for prolonged periods?

We must demand accountability from those who espouse rhetoric on human rights yet remain passive in the face of deliberate attacks on humanitarian workers, the bombing of ambulances, and the conversion of vital institutions such as hospitals, schools, and shelters into sites of mass casualties. How much longer shall Israel evade international scrutiny and accountability for its actions? It is high time for the international community to act decisively to ensure justice and uphold the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people.

It is incumbent upon all of us, including international organisations operating within their respective mandates, to safeguard the rights of Palestinians. From this platform, I urge the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to give due consideration to the emergency plan submitted by the Palestinian government aimed at revitalising the labour sector. This plan is slated to be presented at the upcoming ILO conference in May, followed by a donor conference scheduled for June, as agreed upon by the organisation's Board of Directors. These initiatives are crucial in providing much-needed support for employment programmes in Palestine.

The harrowing scenes unfolding before us today constitute a heinous crime whose ramifications will reverberate throughout Palestine's working landscape for generations to come. Preliminary estimates from the Palestinian Ministry of Labour reveal that in the initial five months of the frenzied conflict, over 550,000 jobs were lost—a staggering blow to an already beleaguered economy grappling with the challenges of occupation and crisis.

The genocidal onslaught not only resulted in the loss of over 34,000 Palestinian lives but also left hundreds of thousands disabled by war without access to dignified employment opportunities. It displaced countless individuals who lost their loved ones or saw their places of work obliterated. Moreover, it threatens to deprive millions of Palestinian children of the education necessary for securing decent employment prospects in the future. The gravity of these consequences cannot be overstated, underscoring the urgent need for concerted action to address the profound humanitarian crisis unfolding in Palestine.

The reality confronting us is stark and disheartening. Without reservation, I assert that the working conditions endured by Palestinians under Israeli occupation rank among the most abysmal in the world. These conditions not only flagrantly disregard workers' rights and the basic right to employment but also contravene numerous international conventions governing labour rights.

Adding insult to injury, the occupation authorities have baselessly accused UNRWA, an organisation that employs 30,000 individuals and provides vital assistance to millions of Palestinians, of complicity in the October 7 attack. In response, they have waged a relentless campaign to undermine UNRWA's humanitarian efforts and disrupt its funding streams, which rely heavily on contributions from donor countries.

What is particularly troubling is the precipitous decision of some nations purporting to champion justice to halt their financial support to UNRWA even before the results of the UN investigation were released. As we now know, these allegations were unsubstantiated and debunked by the investigation.

Work is not merely a means of livelihood but a testament to human dignity. Israel's concerted efforts to undermine UNRWA, an agency established in 1949 to provide essential support and employment opportunities for refugees, are a direct assault on the dignity of the Palestinian people. I implore the donor countries that have ceased funding UNRWA to reassess their stance, for the continued operation of this agency is not just a moral imperative but a humanitarian duty of paramount importance.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I commend the exceptional quality of the reports presented during this conference, covering a diverse array of topics essential to our collective agenda. Of particular significance is the report titled "The Future of Human Resources in Light of the Technological Revolution," which delves into the challenges and opportunities confronting human resources amidst the digital age. Equally important are discussions surrounding the sustenance of decent work for youth amidst digital transformation and the enhancement of social security—a testament to the alignment of these themes with the current priorities of joint Arab action.

In this era of rapid technological advancement, it is imperative that we adapt to the evolving landscape of the labour market, safeguarding workers' rights and embracing new paradigms of employment. This entails not only providing innovative forms of education, training, and rehabilitation but also fostering resilience in the face of unprecedented change.

In closing, I extend my gratitude to all participants and stakeholders, wishing you every success in your endeavours.

Thank you.