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Ecumenical to President Obama on Gaza (March 15, 2010)

March 12, 2010

Dear Mr. President,

As Christian leaders in the United States we strongly support your commitment to a two-state peace between Israel and Palestine that will ensure Israel's security as well as Palestinian self-determination and security.

As your Administration works to launch a political process to achieve this goal, we echo the recent calls in letters to you by fifty-three Members of Congress and seven organizations, including Churches for Middle East Peace, urging the United States also to address immediately the grave humanitarian crisis affecting 1.4 million Gazans.

We recall your words in January 2009, after the devastating war in Gaza: "I was deeply concerned by... the substantial suffering and humanitarian needs in Gaza. Our hearts go out to Palestinian civilians who are in need of immediate food, clean water, and basic medical care, and who've faced suffocating poverty for far too long." Yet today, due to Israel's policy of severely limiting passage of essential goods and materials through its crossings, the suffering in Gaza continues.

We believe this policy is strategically unsound, harms Israel's security, and exacts an unacceptable toll on innocent Palestinians. It offends American humanitarian values. We urge you to address the resulting humanitarian crisis.

The following data illustrate the grim toll taken by Israel's closure policy.

- 70% of Gazans survive on \$1 a day. 40% of workers are unemployed.
- There were on average 850 trucks daily with food, goods and fuel entering from Israel, pre-closure; there are 128 today.
- The closure and the war have virtually halted manufacturing and most agricultural exports. Before 2007, 70 trucks a day carried Gazan exports to Israel, the West Bank and foreign markets valued at \$330 million, or 10.8% of Gaza's GDP.
- 11% of Gaza's children are malnourished, to the point of stunting, due to poverty and inadequate food imports. Infant mortality is no longer declining.
- 281 of 641 schools were damaged and 18 destroyed in the war. But because of the closures few have been rebuilt, and thousands of students lack books or supplies. There are daily eight-hour power outages.
- The war and Israel's refusal to allow imports of cement and material to rebuild 20,000 destroyed or damaged homes have left many more thousands of Gaza's people in tents, temporary structures, or with other families.
- Many war-damaged or deteriorating water and sewage facilities are health and environmental hazards, for lack of rebuilding supplies and equipment.

delayed. Doctors cannot leave for training, and patients face long delays to visit Israeli hospitals. 28 have reportedly died while waiting.

- Movement of people in and out of Gaza, including students, aid and medical workers, journalists, and family members, is severely limited.

As you said in your Cairo speech, “Just as it devastates Palestinian families, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza does not serve Israel’s security.” In recent months, sporadic rocket fire into southern Israel has resumed. We deplore the rocket fire and fear a generation of jobless Gazan young adults – 70% of Gazans are under 30 – lacking any hope for the future, are ripe for further radicalization and violence. The prospect for renewed major violence is real.

The perception of U.S. support for or acquiescence in the closure challenges our reputation for upholding humanitarian values. It deprives 1.4 million Palestinians of a decent, minimum standard of welfare. It restricts the use of the \$300 million the United States has committed to rebuild Gaza, is a serious obstacle to restoring hope and making peace, and undermines long term Israeli security. We remain deeply concerned about the people of Gaza, a small percentage of whom are Christian—some of whom operate necessary health and social services for the benefit of all who need these services. We urge your administration to use America’s unique relationship with Israel to persuade it to lift the closure of its border crossings with Gaza now. It is the right thing to do and is in the best interests of both Palestinians and Israelis who long for a just peace.

Sincerely,

Rev. Geoffrey Black

General Minister and President
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Bishop Wayne Burkette

Moravian Church in America, Southern Province

Very Rev. Thomas Cassidy, SCJ

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