

UNESCO ADMITS PALESTINIANS AS FULL MEMBER

Witold Zys, B'nai B'rith's permanent representative to UNESCO, reports:

The General Conference of UNESCO, meeting in Paris from 25 October to 10 November 2011, decided to admit Palestine as member state of the Organization. The General Conference is the supreme instance of UNESCO, composed of all the member states (now 195), meeting once in two years to approve the programme and the budget of the Organization and decide on other important issues.

The item on the admission of Palestine was taken up on Monday 31 October 2011, immediately after the end of the general policy debate in which the last speaker, still as observer, was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Palestinian Authority who made a passionate plea for the admission of Palestine as member state.

The item was taken up at close to 1 pm. and the session continued until 3.15 pm. The conference room which seats about 1400 persons was filled beyond capacity (which is quite unusual), with both the delegations in the main hall and those placed on the balcony – the press, non-governmental organizations, the public - visibly committed in their majority to the Palestinian cause. After the President of the General Conference recalled the constitutional requirements (recommendation of the Executive Board and two-thirds majority in the Conference) and the Chairperson of the Executive Board recalled that the Board had recommended to the Conference the admission of Palestine, a roll-call vote was requested by Canada, seconded by the Netherlands.

The result of the vote was 117 in favour, 14 against and 52 abstentions. The announcement of the result was met with a long ovation. The European countries which voted in favour were strongly applauded, particularly France whose favourable vote – which was totally unexpected – was also met with a real ovation.

One of the main features of this vote was the incapacity of the European Union to reach a common position. Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia and Spain voted for, while the Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden voted against. The other members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Slovakia and the United Kingdom) abstained.

The vote was followed by a long series of explanations of vote – 47 delegations. USA was the first, explaining that it could not accept premature admission of Palestine to a specialized agency. USA was committed to the numerous activities of UNESCO but this vote would make US participation in this work more difficult. The US delegate also recalled the commitment of President Obama to the idea of two states for two peoples, living in peace – but this can only be reached by negotiations. Israel said that the decision was a tragedy for UNESCO and an infringement of international law and order. UNESCO which is an

organization devoted to science has now engaged in science-fiction, by admitting as member a non-existent state.

Generally speaking, the states which voted against or abstained argued that they were not opposed to a Palestinian state but believed that the matter should have been dealt with first at the United Nations. Many of them also called for negotiations between the parties. The states which voted for welcomed the new member state; many of them stressed that it was a historic moment.

The delegate of France was far from convincing. He started by recalling the statement of President Sarkozy at the UN on 21 September in favour of enhancing the status of Palestine by granting it the position of non-member state. The situation at UNESCO was different and France believed that Palestine had the right to become a member of that organization. He also called for renewed negotiations.

The observer for Palestine (Palestine has still to sign the Constitution of UNESCO which is deposited with the British government before becoming member state) was the last to speak, before the Director-General. He also stressed the historic nature of this vote which restored to the Palestinian people some of its rights. He thanked the countries which voted for admission; as to those that voted against, Palestine will not hold it against them: a new page was turned.

The Director-General said that this was a historic moment and expressed the conviction that everybody is interested in peace and in sharing common values. She emphasized the long-standing cooperation with the Palestinians in the various fields of competence of UNESCO and said that she would see to it that this cooperation would continue. However, she did not conceal her worries. Admission of a new member state should strengthen the organization, not to divide it. As the Director-General she was concerned by the consequences of the decision on the stability of the budget: the financing by the main contributor may be jeopardized. She appealed to all to do everything in their power to enable UNESCO to continue its action.

USA immediately announced that it would stop the payment of its contributions to the UNESCO budget, as required by its legislation in the case of an organization which admits Palestine as member state. So did Israel. This explains the concern of the Director-General – the contribution of USA represents 22 per cent of the budget.