

Canadian Jewish News

Christian coalition backs Palestinians

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TORONTO -- A leading Canadian Christian social justice coalition has urged the federal government to abandon its traditional even-handedness in the Middle East and help impose an end to Israel's "illegal" occupation of "Palestinian territories."

In a March 13 letter to Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham, KAIROS, the Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiative, criticizes Israel's military incursions into Palestinian areas, portraying Palestinian suicide bombings as reprisals for Israeli aggression.

"The last 18 months have been filled with horrifying violence and a steady increase in injury and deaths, but this past week has witnessed new heights in the wanton disregard for life and property," the coalition's letter to Graham states. "Israeli military incursions into densely populated areas, such as the refugee camps in Bethlehem and most recently, the total occupation of Ramallah, and Palestinian reprisals in the form of suicide bombings and rifle attacks, have resulted in dozens of civilian deaths."

KAIROS, which promotes human rights, justice and peace around the world, seeks "an immediate cease-fire [that] must be implemented to avoid massive further casualties." As well, the letter states, "UN monitors are desperately needed to make such a cease-fire hold. Israel has long resisted the presence of UN monitors and we ask that you stress to the Israelis their utility for ensuring the security of both peoples."

Founded last July, the Toronto-based coalition brings together social justice and peace groups from Canada's Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Mennonite, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Quaker and United churches.

The churches fund the coalition, which, in turn, is said to function at arm's length from the churches.

The churches, states the letter to Graham, "have consistently stated that addressing the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel is fundamental. Canada's official position holds the occupation to be illegal and in contravention of UN Security [Council] Resolutions 242 and 338."

(Canada's long-held official position, according to background notes from the Department of Foreign Affairs, is that Ottawa "does not recognize" Israel's occupation, but considers settlements as "contrary to international law.")

While acknowledging the importance of negotiations between the parties, KAIROS says "there are also times when international law must simply be implemented. We think this is a direction that

ultimately may avoid many more years of bloodshed and misery in the Middle East and ask [Graham] to consider support for such an initiative."

Eric Vernon, director of government relations for Canadian Jewish Congress, said KAIROS' view is based on erroneous interpretations of Canadian policy and the two UN resolutions.

Vernon pointed out that Resolution 242, passed in 1967 after the Six Day War, recognizes the right of all states to exist within secure borders and recognized boundaries, and the need for Israeli withdrawal "from territories occupied in the recent conflict."

Resolution 338 of 1973 calls for the implementation of Resolution 242 and negotiations between the parties.

Vernon said Canada has endorsed both measures, and a cornerstone of its Mideast policy is that a just and lasting peace can only be reached as a result of direct negotiations between the parties.

"[The UN resolutions] clearly state that [Israel's occupation] is not in contravention of international law. And they, like Canada, also call for direct negotiations between the parties," Vernon told The CJN.

Any attempt by Canada or other countries to impose a settlement on Israel would be untenable anyway, he said.

And he wondered to what extent KAIROS represents the views of Canada's Christian churches.

"Is this a convenient way for the churches to slam Israel?" Vernon asked. "If not, where are the mainstream voices?"

He said the KAIROS letter is striking because it "does not hold Palestinians accountable for anything," and because it states that negotiations have failed.

"Israel has been willing to negotiate, but they have to have someone as their partner," Vernon said.

Dale Hildebrand, KAIROS' spokesperson on Mideast matters, says talks between Israel and the Palestinians "haven't been very fruitful, and it doesn't seem possible the two parties will agree without outside intervention."

Hildebrand said his group's letter calls for "a new direction. What's been tried clearly hasn't worked.

We need to work toward a solution."

He conceded that, in effect, the letter calls for Canada to help "impose" that solution. However, he added, "we would never endorse a violent approach."

Asked whether his group's view reflects that of its constituent churches, Hildebrand said, "this is a very sensitive area for the churches. We speak for KAIROS and its board of directors, and not for individual churches. We wouldn't want to undermine the views of the churches."