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In Larnaca, Cyprus

"Collective punishment of Gaza by Israel is prohibited by International law and should end immediately"

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On 22nd September, 2008, I flew to Larnaca, Cyprus, at the invitation of the Free Gaza Movement to join them on a mission from Larnaca to Gaza.

The purpose of the mission was to break the blockade of Gaza. In Larnaca, I joined a 22 person international delegation of doctors, parliamentarians, and human
Rights workers in the hope of setting sail aboard the SS Hope for Gaza.

This was to be the second mission into Gaza following upon the very successful sailing on 23rd August, 2008, of the SS Free Gaza and SS Liberty, when 42 International delegates broke the Siege and landed in Gaza, carrying
Hearing aids for children. These were the first boats to dock in Gaza Port in over 40 years since the military occupation of Palestine by Israel. Over 40,000
Gazans welcomed the boats when they arrived last August, and we were assured that a warm welcome was being prepared for us by the people of Gaza. The fact that 10 Palestinians (5 medical doctors) were in our delegation added to the excitement of the Gazan people.

Unfortunately as things turned out, after a hold-up of some days, it was decided to delay the return to Gaza for a future date. The problem was that the two original boats were not suitable for another trip, so the Free Gaza Movement decided to buy or lease a sturdier boat. Every time they thought they had reached an agreement with a boat owner, it fell through (they believe due to outside pressure). The second problem was that strong winds on the seas meant we would have to wait for another week before we could even consider sailing. Hence the Free Gaza Movement decided wisely to temporarily delay our voyage.

We will return to sail to Gaza as soon as the boat is ready and bring with us Medical supplies. These are urgently needed, as despite unilateral evacuation of 7,000 settlers, the Gaza strip remains Occupied territory. Israel continues to control its 6 land crossings, (many of which are closed for long periods of time), airspace, territorial waters, population registry, tax system, supply of goods, freedom of movement and access to healthcare. Israel has military control over 26%of the Strip's total territory as 'border security zones'. The International community was led to believe that Israel gave back Gaza, but this simply is not true. Israel even prevents fishermen from going to sea in Gazan water, despite Oslo allowing them a 20 nautical mile fishing area.

Gaza is like a ghetto, a huge prison, with Israel holding the keys to all the doors. Israel controls everything in the lives of the Gazan people. Many Gazans have been killed, including children, caught in the crossfires of Israeli collective punishment. Armed Palestinians try to hit back at their occupiers with crude weaponry, such as the Qassam Rocket attacks on the Jewish town of Sderot, where 4 Jewish people have been killed, and hundreds injured. Gazan hospitals have been paralyzed, 40% of Gaza City residents have been deprived of access to clean water. Children are living in the cold and dark. Gaza pumps 40 million litres of untreated sewage into the sea every day, because of a lack of electricity to run the treatment plant, and lack of pipes to replace old ones (Israel argues they will use the pipe as bombs, so none are allowed into Gaza, nor are they allowed cement and therefore cannot build hospitals, homes, etc.).

I sympathize with Sderot's residents, exposed to traumatising Qassam rockets for the past 7 years but siege and collective punishment are no answer, and denying basic necessities, driven to the edge of starvation, and constant military Israeli offensive (l,000 Palestinians were killed in 2007, including many civilians) is against Geneva Convention. In the meantime several Palestinian ceasefire offers have been rejected out of hand by the Israeli Government, and they are by their repressive policies encouraging extremism. Gaza is a traumatized, broken society, where 80% are unemployed and 2O% work for the UN and NGO's, therefore 100% of Gazans rely on the benevolence of the outside world.

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The International Community must end its Silence on the suffering of the Palestinian people, live up to their obligations under the Fourth Geneva convention and take action to challenge Israel's collective punishment of l.5 million residents of the Gaza Strip.

They must also insist that Israel, end the blockage, end the occupation of Palestine, and implement the political solutions to what is a political problem and solveable.
Israel has partners for peace, and the International community must no longer listen to the old mantra, that Israel has no partner for peace. The truth is that Israelis and Palestinians can be friends, and this is not a clash of civilizations as some would have us all believe. This is a political problem exacerbated by failed and repressive policies of the Israeli Government,and as they are the stronger party and occupying power they have the legal and moral responsibility to end the conflict. Also an end to violence by all Palestinian armed group and Palestinian Unity are necessary for peace.

The Israeli/Palestinian people are tired of violence and war, they want justice and peace and it is now up to the political leaders through unconditional, all inclusive dialogue to deliver that peace to all the people.

So we will return to Gaza soon and we encourage people from around the world to join us in defying Israel's blockage of Gaza. We also invite some country to be the first in the world to join us and send boats or Planes of medicines, sewage pipes, etc., to save the children of Gaza.

Mairead Maguire (Nobel Peace Laureate), lst October, 2008

www.peacepeople.com

Peace people, 224 Lisburn road, Belfast. BT9 Northern Ireland.

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