



# THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES – EINE KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – UNA COMUNIÓN DE IGLESIAS – UNE COMMUNION D'ÉGLISES

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

*Office of the General Secretary*

## **Statement by Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, General Secretary on the conflict in the Gaza Strip**

**6 January 2009**

The Lutheran World Federation is shocked by the death and destruction caused by the ongoing and escalating conflict in the Gaza Strip. On behalf of the LWF's global membership of 140 churches in 79 countries, I call for the immediate cessation of both the Israeli military operations and the Hamas missile attacks, the swift establishment of a workable and effective ceasefire agreement, and the institution of negotiations that will address the root causes of conflict in the region.

The LWF, believing in the power of God's love to overcome all obstacles, steadfastly maintains its commitment to a vision for peace for both Israelis and Palestinians, based on the implementation of a two-state solution. As 2008 Nobel Laureate Martti Ahtisaari has said, wars and conflicts are not inevitable, and peace is a question of will. Tragically in this case, once again, short-term political interests – which all too often favor confrontation and violence over dialogue and the pursuit of peace – have prevailed. Both parties' commitment to the search for peace is called into question by their respective actions.

Even during the supposed ceasefire, the Israeli siege of Gaza remained in force, with provision of food, medical supplies, electricity and other essential goods and services being only intermittently and arbitrarily permitted. The blockade imposed severe suffering on the entire civilian population of Gaza, fostering despair and rage rather than promoting an atmosphere for negotiations and peace. At the same time, the rocket attacks by Hamas and other militant organizations are condemned by the LWF as an unacceptable response threatening the lives of another civilian population. The government of Israel has the same right and obligation as any other government to protect its people and territory from such attacks. However, it is clear that the military operations that Israel has launched since 27 December 2008 are disproportionate to the actual threat and have resulted in an intolerable number of civilian deaths and injuries. The motivations for the present military actions must therefore be questioned.

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated places on earth. With over 1.5 million people crammed into its 360 square kilometers (139 square miles), Gaza's population density rivals that of Singapore and Hong Kong. In such a context, military operations on the scale being undertaken in Gaza over the last 10 days are bound to leave extremely high numbers of civilian casualties in their wake. As an occupying power, the government of Israel bears responsibility for the welfare of these children, women and men, as well as for that of the people of Sderot and other Israeli communities living in fear of Hamas' rockets.

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The LWF has been present and providing humanitarian services in the Holy Land for over 60 years, particularly through the Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives. Based on its long humanitarian experience in the region, the LWF is gravely concerned for the situation of the general population of the Gaza Strip, who must survive this conflict without electricity, medical supplies, or sufficient food or water. I call upon the government of Israel to ensure full humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip, and the provision and distribution of sufficient food, water, medical supplies and other essential goods and services. In addition, injured persons and patients with chronic diseases must be assured access to medical treatment in Gaza or allowed to leave Gaza for treatment.

The LWF supports the many activities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land in the fields of education, inter-faith dialogue and peace-building, in the interests of contributing to the establishment of peace with justice in the Holy Land. The interpretation of God's promise to Abraham and differing understandings of who may rightfully claim his legacy, which lie at the very heart of this conflict, can only be resolved by dialogue and reconciliation among all his children.

The opportunities offered by the tenuous 6 month long ceasefire have been squandered. Much more could have been done on both sides to strengthen that fragile foundation - by Israel lifting the siege of Gaza so as to improve the lives of ordinary Gazans and to give them hope of a better future, and by Hamas refraining from its destructive provocations. Political leaders in Israel and in the Gaza Strip have willfully failed to take those precious opportunities. Against the background of forthcoming elections in both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, priority appears to have been given to the immediate political advantages of displays of armed power, rather than to the difficult search for peace. This is not only short-sighted; it is a betrayal of both peoples' hopes for a peaceful future.

The LWF offers its prayers and support for all those Palestinians and Israelis who stand against violence, who work for the promotion and protection of human dignity and justice for all, and who seek peace in the midst of conflict. The present bloodshed and destruction will not secure peace for either Israelis or Palestinians. It will only plant the seeds for more conflict, marginalizing the peacemakers, breeding despair, promoting radicalization and strengthening the appeal of violence.

I appeal to the Quartet to make urgent and maximum efforts to ensure full humanitarian access to the victims of the violence in the Gaza Strip, to encourage the establishment of an effective ceasefire, and to promote longer-term negotiations on the underlying sources of conflict in the region.

I plead for religious leaders and people of all faiths to renew their commitment to peace and justice, to resist the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes, to reject extremism, to foster mutual understanding and tolerance, to invest in hope, to offer inspiration to those in their faith communities who despair of non-violent solutions, and to demand that their political representatives deliver tangible progress towards a just and sustainable peace in the Holy Land.

I pray for strength, wisdom and hope to be granted to the aid workers, medical personnel, diplomats, officials, human rights defenders, Ecumenical Accompaniers, journalists and other observers who are struggling to help the victims of this conflict, to inform the international community, and to bring the fighting to an end.

A delegation of 45 bishops from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, visiting the region from today, will be witnesses and messengers of peace on behalf of our entire global communion. I call on all LWF member churches and all people of good will around the world to pray for peace, to advocate for justice, and to convey these concerns to our political leaders. This is not a matter for Israelis and Palestinians alone, for what happens in the land that so many of the world's people call holy affects us all. The continuing bloodshed between Israelis and Palestinians plants the seeds of division and violence in many places around the world. Without a just peace in the Holy Land, there can be no true or sustainable peace for any of us.