

July 23, 2024

As global Christian leaders committed to peace and justice and the recognition of the image of God in all humanity, we abhor the ongoing violence that has now continued for more than nine months between Hamas and the Israeli military. More than 1,100 people were killed by the Hamas attacks on October 7th, and mass killings by the Israeli military in Gaza have taken more than 39,000 lives. More than two-thirds of Gaza – including tens of thousands of homes, hospitals, schools, and universities – have been destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. Not only the livelihoods but even the wherewithal to maintain the most basic subsistence of two million people has been erased. Children are dying of malnutrition, credible reports indicate prisoners are being tortured, and efforts to release the hostages are not being prioritized. These atrocities stain the conscience of all humanity, and in this, we include ourselves as Christian leaders and the global church.

Against this catastrophic backdrop, we have called before and call again now, with heartfelt insistence, for a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire, for the return of hostages, and the release of Palestinian prisoners held without due process. Immediate and untrammelled access for the huge humanitarian response is now required to restore to the people of Gaza their God-given dignity and the same right to food, shelter, education, healthcare and the means to support themselves that we enjoy.

Challenging as this will be to achieve, it will not be enough. Regrettably, we now face the threat of even greater and more widespread violence. This is a moment of extreme peril not only for Israelis and Palestinians but for the entire region. A full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah is an imminent possibility. A largely unreported and bloody confrontation has been developing in the West Bank between Israeli security forces, often working together with or alongside armed settler groups, against Palestinians – especially, but not only, those living in refugee camps. More than 520 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank so far this year. The incidence of land seizures and house demolitions in Area C has dramatically increased. As of early July, the Government of Israel recently approved the largest single appropriation of occupied land – 12.7 square kilometers (nearly 5 square miles) in the Jordan Valley – since the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Nonviolent resistance to prolonged occupation has been met with unjustified violence by Israel and has been delegitimized by ill-considered condemnation from parts of the international community. This has contributed to a growing belief among many Palestinians in the West Bank that armed resistance is both legitimate and effective, even inevitable. This growing conviction is contrasted with a perceived failure and impotence of the commitment to non-violent resistance, peacebuilding, and reconciliation that, as Christians, we share and support. On all sides of this conflict, belief in the possibility of peace and the commitment to non-violent approaches is waning. The window for constructive dialogue between combatant parties is rapidly closing. It

will be replaced by more violence and a further erosion of hope and trust. As Christian leaders, we feel compelled to speak out before it is too late and broader Middle East war becomes inevitable.

Without decisive action now, the consequences of this drift to deeper, broader, and more entrenched conflict will be more destruction and loss of innocent lives. It is time for the international community, as well as Israeli, Palestinian, and regional decision makers, to act. Our common humanity demands it. Millions around the globe demand it. We therefore reiterate our appeal to the belligerents for an end to hostilities and for hostages to be returned to their families.

We fear the existential threat to the Christian presence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories – the very place where our faith tradition began. More than three percent of the Christian community in Gaza has been killed since October 7th, including 18 Christians at St. Porphyrius Orthodox Church. Dozens of Christian families throughout the West Bank have left due to the occupation, increased violence, and economic pressures. Christians and their significant contributions to civil society could soon disappear from the Holy Land.

Thus, as Christians and people of peace, we call on the international community and global institutions to end all arms flows into the conflict zone and to end various states' attempts to frustrate legal remedies being sought in the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in response to war crimes alleged against both sides and the 'plausible' accusation that Israeli action in Gaza 'could amount to genocide.' We also call for unrestricted access to all necessary humanitarian assistance for those in need and the opening of an internationally facilitated long-term and permanent peace process.

Violence, impunity, denigration, frustration, and flouting of the rules-based international order must stop. Now is the time for courageous and creative leadership that works for peace. We speak out as Christian leaders with a deep concern for the common good for all affected by war and conflict without exception. We speak with urgency. We speak in a spirit of peace. We speak because we are deeply inspired by the courageous and selfless commitment of our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters in the Holy Land, who suffer alongside their Muslim and Jewish neighbors and remain resolutely determined to help bring about a just and dignified future for all inhabitants of these lands.

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