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March 28, 2020

An Open Letter to Church Leaders:

As the Covid-19 pandemic threatens countries, communities and individuals around the world over, we know that you are fully engaged in providing spiritual advice and comfort for the flock that God called you to shepherd. Therefore, we hesitate to bring this matter to your attention, but the urgency of the hour gives us no choice.

We recently learned that Covid-19 cases have now been officially confirmed in the Gaza Strip. While the horror of the virus is felt everywhere, the pandemic would be truly catastrophic in the besieged enclave, where Palestinians in refugee camps constitute 70 percent of the population. Other areas of the world host large refugee populations, but Gaza is unique in that it is subject to a severe Israeli blockade that has been repeatedly condemned by the United Nations and the vast majority of countries in the world. Gaza has been routinely called the “largest open-air prison in the world.” Even before the arrival of Covid-19, health officials in Gaza were reporting severe shortages of medical supplies, equipment and hospital beds. In the crowded refugee camps in Gaza, it is not unusual to find 10-15 people living in a one- or two-room residence. The majority of nearly 2 million Gazans will not be able to self-isolate or practice social distancing. While medical guidelines call for frequent hand washing, Gaza has such limited clean water supplies that people are forced to use potentially contaminated water for drinking, let alone washing. It was reported that Israel allowed the entry of only 200 test kits to the area. Consequently, unless drastic measures are taken immediately, Covid-19 has the potential of turning Gaza from an open-air prison into a gigantic death camp.

We ask you to join with other church leaders to call on the Israeli government to immediately end the Gaza blockade and allow medical personnel and equipment, including test kits, masks and ventilators to enter Gaza. Since Israel has blockaded Gaza for the last 14 years, it must assume full responsibility for what will happen there in the coming weeks and months. The United States government also shares responsibility for allowing Israel to keep nearly 2 million Gazans in perpetual imprisonment.

We implore you to make immediate contact with the Israeli government to do the following:

1. Sign an unconditional truce with Hamas so that leaders on both sides can work together to fight the spread of Covid-19. This is exactly the right time for joint humanitarian and non-political cooperation.
2. Open the borders to the West Bank and the outside world for all Gazans requiring urgent treatment that is unavailable within the Strip.
3. Allow the international community to send needed medical equipment and supplies.
4. Allow other countries, United Nations agencies, church mission groups, and other

NGOs full freedom to do their work of helping the poor and ill in Gaza.

Contact Information for the Office of Israel's Prime Minister:

<https://forms.gov.il/globaldata/getsequence/getHtmlForm.aspx?formType=ContactUsEn@pmo.gov.il>

We also call on Christians everywhere to include Gaza in their prayers as they seek God's help and healing grace for their own compatriots.

And we call on the U.S. to resume the suspended financial support to UNRWA, the agency that has ministered to Palestinian refugees since 1948.

We believe that the church has a responsibility to stand in solidarity with people who are threatened with destruction and death as the wise writer of the Book of Proverbs wrote:

*"Deliver those who are drawn toward death,
And hold back those stumbling to the slaughter.
If you say, 'Surely we did not know this,'
Does not He who weighs the hearts consider it?
He who keeps your soul, does He not know it?
And will He not render to each person according to his or her deeds?"* Proverbs 24:11-12
(NIV)

As we all journey down this current Jericho Road, we call on you to look at the masses living in Gaza with Christ-like compassion and do what you can to allow life, freedom, healing and peace to reign over the threatened and besieged enclave.

Sincerely in Christ,



Reverend Alex Awad, Co-Chair
PCAP Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace

ENDORSEMENTS:

Alliance of Baptists Community for Justice in Palestine and Israel
Conference of Major Superiors of Men (Catholic)
Disciples Palestine Israel Network
Episcopal Peace Fellowship/Palestine Israel Network
Israel Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church, USA
Mennonite Palestine Israel Network
National Council of Churches of Christ, US
Pax Christi USA
Quaker Palestine Israel Network
United Church of Christ Palestine Israel Network
United Methodist Kairos Response
Unitarian Universalists for Justice in the Middle East