

THE ROYAL FOREIGN MINISTRY
Committee Chairman Anders Anundsen
Scrutiny and Constitutional Affairs
Parliament, 0026 Oslo

Oslo, March 11, 2013

Re.: Foreign Ministry's financial contributions to the Palestinian Authority

Cf. Question from the committee in a letter from 03/05/13: "The Committee on Scrutiny and Constitutional Affairs refers to [the fact] that the Foreign Minister has repeatedly assured Parliament that Norway's financial contributions to the Palestinian Authority have not gone to pay imprisoned terrorists. Can the Foreign Ministry document this?"

For my part, I have not mentioned this matter to Parliament after I took over as Foreign Minister on the 21st of September, 2012. The question seems to refer to answers given by former Foreign Minister Støre.

As far I can see, Støre on two occasions answered questions about this matter, cf. Document No. 15: 1876 (2011-2012), from MP Ropstad, answered 10/09/12, and Document No. 15:1905 (2010-2011), from MP Syversen, answered 15/09/11.

I have today answered a question from MP Ropstad of March 4, 2013 on the same matter, cf. Document No. 15:930 (2012-2013), and my answer is as follows:

"First, a few words about the background of the matter: The question of the status of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons is part of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many Palestinian prisoners convicted in Israeli courts have committed serious crimes. Anyone who participates in carrying out terrorist acts must be held legally responsible. At the same time, any legal proceedings must comply with international rules.

The Norwegian involvement in the Middle East is based on the intention of contributing to peace through a two-state solution. The budget support to the Palestinian Authority (PA) is an important tool in this process. In this work, we work closely with the US, the EU and several European and Arab countries. The EU accounts for the largest contributions, while the United States is the second largest donor. In recent years, Norway has been at the 6th/7th place as far as the size of contributions is concerned, and Norway chairs the donor group, the so-called Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC), which coordinates the efforts.

Together with the other donors, we provide budget support to the PA. The total budget support from all donors constitutes about a quarter of the PA's total budget. Other sources of income are taxes and fees collected by the PA, and some customs and tax revenues that Israel collects on behalf of the PA according to [their] agreement.

It is the PA that determines how budget funds are spent. The majority of our support goes to salaries for teachers, health professionals, police and other public employees. At the same time,

it is essential - both for us and other donors - that there be clear requirements related to the budget support and that the responsibility to document [compliance with] these requirements to the donor community is incumbent on the Palestinian Authority.

Norway coordinates the budget contributions with the other donors. World Bank requirements and control procedures apply. The World Bank administers a fund and is responsible for payments from the fund. Payments from this fund depend on the PA's carrying out specific and agreed upon reforms in [its] financial management, governance, [and] cuts in public spending and subsidies. Norway could introduce earmarking of the budget support, but then it would no longer be possible to transfer the money via the World Bank's fund along with the money from other donors. In that case, Norway would have to establish its own comprehensive control program, independently of our partners, and this is not considered expedient. It is also our experience that when the donors stand together, it increases the influence on the recipients, compared with each donor managing its own financial contribution.

As to the issue of payments to Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. According to the PA, the discussed support program is not a salary - but direct support for the prisoners' canteen expenses and social allowance to the families of prisoners. The social allowance compensates for the loss of income because the main breadwinner is no longer able to contribute.

This is what we and other donors have been told on previous occasions, and this was again maintained by [PA] Prime Minister Fayyad in a meeting with Norwegian representatives last week. In this meeting, we also brought up the arrangement and level of the support program for the prisoners, and we clearly expressed from the Norwegian side that we find aspects of this [program] problematic. We have also been made aware of new information on this issue that differs from earlier information provided by the PA. We have also stated that we find this unfortunate.

To get more details and necessary clarifications, the Norwegian representatives notified [the PA] at this meeting that Norway and the UK will follow up on this question in a joint letter to the PA.

Then Foreign Minister Støre informed the Parliament that the size of the social support depends on how many children the family has and the length of the sentence for the prisoner.

Based on information received from the PA, Støre further informed Parliament that social allowances are given to Palestinian prisoners in Palestinian and Israeli jails. This is still the case, according to the Palestinian Authority.

However, there are several different programs and channels of social support to Palestinian prisoners and their families. The Palestinian Authority also refers to payments to Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons from Israeli authorities. I assume that this is related to Palestinian prisoners who either have a tie to Israel through citizenship or they carry so-called Israeli ID cards because they are residents of East Jerusalem and pay taxes and fees to the Israeli government.

We have relatively recently - and that is after then Foreign Minister Støre responded to the questions – received information indicating that the differences in both estimation of [the prisoners'] financial need and the channels for support [for prisoners] are greater and more

extensive than we have assumed according to the earlier information we received from the PA. It is unfortunate that the information that was first communicated to Parliament, and which was based on information obtained from the PA at the time, in retrospect, is imprecise.

The program, which includes about 4,600 Palestinian prisoners convicted by Israeli military courts, differs to a greater degree than previously assumed from other programs related to social support. This is why Norway and Britain are sending a joint letter to the PA with questions that need clarification.

I would like to emphasize that the group of Palestinians who have been sentenced by Israeli military courts is very diverse and includes eg. minors jailed for throwing stones, imprisoned elected MPs of Hamas and long-term prisoners convicted of terrorist offenses. I also remind [you] that this is the reason that a series of questions have been asked as to the basis for and the conditions of the detention of several of the prisoners, including whether they are in accordance with human rights and humanitarian law.

If the response from the Palestinian Authority to Norway and the UK comprises information and clarifications that further differ from the information provided to Parliament in 2011 and 2012, I will return to Parliament in an appropriate manner with this."

I hope this sheds sufficient light on the matter for the committee, but I am of course prepared to answer more questions as the committee wishes.
Sincerely,

Espen Barth Eide
(Foreign Minister)