

## FOCUS

## The Right of Return, at Last

by Edward Said

The contradictory part of the issue is the snowballing effect of what is now a universal Palestinian demand heard literally all over the globe for the right of return. Petitions have been signed by the dozens, thousands of names in the Arab world, Europe, Africa and the Americas have been added to these lists on a daily basis, and for the first time ever, the right of return has been put squarely on the political agenda.

**N**OW that all the cheery atmospheres connected with Ehud Barak's tenure in office have more or less dissipated, and he or his party faces prosecution for campaign corruption at home, and an increasing demand for results abroad, the true face of his regime is emerging with startling, not to say disquieting clarity.

For me, one of the worst offenders in this moral blindness remains the Palestinian leadership, which has actually eased the way forward for Zionist arguments and plans, with scarce allowance for the sufferings of the huge mass of Palestinians who languish in camps, shanty-towns, and makeshift houses in Palestine and in too many Arab countries to be counted.

The issues in the by-now notorious peace process finally has come down to the one issue that has been at the core of Palestinian deprivations since 1948 — the fate of the refugees who were displaced in 1948, again in 1967, and again in 1982 by naked Israeli ethnic cleansing. Any other description of those acts by the Israeli army is a travesty of the truth, no matter how many protestations are heard from the unyielding Zionist Right-wing (assuming that the Left is more likely to accept the truth).

That the Palestinians have endured decades of dispossession and raw agonies rarely endured by other peoples — particularly because these agonies have either been ignored or denied, and even more poignantly, because the perpetrators of this tragedy are celebrated for social and political achievements that make no mention at all of where those achievements actually began — is of course the locus of "the Palestinian problem," but it has been pushed very far down the agenda of negotiations until finally now, it has popped up to the surface.

For the past several weeks two contradictory sets of happenings have occurred which, in their stark, irreconcilable antithesis, tell almost the whole story of what is wrong with an uninvolved Zionism on the one hand; and what is just as seriously wrong with the peace process on the other. Barak and several of his faceless underlings have tirelessly been on record in Israel, in Europe and elsewhere to affirm their increasingly strident disavowal of any responsibility for Palestinian dispossession. Here and there, a more humane Israeli official will, for example, temper these disavowals

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Assaad Abdel Rahman, the PLO's minister in charge of the refugee question for the peace process, has recently made some excellent strong statements about the absolute right of return for Palestinians evicted by Israel; these statements express the right kind of resolve and the right kind of moral indignation.

After all, Abdel Rahman says, a UN Resolution (number 194) has been affirmed annually since 1948; it allows Palestinians the right of return and/or compensation. Why should there be a compromise by Palestinians given the world community's unanimity?

Even the US has supported the resolution, with Israel its

signer of the CTBT, as indeed was the indication before the Kargil conflict with Pakistan last year, it would not like to be seen to be doing so under pressure from the U.S. or any other country.

The more the pressure from the U.S. and other countries for India to sign the CTBT, the less the chances of India signing it," the source told India Abroad News Service.

Clinton will be the first U.S. President to visit this country since Jimmy Carter was here 22 years ago. The visit takes place as the two Cold War era antagonists seek to forge a new relationship on a broad front, particularly in the economic field.

Informants sources say that while no major breakthrough is expected on the nuclear front, during the visit, Indo-U.S. ties are set to deepen in areas like energy, information technology, health and environment and in combating international terrorism.

New Delhi is well aware of Clinton's missionary pursuit of nuclear non-proliferation goals and his keenness to crown his last year in office with India's endorsement of the CTBT, but the Vajpeey government is unlikely to oblige him. The Indian government has repeatedly said that it would seek the widest possible national consensus before taking a decision on the CTBT.

Before last year's Kargil conflict, New Delhi had appeared to be slowly but steadily moving towards signing the CTBT, an impression largely created by the Singh-Talbot talks.

While the Kargil conflict brought pressure on the government against signing the CTBT, the label of being "soft" for agreeing to the release of three extremists in exchange for the passengers of a hijacked Indian airliner has made the government more wary of signing the treaty.

But most economists say that the earlier the nuclear genie is put back in the bottle, the better for the country's economic development. "From the economic point of view, I don't see much point being a nuclear power," said S.D. Tendulkar, dean of the Delhi School of Economics.

But the problem, he told

IANS, was Indo-Pakistani rivalry, leading to unproductive defence expenditure which, he felt, should be curtailed and stopped. He noted that the U.S. sanctions after the Pokhran tests had affected investments because of what he called the "signalling effect."

Giri Deshingkar, of the Centre for Studies of Developing Societies, was also of the opinion that India should sign the CTBT and said the country was in a completely different frame of mind from the time when it had rejected it at the Geneva conference. "Nothing is gained by not signing," he told IANS and cautioned that New Delhi's refusal to endorse the treaty would send a wrong signal that it was getting ready to conduct further tests.

Former Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit said while there was no reason for India not to sign the CTBT after the Pokhran nuclear tests, it should use the leverage to get the international sanctions lifted and funding by multilateral agencies resumed.

He noted that Clinton was coming to India despite differences over the CTBT and said these differences need not stand in the way of co-operation in other fields, like counter-terrorism.

Indian Communists and other left parties see the Clinton visit as part of the U.S. efforts to internationalise the Kashmir dispute and to put pressure on New Delhi to sign the CTBT. "They are putting pressure on us to sign the CTBT while at the same time they are unwilling to agree to universal disarmament," said D. Raja, spokesman for the Communist Party of India.

The women belong to the Elangata Wuas Ecosystem Management Programme, which has more than 1,500 members, 600 of them women. The group is a partnership between the people of Lodikilani and Torosei villages, about 100 kilometres south of Nairobi, and the Centre for Biodiversity of the National Museum of Kenya.

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