



شبكة المنظمات الأهلية الفلسطينية

The Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network

Ms. Sigrid Kaag

Minister for International Trade and Development Cooperation
Rijnstraat 8
2515 XP The Hague
The Netherland
Via e-mail

Re: review of and suspension of Dutch payments for UAWC

Ramallah, 27 July 2020

Dear Minister Kaag,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations Network (PNGO), an umbrella organization and coordination framework of 142 Palestinian NGOs, which is based on the principles of democracy, social justice, rule of law and respect for human rights.

We are most grateful for the political and financial support that the Netherlands has been providing to Palestinian civil society organisations. One of the beneficiaries of Dutch aid is the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), which is a member organisation of PNGO.

The immediate reason for my letter is your recent announcement to launch a review of and to suspend further payments to UAWC. We are deeply concerned about the implications of this decision for UAWC in particular and Palestinian civil society more broadly.

We understand the Dutch government's need for clarifications, following the arrest by Israeli authorities last year of two former employees of UAWC. Both men are, as you rightly noted in answers to questions in the Dutch parliament, suspects at this stage. However, your answers make no mention of the torture and inhumane treatment they have been exposed to in Israeli detention. One of them, Samer Arbid, was almost tortured to death.

Acknowledging and reporting such torture is important on its own for acknowledging a foundational rule of virtually every modern legal system: only the guilty can be punished for their acts, and only after a fair process. This principle is valid also in relation to the status and case of the former UAWC employees: they are innocent until proven guilty in a fair trial, in which their rights have been fully respected. The trial awaiting the former UAWC employees in Israel's military court system is set to violate these basic legal standards in every way.

Your answers to parliamentary questions also failed to acknowledge "shrinking space" as the decisive context in which UAWC has been targeted by virulent smear campaigns. These campaigns started long before the two former UAWC employees were arrested. They have been waged by Israeli organisations established for the sole purpose of damaging and disrupting

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NGOs that work to hold Israel accountable for its serious and systematic violations and that challenge Israel's efforts to entrench its military occupation, on its trajectory towards formal annexation of large parts of Palestine.

The Dutch government funds UAWC because of its vital work in Area C of the West Bank. That same work is the very reason why UAWC has been under such heavy attack. The organizations leading this attack and many other NGOs are shielding and thereby facilitating Israel's violent occupation and its preparations for formal annexation. They should be denounced and dismissed by the EU. Yet, Palestinian civil society organizations providing basic needs and promoting human rights are the ones that are increasingly put on the defensive.

Within the EU, the Netherlands has been a leading promoter and defender of civic space and human rights organisations, including in Palestine. We are deeply concerned your review and the suspension of Dutch payments for UAWC will add momentum to the aggressive shrinking space campaign, which the Israeli government and its affiliated predator organizations have launched against Palestinian civil society.

In answers to parliamentary questions you explained the dual focus and wide scope of the review of UAWC as follows: "I have decided to launch an external review into possible links between PFLP and UAWC and how UAWC implements its own policy that employees may not be politically active, before a decision can be taken about further cooperation with UAWC."

We trust your good intentions, but cannot escape the conclusion: this approach will open the door widely for escalating incitement against UAWC and manipulative interference with the review, if not during then after its release. The peak in incitement we witnessed right after the announcement of your review should be seen as a prelude to this scenario unfolding.

We expect such incitement will also be channelled to other donors of UAWC. If they follow your decision to suspend payments to UAWC, this could quickly put UAWC's operations and its financial sustainability at risk. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Palestinian families earning a minimal living in agriculture, depend on UAWC for vital support. Who would look after them?

Finally, we are deeply concerned about the domestic implications of a review of UAWC as projected by your answers to the Dutch parliament. During the last months, concerns and tensions about EU funding conditions have led to dangerous polarization within Palestinian civil society and are undermining the trust and cohesion of Palestinian society at large.

In a [letter](#) to PNGO dated 30 March 2020, the EU clarified "a natural person affiliated to, sympathizing with, or supporting any of the groups or entities mentioned in the EU restrictive lists is not excluded from benefitting from EU-funded activities, unless his/her exact name and surname (confirming his/her identity) corresponds to any of the natural persons on the EU restrictive lists".



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The same letter also clarified that “[t]he EU does not ask any [Palestinian] civil society organization to change its political position towards any Palestinian faction or to discriminate against any natural person based on his/her political affiliation.”

It is of critical importance that your review will respect these principles and standards.

Our colleagues at UAWC have informed you that they await your review with confidence and stand ready to cooperate with it, as they have done before during reviews launched by other donors, all of which dismissed the allegations against UAWC as unfounded. As you move forward, we urge you to be sensitive to the concerns raised above.

Yours sincerely,

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