



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Holy Land May 2008

I am glad that the Annapolis Conference pointed towards the abandonment of partisan or unilateral solutions, in favour of a global approach respectful of the rights and legitimate interests of all the peoples of the region. I appeal once more to the Israelis and the Palestinians to concentrate their energies on the implementation of commitments made on that occasion, and to expedite the process that has happily been restarted. Moreover, I invite the international community to give strong support to these two peoples and to understand their respective sufferings and fears.

--Pope Benedict XVI, January 7, 2008

BACKGROUND

The Middle East is a land holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, but tragically it is also a violent land that yearns for a just peace. USCCB has had a long history of pursuing justice and peace by supporting a two-state solution.

Events of the past three years have created a particularly volatile situation. In January 2005 Palestinians elected President Mahmoud Abbas, Israelis withdrew from some Palestinian lands, and President Bush urged a renewed peace process. The President secured U.S. funding to “support Palestinian political, economic and security reforms,” but Congress attached provisions delaying aid and making it less effective. Despite new leadership, the Palestinian Authority was historically viewed as plagued by cronyism and inefficiency that crippled its ability to improve the lives of the Palestinian people. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, while welcome, was not seen as a result of the peace process or President Abbas’ efforts and led to a collapse of security in Gaza. Palestinians believe Israeli settlements and the route of the security barrier effectively confiscate Palestinian lands and water resources in the West Bank.

These realities apparently led to the Hamas party winning a majority in the January 2006 Palestinian Parliamentary elections. This was a serious setback for the peace process since Hamas, unlike President Abbas and his Fatah party, refuses to recognize Israel or to accept previous agreements and renounce violence. Hamas’ designation as a foreign terrorist organization led to a dramatic reduction in international assistance to the Palestinian Authority as donors struggled with how to assist the Palestinian people without supporting Hamas. In Summer 2006 armed conflict broke out, precipitated by provocative acts by Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, including cross-border raids against Israeli military personnel and rocket attacks against Israeli civilians. Israel defended its citizens, but its military response was disproportionate and indiscriminate in some instances, endangering Palestinian and Lebanese civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure.

In June 2007 Hamas took control of Gaza. In response President Abbas dissolved the Hamas-Fatah unity government and formed a new Palestinian Authority (PA) government, appointing Salam Fayyad, a Western trained economist, as Prime Minister. The PA remains in control of the West Bank only and is trying to implement political and economic reforms. But crude rocket attacks from Hamas-controlled Gaza and continued suicide attacks contribute to legitimate Israeli security concerns. At the same time, Israel’s often-aggressive military response, expansion of settlements, numerous check-points, and construction of a security wall deep in Palestinian areas have contributed to a dramatic decline in the Palestinian economy, deepening poverty and a sense of hopelessness. These actions increase the misery and tension that often breed violence and impede the creation of a viable Palestinian state. The humanitarian situation is difficult in West Bank but dire in Gaza, where Israeli sanctions have severely limited access to basics such as food and fuel. Catholic Relief Services is providing aid in both Gaza and the West Bank but is sometimes hampered in its work.

Israelis and Palestinians need the active support of the United States and the international community to take substantive reciprocal steps to improve conditions on the ground and help restore people's hopes that a peace agreement is possible. Palestinian leaders must improve security by blocking illegal arms shipments and disarming militias, and improve governance and transparency as they build their capacity for a future state. Israel needs to freeze expansion of all settlements, withdraw "illegal outposts," and ease movement for Palestinians by reducing the number of military check points.

In November 2007, the U.S. convened a meeting at Annapolis attended by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, President Abbas and other countries interested in advancing a solution to ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Notably a number of Arab states participated. While President Bush reaffirmed U.S. support for a two-state solution in his recent State of the Union address, more concerted U.S. leadership is required.

USCCB RESPONSE

National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East (NILI): Since 2003 USCCB has been a leader of an unprecedented initiative of 35 U.S. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders who are urging the U.S. government to work to revive and energize the peace process.

The Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land: The Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land was launched in February 2005 as part of the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative. The Campaign invites bishops and Catholic leaders to work with local religious leaders in Jewish, Muslim and other Christian traditions to raise a united voice with policy makers and the wider public.

USCCB Advocacy: USCCB insists that a just peace demands an end to the violence, real security for the State of Israel, an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the establishment of an internationally-recognized and viable state for Palestinians. It also requires an agreement on Jerusalem that protects religious freedom and other basic rights, and an equitable sharing of resources, especially water. USCCB believes that consistent and persistent U.S. leadership is needed to challenge and restrain both parties to the conflict and to hold them accountable for mutual steps needed for a just peace. It is not in the best interests of either Israelis or Palestinians for the dire situation in Palestinian areas to deteriorate further. Non-governmental organizations, including Catholic Relief Services, play a crucial role in delivering Palestinian aid and witnessing to the crisis.

The Christian Communities in the Holy Land: The beleaguered Christian community feels increasingly isolated as continuing violence and growing despair leads more to emigrate. There is an urgent need to make adequate and timely progress in negotiations on the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See which is critical both for the future of the Church in the Holy Land and for religious freedom in the region. Many Church agencies and institutions are put at risk by Israeli tax policies and other problems and the ministry of priests and other Church personnel is hampered by Israeli visa problems. For the past seven years, leaders of bishops' conferences from Europe and North America have met in the Holy Land to visit with public officials and the local Church to demonstrate solidarity and support.

ACTION REQUESTED

Despite significant setbacks and discouraging developments, we cannot abandon the people of the Holy Land or the pursuit of a just peace.

- **Join the Catholic Campaign for Peace in the Holy Land.** Reach out to Jewish and Muslim religious leaders to work **together** to promote strong U.S. leadership. Website: www.usccb.org/sdwp/holylandpeace/.
- **Call for stronger U.S. leadership** to hold both parties accountable for building a just peace – the Palestinians to improve security and governance, the Israelis to stop settlements and allow movement of people and goods. Ask Congress to support funding to build the Palestinian Authority's capacity for governance and to provide urgent humanitarian aid for Palestinians.
- **Support the Church in the Holy Land.** Urge members of Congress and Jewish leaders to press Israel to successfully conclude negotiations with the Holy See related to the Fundamental Agreement.

RESOURCES

Visit www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/mideast.shtml. For further information: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3160 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), scolecchi@usccb.org (email).

3211 Fourth St., NE. Washington, DC 20017. Tel: (202)541-3160 Fax: (202)541-3339