Statement by South Africa on Agenda item 61:
Permanent Sovereignty of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and of the Arab population in the occupied Syrian Golan over their natural resources
30 October 2013
Mr Chairman,

The Government of South Africa has since 1994 consistently supported the Palestinian cause for their right to self-determination and their aspiration for an independent, democratic, sovereign, united and viable State of Palestine living in peace and security side by side with the State of Israel.

Reports of United Nations agencies on the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the Syrian Golan point to: the increased demolition of homes; the revocation of residency rights of Palestinians in and around occupied East Jerusalem; the exploitation of natural resources; accelerated construction of illegal settlements by Israel; ongoing violence perpetrated by settlers; and the continuing policy of closures and severe restriction on movements of people and goods. The severity of these are reflected by the estimate that Israeli squatters in the West Bank have destroyed in the vicinity of 800 000 olive trees since occupation began in 1967 – a central building block of Palestinian livelihood. In addition, indications are that squatting activity in the West Bank has increased by an estimated 70% in 2013, over such activities in 2012.

My delegation therefore remains deeply concerned at the impact the prolonged Israeli occupation is having in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. This is more so because the occupying state continues to resort to the considerable means of repression it has at its disposal. As the report before us indicates, restrictive and discriminatory practices over the Palestinian people and their natural resources have resulted in loss of land and much needed productive resources, weak economic performance, a further declining gross domestic product, a deepening fiscal crisis, lower wages and rising levels of poverty and unemployment. Left unchecked, these restrictive actions present bleak political prospects for the Palestinian people. The situation in the Gaza Strip is even more bleak as the collective punishment that has been imposed on its people has negatively affected economic activity and access to resources such as fishing.

Some assistance to the Palestinian people has, however, come from the international community, UN agencies and donor countries. As part of these international efforts, South Africa contributes financially towards the activities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA). South Africa has also provided diplomatic training to Palestinian officials as part of its capacity-building project.

These efforts are not enough and do not assist in alleviating the development challenges of the Palestinian and Syrian people living under foreign occupation. As the World Bank’s Economic Monitoring Report of March 2013 points out, “while the
donor community’s efforts have been directed towards short-term relief for Palestinian fiscal stress, it is important to recognise that the prolonged system of closures and restrictions is causing lasting damage to the competitiveness of the Palestinian economy”.

Mr Chairman,

The Palestinian people’s full sovereignty over their natural resources can only be fully realised with the end of Israel’s occupation. As much as aid is essential for relief and for keeping the Palestinian economy from collapsing, it is not a substitute for the Palestinian people’s sovereignty over their land, borders, trade, natural resources and economic policymaking. A critical first step would be for the Israeli government to act against squatting activities and crimes committed by settlers in the Occupied Territories, including the destruction of natural resources.

A substantial amount of Palestinians is dependent on international assistance for subsistence. Given the declining international aid, this is not sustainable. Food insecurity for the Palestinian people can only be addressed with the attainment of full sovereignty over their natural resources. In addition to the declining donor support, the ability of the Palestinian Authorities to mobilise domestic resources has been severely hampered by the withholding and redirection by Israel of tax revenues it collects on behalf of the Government of Palestine.

Mr Chairman,

As global attention is focussing on the achievement of the Millenium Development Goals (MDG’s) and consideration of the post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals, the ability of people living in the OPT’s to work towards achieving all three dimensions of sustainable development has been rendered impossible because of their inability to enjoy full sovereignty over their natural resources. It is only through a political solution leading to a viable two state solution that there can be sovereignty over their natural resources which would provide an opportunity to overcome their acute developmental challenges.

Thank you.