

26 October 2023

Statement

From the desk of the General Secretary, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana

REFLECTIONS ON GAZA: FEAR, INSECURITY AND REPRESSION IS NO RECIPE FOR LASTING PEACE

The weeks following the incident of 7 October 2023 in Israel have magnified the daily experience of Palestinians in Gaza and Israel. The brutality of the Hamas attack on Israeli families, women and children in the kibbutzim is rightly to be condemned with the same vehemence with which we condemn all brutal attacks on defenceless people anywhere in the world. In the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres, "Nothing can justify the deliberate killing, injuring and kidnapping of civilians - or the launching of rockets against civilian targets." The Hamas incursions resulted in no less than 1 400 Israeli deaths, and between 200 and 250 persons abducted and held hostage.

In response the Netanyahu government of Israel went on a war footing, established a war cabinet of national unity, and mounted an incessant barrage of bombardments that would reduce Gaza City to a rubble, with over 6 000 Palestinians killed with about half of the dead being children. Several thousands have been displaced or fled for safer locations.

What we now have is beyond the rage over the brutal Hamas attacks, it has become a systematic assault on the Palestinian people, almost as though their crime is being Palestinian. The continued indiscriminate bombing in Gaza, which has been described as a concentration camp, destroys lives, sometimes wiping out three generations of one family at one go, such as in the case of journalist Wael Dahdough whose wife, son and seven year old daughter were killed, with other family members still unaccounted for. No place is safe: schools, hospitals and even churches are targeted with impunity. The bombing of the Greek Orthodox Saint Porphyrius Church in Gaza City adds to the senselessness of these bombardments. This is happening in the glare of the international community which seems to give tacit support to Israel to commit such atrocities with no moral outrage.

The huge and growing number of the dead should touch every heart of flesh in the world! With thousands more in hospitals with dwindling capacity to cope, and surgical operations conducted raw with no anaesthetics or pain killers, it is heart-wrenching.



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There has been the cutting off of water, electricity and fuel, rendering emergency services an uphill struggle. In the West Bank the settlers are reportedly going on shooting sprees that have killed over 90 Palestinians in the last couple of weeks.

We are alarmed at the moral bankruptcy demonstrated by Western powers in the unqualified support of Israel, a “blank cheque” given in the name of Israeli self-defence. These incessant bombardments are not self-defence by an occupying power with the most sophisticated defence force in the Middle East and one of the tops in the world. It can only be truly described in the words of “collective punishment” used by the UN Secretary General António Guterres saying, “The horrendous attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of those in Gaza through Israel’s bombing campaign.”

This at best, is short-sighted, but largely it is a dangerous game that promotes warmongering that will engulf the whole region and potentially the whole world. It is an invitation for proxy street battles between sympathisers of Israel and Palestine in different parts of the world where there is no Israeli Defence Force (IDF) to bombard anyone - a recipe for disaster!

The Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem and other Christian churches in the Holy Land responded with a “solemn observance of fasting and prayer for peace, reconciliation, and an end to the harrowing conflict”. The SACC echoes the statement of the church in Jerusalem saying, “The devastation witnessed, coupled with the sacrilegious targeting of the church strikes at the very core of human decency.” They said that, “This is deserving international condemnation and retribution,” calling on the international community - us all, “To fulfil its duty in protecting civilians and ensuring that such horrific acts are not replicated.” The present pain has its source in two realities that have to find satisfaction if lasting peace is to be achieved. The one is the Israeli insecurity in the face of the demand by some, including Hamas, for the State of Israel to cease to exist. They and their Western allies believe that the answer is to constrain and suppress militarily, the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for their own sovereign State.

The other side of the coin is the reality that Palestinians have been living in a state of oppression since 1948, and this intensified after 1967. The general Palestinian situation is a breeding environment for anti-Israeli attitudes.

Considering the extremely oppressive conditions under which the Palestinian people must live, there is therefore no question about the justness of the Palestinian cause.

The collective punishment of Gaza and the killings in the West Bank cannot and will not secure peace and security for Israel; what will, is a return to peace negotiations and the establishment of meaningful protocols for justice, security, peace and dignity for all the people of the Holy Land - Palestinian and Israeli.

The leaders of the people of Israel and Palestine must be principled enough to lead their people in search of justice, peace and security; where they can agree to set aside their differences and find each other in a shared future of mutual freedom, dignity and security.

The planned ground force invasion by the IDF to eliminate Hamas is both dangerous and ultimately unhelpful, as it gives permission to Israel to commit atrocities under the cover of defending itself. The call to annihilate Hamas at all costs may even be interpreted as a rallying call to various forces in the region to also mobilise for an expanded war.

We support the refusal of Egypt to open for Gaza to be depopulated into their country with no right of return as is the case with the people who were driven into permanent refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria in 1948 and 1967; thus, making way for the Gaza land to be taken up with new Israeli settlements. Instead, we call for an immediate ceasefire, the cessation of both the Gaza bombardments and the Hamas rocket launches, and the recommitment to serious peace negotiations for lasting peace.

We welcome the release of the two pairs of Israeli hostages, for which we thank Qatar's involvement. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all the other hostages. We join and echo the appeal by church leaders in Palestine:

"First of all to pray for our mission here, as well for the peace of Jerusalem (Psa. 122:6). Secondly, advocate with your representatives (and governments) for a just and lasting peace in the Holy Land, so that all who dwell within these lands can live in security. We join the global call for the opening of safe corridors that make it possible for massive humanitarian support to reach the people of Gaza, who are desperate - for lack of water, food, and electricity - and who live in the expectation of death from the aerial bombardments that define their daily life.

Finally, if you are able, support our ministries in Gaza, Palestine & Israel, and throughout the Diocese of Jerusalem by contributing financially through one of our international partners." We offer for the consideration of South Africans the following organisations through whom to make donations:



- UN Population Fund (UNFPA) <https://www.unfpa.org/donate/Gaza>. Pregnant women and newborns are among the most vulnerable.
- UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the relief and humanitarian organisation for refugees.
- UN World Food Program (WFP) for emergency food supplies <https://www.wfp.org>
- Gift of the Givers <https://giftofthegivers.org/disaster-response/palestine-relief/26909/>

Freedom, justice and peace are indivisible concepts. What is just for one people should be just also for the other people. What is unjust for the one is unjust also for the other. The measure of freedom and liberty for one should be the same measure of freedom and liberty for the other. Fear, insecurity and military repression is no recipe for lasting peace. There should be no compromise on the fundamental demand for a just peace with dignity and security for both Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians — peace, lasting peace with security for all.

The statement of the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem has an encouraging citation from scripture: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). With them we pray for the unwavering spirit in the face of extreme adversity.

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SACC Media enquiries and memorial service attendance:

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About SACC

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) is an ecumenical association of affiliated Christian Churches, and blocks of churches such as The Evangelical Alliance and the Council of African Independent Churches, and the International Federation of Christian Churches, with a mandate to lead common Christian action that works for moral witness in South Africa. SACC does not exist for the propagation and the advancement of its doctrinal position, but is the place where our diverse interpretations of our faith come together in action for **social justice**. It therefore seeks to achieve a visible, just socio-economic and ecological impact, enabled through engaged churches-in-community for a reconciled South Africa and our sub-continent.