

The Free Gaza Movement

Breaking the Siege of Gaza

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Dr. Navanethem Pillay, High Commissioner
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais Wilson
52 rue des Pâquis
CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland

Dear High Commissioner Pillay,

We are writing out of a deep concern over the political and humanitarian catastrophe created by Israel's hermetic closure of the Gaza Strip. Although the international community pledged over \$4.2 billion for Gaza at the Sharm el-Sheikh Conference on 2 March 2009, little money or aid has actually reached Gaza due to Israel's closure policy, a form of collective punishment of the 1.5 million Palestinians who live there.

We need your help and intervention to protect international citizens' efforts, including the Free Gaza Movement's efforts to overcome this continuing tragedy.

Since August 2008 international human rights workers in the Free Gaza Movement have been regularly sending boats to Gaza. Although the first five voyages successfully reached Gaza, the only international vessels to do so since 1967, the last three attempts have all been violently stopped by the Israeli military. Most recently, on 30 June 2009, Israeli naval commandos forcibly boarded the "Spirit of Humanity," a converted ferryboat, in international waters approximately 19 miles off the coast of Gaza. At gunpoint, the Israeli navy commandeered the vessel, forced it to sail to Israel, confiscated the cargo of medical supplies and children's toys, and arrested all 21 volunteers and crew – including Irish Nobel laureate Mairead Maguire and former U.S. congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, detaining them in prison for a week, then deporting them.

These actions by the Israeli government must be strongly condemned. The U.N. and its member states cannot remain silent and allow these violations to continue.

We know and appreciate that you share our concern for the suffering imposed on Gaza's civilian population as a result of Israel's illegal blockade. And we also believe our international actions must become commensurate with the crisis, and we believe that you have an important role to play as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The blockade of Gaza has created a man-made and deliberate humanitarian catastrophe. Given the continuing and sustained failure of the international community to enforce its own laws and protect the people of Gaza, we strongly believe that we all have a moral obligation to intervene to uphold international principles. Regardless of Israeli threats or actions, members of the Free Gaza Movement intend to continue sailing unarmed boats to Gaza. We will continue to take in human rights defenders, journalists, and parliamentarians, as well much-needed humanitarian and reconstruction supplies. The only "protection" these voyages have is the conscience of the world.



We urge you, in your capacity as High Commissioner, to use your influence as a senior U.N. official to work for an end to the collective punishment of the people of Gaza. We would also appreciate your public statements defending citizens' initiatives such as the efforts of the Free Gaza Movement to peacefully challenge Israel's illegal blockade.

We are at your disposal to testify in front of any international body if amplification of our initiative and others like it is required.

Respectfully Yours,

Huwaida Arraf, Chairperson
Free Gaza Movement

Past Statements regarding the Gaza Crisis

- *As early as October 2006*, Prof. John Dugard, then UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the OPT, stated:
Gaza is a prison and Israel seems to have thrown away the key ... [T]he people of Gaza have been subjected to collective punishment in clear violation of article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.
- *In January 2008*, a coalition of Israeli human rights organizations, including Gush Shalom, PHR, and ICAHD, stated:
[We] deplore the decision by the Israeli government to cut off vital supplies of electricity and fuel (and therefore water, since the pumps cannot work), as well as essential foodstuffs, medicines and other humanitarian supplies to the civilian population of Gaza. Such an action constitutes a clear and unequivocal crime against humanity. [Israel's] decision to punish Gaza's civilian population, with all the human suffering that entails, constitutes State Terrorism against innocent people.
- *By May 2008*, prominent international aid organizations, including CARE International UK, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, and Medecins du Monde UK, stated:
[T]he stranglehold on Gaza's borders has made ... the work of the UN and other humanitarian agencies ... virtually impossible ... [bringing] basic services such as water and sanitation near to collapse.
- *Also in May 2008*, Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu denounced the Gaza blockade as an "abomination" and said that the international community's "silence and complicity...shames us all."
- *By January 2009*, UN General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto condemned both the blockade of Gaza as well as United Nations' "complicity" in the blockade.
- *In April 2009*, former U.S. President and Nobel laureate Jimmy Carter said:
Palestinians in Gaza are being 'starved to death,' receiving fewer calories a day than people in the poorest parts of Africa. It's an atrocity what is being perpetrated as punishment on the people in Gaza. It's a crime... an abomination that this continues to go on. Tragically, the international community largely ignores the cries for help, while the citizens of Gaza are treated more like animals than human beings.
- *Last month* the ICRC released a report titled "Gaza: 1.5 million people trapped in despair," writing:
Israel's military operation ['Cast Lead,' in Dec/Jan] left thousands of homes partly or totally destroyed. Whole neighbourhoods were turned into rubble ... [R]estrictions on imports are making it impossible for Gazans to rebuild their lives ... Gaza neighbourhoods particularly hard hit by the Israeli strikes will continue to look like the epicentre of a massive earthquake unless vast quantities of cement, steel and other building materials are allowed into the territory for reconstruction ... The fact that water and sanitation services could collapse at any moment raises the spectre of a major public health crisis.
- *Finally*, Richard Falk, the current UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the OPT, stated:
[Israel's] policy of collective punishment ... within the Gaza Strip constitutes a continuing flagrant and massive violation of international humanitarian law ... **Preventive action must be taken immediately** to offset the persisting and wide-ranging violations of the fundamental human right to life.