

8 June 2010

To: The Representatives of the Quartet on the Middle East (EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov).

c.c.: European Union foreign ministers; Envoys of the Quartet on the Middle East

Dear Foreign Minister,

As a group of international development, human rights and peace-building organisations with operations and partners in Gaza working to overcome poverty and protect human rights, we write to express our sadness and shock at the deadly consequences of Israel's interception in international waters of a flotilla of boats attempting to carry relief supplies to Gaza, and to call on the Quartet to take two key steps. This tragic incident is a direct result of the Israeli-imposed blockade of the Gaza Strip, which has had a terrible human impact on the people of Gaza; whether it is Gaza's children, its most vulnerable citizens, or farmers or factory workers who have lost their livelihoods, all are suffering the consequences. It is now vital, therefore, that the international community ensures an appropriate response to the incident itself, but also launches a new, concerted diplomatic initiative to end the blockade immediately.

Recent events, and the fact that the blockade is soon to enter its fourth year, only highlight the tragic consequences of the failure of the international community to achieve progress on the issue. The recent initiative by the Quartet to secure entry for a number of essential items needed for a group of reconstruction projects, many of which had been blocked by the Israeli authorities for long periods, has been welcome. This shows that international engagement and pressure on the blockade can bring results – and that mechanisms are already available to ensure that vital reconstruction and development materials are not diverted into any activities which could threaten the lives of people in Israel. However, these are tiny concessions against the background of the scale of materials prevented entry and the needs of the people of Gaza.

As organisations, many of whom have been directly affected by the severe restrictions on providing humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza, we are alarmed by many of the claims made by Israel in recent days that there is open access for humanitarian aid into Gaza. Israel's blockade permits only the entry of a narrowly-restricted number of basic humanitarian goods (and often even these in insufficient quantities) as well as forbidding most people in Gaza from exporting anything to the outside world or leaving the territory. The blockade, which punishes the entire civilian population of Gaza, constitutes collective punishment, which is unacceptable and violates international law. The primary responsibility for this situation lies with Israel, which continues to flout its international obligations as the Occupying Power.

We have repeatedly called for more effective international action to bring about an end to this blockade policy. Less than six months ago many of us came together to issue a report, *Failing Gaza*, documenting how the blockade systematically prevents the rebuilding of Gaza's shattered civilian infrastructure and economy. In another report (issued back in September 2008) a group of us examined the record of the Quartet on making good their commitments on the Middle East Peace process. In this we welcomed the Quartet's call earlier that year for a 'new approach' to Gaza and its commitment to task its Representative with pursuing – amongst other things – the immediate resumption of stalled UN and other donor projects in Gaza, and the increased entry of goods through the Gaza crossings. But we noted then that, in reality, 'neither the [required] quantity nor the flow of humanitarian and commercial goods, both into and out of Gaza, ...has been achieved'.

With the eyes of the world now on Gaza, the time has come for governments, not just to issue more statements of disapproval of the blockade, but to come together to take action.

The Quartet must now take international leadership to bring about a swift and full end to the blockade. Without such leadership, the policy will continue to destroy the lives of the people of Gaza and their economy, and threaten attempts to achieve a just and durable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We call on the Quartet to take two key steps.

First, the Quartet should convene an urgent ministerial-level international conference on ending the blockade. This conference should be called with a clear brief to formulate an international plan of action to bring about the full opening of the crossings to all aid, commercial trade and the movement of people - together with restoring and mobilising appropriate monitoring mechanisms for this traffic. The conference should consider all possible avenues the international community could use to bring about an end to the blockade and so also help set the foundation for viable moves towards a just and sustainable solution to the conflict.

Second, we welcome the calls by the UN Security Council for a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent inquiry into the circumstances around the flotilla interception. We urge Quartet members to ensure that independent international experts recognized for their impartiality, competence and expertise are indeed involved in the investigation, as a basis to ensure full accountability for what happened. It is also vital that Israel is urged to fully cooperate with the investigation, which should get underway - and report back - as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,



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