

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, 14 May 2008

Main Committee

## Middle East

**Mrs IRWIN** (Fowler) (9.34 am)—Eight years ago I visited Israel and the Occupied Territories. The experience changed my views of the Middle East situation, and one experience in particular had a lasting effect on me.

While visiting the Jabalya refugee camp in Gaza, I met an elderly man. He invited me into his small, two-room residence in the camp where he had lived since 1948, but he explained to me in broken English that this was not his home. On the wall behind the door was a large set of iron keys. He explained that they were the keys to the home he had fled from in 1948. That home was 20 kilometres away, across the border in the state of Israel. Those keys were his most treasured possession. They were a constant reminder to him, to his four children, to his 23 grandchildren and to his 28 great-grandchildren of their home—the village where countless generations of his family had lived before him. Those keys were more than just a symbol of his dispossession; they were a symbol of hope that one day he or his descendants would return to their rightful home.

Today we remember what Palestinians call al-Nakba, the catastrophe. Sixty years ago Palestinians fled from their homes to escape massacres, such as those that occurred at Deir Yassin, where over 100 people—mainly women, children and the elderly—were slaughtered. Can those of us in Western nations who have expressed congratulations to the state of Israel on its 60th anniversary not spare a moment to remember the suffering of the Palestinian people of 60 years ago and the daily consequences of their dispossession, displacement, exile and occupation?

Today those 700,000 Palestinian refugees have grown to seven million. Four million live under illegal Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. Three million live as noncitizens in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and other countries. Many of those live in the 58 registered refugee camps. For each Palestinian, the al-Nakba is not just a historical event; they are reminded each day of this ongoing human tragedy. While the United Nations, which created Israel, together with major world powers continues with processes and road maps, the tragedy of al-Nakba lives on. Palestine was never a land without people, but today it is a people without a land. For seven million Palestinians, this symbol of hope is a latchkey. The destiny of nations is not written in ancient text; demography is destiny. Only by understanding the attachment of Palestinians to their land can we begin to frame a just peace in the Middle East.