

It's time for a renewed peace process in a holy land

The illegal occupation of Palestinian territory by Israel, as defined by international humanitarian law and condemned under UN resolutions, marked 50 years in June. A third and even fourth generation of Palestinians and Israelis have been born into a situation in which violence and injustice are commonplace.

The situation is unsustainable; the status quo allows the Israeli government to embed its control to a point where poverty, suffering and, increasingly, hopelessness is widespread:

- the 456km¹ Separation Barrier divides families from each other, farmers from their land, students from schools and the sick from medical assistance.
- about 250² Israeli settlements, illegal under international humanitarian law and housing more than half a million settlers occupy strategic areas and enjoy access to water and electricity. Strict limits on Palestinian construction, development and movement ignore the needs of the Palestinian population.
- the closure of the Gaza Strip, and the irregular operation of the Rafah crossing on the border of Gaza and Egypt, have led to Gaza's de-development and a worsening humanitarian crisis.
- In an attempt to weaken Hamas, the de-facto authority in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah with the support of Israel has cut electricity supplies. Gaza now has daily blackouts of 18-20 hours, with many homes receiving just two hours of mains electricity per day and essential services such as health care and disposal of sewage severely affected.

Under international law occupation must be temporary, the occupying power bears responsibility for the wellbeing of the people under its control, and the occupying power should not make permanent changes to the land, for example by building settlements. It is CAFOD partners' view that suffering, injustice, violence and war will only end when occupation and the closure of Gaza end.

Despite repeated attempts, most notably the Oslo Peace Accords, the processes that move Israelis and Palestinians towards peace have collapsed. As Catholics, we heed Pope Francis' call:

"There is need to intensify efforts and initiatives aimed at creating the conditions for a stable peace based on justice, on the recognition of the rights of every individual, and on mutual security".

Please write to your MP and ask them to call on the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, to:

- Put the UK government's weight behind a renewed peace process.
- Push for the restoration of electricity supplies to Gaza and to work for the end to the closure of Gaza.

Israelis and Palestinians both need security, peace and to live in dignity, free from injustice, if communities are to flourish and contribute meaningfully to the common good.

Catholic bishops from around the world, after their visit to the area at the beginning of the year, reminded us of a verse in Leviticus:

"You will declare this fiftieth year to be sacred and proclaim the liberation of all the country's inhabitants' [Leviticus 25:10]. During this fiftieth year of occupation, we must pray for the liberty of everyone in the Holy Land and practically support all those working to build a just peace."

So in addition to writing a letter to your MP, please join CAFOD in praying for peace throughout this 50th anniversary year.

1 <http://www.ochaopt.org/theme/west-bank-barrier>

2 <http://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-impact-de-facto-settlement-expansion-case-asfar>

Prayer for peace

God of peace, bearer of hope,
we seek your help
for the peoples of the Middle East.
Quiet the clamour of war
and guide us towards peace.
Where there is hatred and division
sow seeds of calm and openness.
Where there is destruction
help us to rebuild.
Where children are crying
bring an end to tears.
Shelter your peoples and protect them
Guide them and keep them from harm.
Show us how to break down the barriers of history and fear
and breathe whispers of hope.
Amen.

(Linda Jones/CAFOD)