



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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February 11, 2015

The Honorable Bob Corker
Chair
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
425 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ed Royce
Chair
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
2185 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Robert Menendez
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
528 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Eliot L. Engel
Ranking Member
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
2161 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Corker, Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Menendez, Ranking Member Engel:

As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I write to urge you to intervene with the Israeli government regarding their ongoing efforts to construct a barrier in the Cremisan Valley that will separate Palestinian Christians from their agricultural lands.

The Cremisan Valley lies in the West Bank on the Palestinian side of the Green Line, adjacent to Beit Jala and Bethlehem. Israel initially ordered the seizing of this land in order to re-route the separation wall in 2006. While there have been modifications to the Israeli Government's plan in recent years, these modifications continue to ignore the rights and needs of the local community.

Last month, I traveled to the Holy Land where I met with community and Church leaders and saw the situation in the Cremisan Valley for myself. It is clear that re-routing the separation barrier through the Cremisan Valley will have devastating consequences for the local community. The proposed routes of the separation barrier would effectively confiscate the Palestinian agricultural and recreational lands of over 50 Christian families. This threatens the livelihoods of the remaining Christian community of Bethlehem, pressuring even more to leave the Holy Land. The barrier would also negatively impact the work of the Catholic Church in the Valley by separating a Salesian monastery from a nearby convent, isolating both their ministries from critical resources and contacts with the local population. In one case, the proposed route would surround a Salesian school for 450 students on three sides with a militarized barrier.

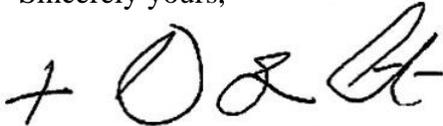
The local Church has serious concerns regarding the route of the security barrier. In a December 5, 2014 Statement, the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land (ACOHL) warned, "The wall alienates the most basic rights and freedom of the Christian community of Beit Jala. ACOHL stresses that land confiscation and settlement expansion do not serve peace in the region and warns of the continuous emigration of the 'Cremisan' community, mostly Christians, as a result of building the separation wall."

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The situation in the Cremisan Valley is a microcosm of a protracted pattern that seriously jeopardizes the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has long supported a secure and recognized Israel living in peace alongside a viable and independent Palestinian state. As the wall moves and constricts more and more communities in the West Bank, the possibility of a future resolution becomes less likely, putting both Palestinians and Israeli citizens at risk.

I ask you to urge the Government of Israel to address this urgent matter and cease and desist in its efforts to unnecessarily confiscate Palestinian lands in the Occupied West Bank. Reversing this Israeli policy can help address the immediate grievances of Christian Palestinians in the Cremisan Valley and renew hope for a just resolution to the conflict.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oscar Cantú', written in a cursive style.

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops