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Relieving the Blockade of Gaza (June 22, 2010)

Policy Statement on Relieving the Blockade of Gaza (June 22, 2010)

Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) welcomes the statement by the Government of Israel June 20 that it will ease its blockade of Gaza.

Those in Gaza have a right not just to some definition of "humanitarian" relief but to have the opportunity for a normal life – to trade, travel, study, and engage in productive work, subject only to reasonable security requirements, and to take part in building a viable Palestinian state together with those who live in the West Bank. Israel has the right to self-defense and to prevent illicit trafficking in arms. The young Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit has been a prisoner of Hamas for nearly four years and should be released immediately.

The announcement follows widespread international criticism of the violent confrontation at sea May 31 between Israeli forces and a flotilla headed for Gaza that led to the death of nine persons and injuries to others.

In March CMEP asked President Obama to work for new, constructive Israeli policies toward Gaza to end the blockade and provide for the needs of those living there, without diminishing Israel's own security. CMEP noted on June 2 that there are ways Israel's security can be assured without imposing hardship on the 1.4 million residents of Gaza.

Steps have now been taken in that direction. According to Israel's June 20 announcement, there will be a list only of items not permitted into Gaza for security reasons. Construction materials for projects approved by the Palestinian Authority are explicitly to be allowed. Policies for the entry and exit of persons "for humanitarian and medical reasons" are to be "streamlined".

A White House statement of June 20 said pointedly more needs to be done to improve the situation in Gaza. Implementation of plans to ease the blockade will be watched closely, given the uncertain history of past announcements on Gaza.

CMEP notes with satisfaction the active White House diplomacy to advance conditions for progress towards a comprehensive agreement. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, author of the Arab League peace plan proposal, is expected in Washington June 29.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is scheduled to meet with President Obama in Washington on July 6. According to press reports the President will discuss with the Prime Minister the need to continue improvement of conditions in Gaza and the need to maintain the freeze on new Israeli construction both in east Jerusalem and in the West Bank. The freeze in the West Banks is scheduled to expire in September.