

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
Ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté
Liga Internacional de Mujeres por la Paz y la Libertad
Internationale Frauenliga für Frieden und Freiheit

Consultative Status with United Nations ECOSOC, UNCTAD and UNESCO

Special Consultative Relations with FAO, ILO and UNICEF

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15 January 2009

Hon Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

We write on behalf of the Australian Section of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) concerning the situation in Gaza.

We believe that Israel's undisputed right to self-defence does not allow the killing of civilians. According to estimates from reliable Palestinian medical sources, the death toll from the recent attacks in Gaza now stands at over 900, and the United Nations has confirmed that a large number of the dead are civilians. It has been reported that a UN school whose location was known to the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) was targeted and bombed, and that as a result somewhere between 30 and 40 civilians were killed. The International Committee of the Red Cross has also reported that some of their own personnel have been fired upon, and in the case of at least two persons, killed.

It is beyond dispute that in an area as densely populated as Gaza, civilians have been and continue to be grossly impacted by the recent actions of the Israeli Defence Forces. As these attacks will inevitably leave a legacy of bitterness for future generations, we believe that this killing is not in the long-term interests of anyone in the region including Israeli civilians. We therefore warmly welcomed the Acting Prime Minister's statements of 2 January 2009 that the Australian Government urged both Israel and Hamas to reach an immediate ceasefire, as well as her condemnation of the use of violence on both sides of the conflict. We also support your own more recent call on both parties to accept the UN

Security Council's resolution (sponsored by France and Egypt and unanimously agreed with only one abstention – by the United States) for an immediate ceasefire.

It is widely recognised that there can never be a military “solution” to the competing claims between Israel and the Palestinian people. Many opinion polls have shown that both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples broadly speaking want peace for themselves, their families and their communities. We believe that they are not well served by their governing authorities who, in our view, are escalating military violence on both sides of the conflict.

In light of reports of the targetting of civilian areas in southern Israel by Hamas; the killing of civilians by both Hamas and the IDF; the failure on the part of the IDF to render timely assistance to wounded civilians (including children); and of reports of the use by the IDF of white phosphorous in civilian areas, we wholeheartedly support your recent call for a thorough investigation of all reported incidents that may have contravened international law or international humanitarian law. We look forward to the publication of a comprehensive report and trust that the Australian Government will ensure that any report received will be widely publicised in Australia.

We very much welcome the announcement that the Australian Government has designated \$5 million in humanitarian aid for victims caught in the crossfire, as well as the news that the Government stands ready to render further assistance. In view of the fact that the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has now reached a new low with no electricity supply, little water, limited medical supplies and much destruction of infrastructure, it is our belief that that the further assistance that was promised is indeed now required. While we are not in a position to determine an exact amount that would be appropriate, we nevertheless urge significant additional aid for humanitarian relief in Gaza. This aid could well be directed through NGOs such as Medecins Sans Frontiers who are already working on the ground in Gaza.

We thank you for your kind attention.

Yours sincerely,

Cathy Picone and Ruth Russell
Joint National Coordinators