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ICRC News Release No. 10/17

17 February 2010

West Bank: no respite from hardship for Palestinians

Geneva/Jerusalem (ICRC) – Israeli restrictions, including measures ostensibly designed to protect settlements, continue to have a severe impact on the lives of many Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said today. While the economy has shown signs of growth and certain restrictions on the movement of Palestinians have been lifted, living a normal life is close to impossible for many people in the West Bank.

"The ICRC has repeatedly called for action to be taken to allow Palestinians to live their lives in dignity," said Béatrice Megevand-Roggo, the ICRC's head of operations for the Middle East and North Africa. "We reiterate our call on Israel to do more to protect Palestinians in the West Bank against settler violence, to safeguard their land and crops, to allow families to repair their houses and to ensure that all Palestinians can get to hospital or to school without delay."

For decades, restrictions linked to the settlements, which are illegal under international humanitarian law, have resulted in Palestinian farmers losing land and income. Despite recent improvements in the economic situation, an estimated 50 per cent of the West Bank population lives in poverty. Particularly hard hit are Palestinians living in areas under full Israeli civil and military control (referred to as Area C) – which represent over 50 percent of the land.

Checkpoints, roadblocks and earth mounds as well as the routing of the West Bank barrier present everyday obstacles for many Palestinians. Some of them are often unable to reach a hospital or visit their relatives. The West Bank barrier, inasmuch as it veers away from the 1949 Armistice Line, or "Green Line," into occupied territory, is contrary to international humanitarian law. Furthermore, the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits the confiscation of land for the purpose of building or expanding settlements.

Harassment or violence perpetrated by Israeli settlers is a regular occurrence, preventing many farmers from cultivating or even setting foot on their own land. Approximately 10,000 olive trees have been chopped down or burnt in the past three years. Furthermore, Palestinians are facing a range of restrictive urban-planning measures implemented by the Israeli authorities. They are often unable to get permission to repair or enlarge their houses, meaning that young people have few options but to leave home or live in cramped conditions with the rest of the family.

"Israel must find the right balance between meeting its legitimate security needs and safeguarding the basic rights of the Palestinian population," said Ms Megevand-Roggo. Under international humanitarian law, as the occupying power, Israel has an obligation to treat the civilian population humanely at all times. It must allow the West Bank's economy to grow, and ensure that

Palestinians have sufficient access to water and health care. It must not requisition, destroy or damage property belonging to civilians unless absolutely required by military necessity.

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