

H.E. Mr. Carl Bildt,  
Foreign Minister of Sweden  
Ministry for Foreign Affairs  
Gustav Adolfs torg 1  
SE-103 39 Stockholm  
Sweden

Ramallah, 23 July 2009

Dear Foreign Minister Bildt,

As members of the Palestinian Council of Human Rights Organisations, a permanent forum of coordination between the Palestinian human rights organisations concerned with the promotion and protection of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), we write to congratulate your country on its presidency of the EU Council and to express our appreciation for the emphasis you have given to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as Foreign Minister of Sweden. Your positive engagement is evidenced not least by you being the first European Foreign Minister to visit to the Gaza Strip in the direct aftermath of Israel's recent military offensive "Operation Cast Lead".

While we welcome your initiative and commitment to the conflict, we also want to bring to your attention the continuing and deteriorating human rights situation on the ground since your last visit. Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip, now entering its third year, has exacted a pervasive and devastating toll on the civilian population and constitutes a particularly severe form of collective punishment, in blatant violation of international law. The persistent closure of Gaza's border crossings continues to heavily restrict the movement of goods and people to and from the territory. *Inter alia*, patients, some of whom were injured as a direct result of "Operation Cast Lead", are regularly denied permission to leave the Gaza Strip in order to seek critical medical treatment abroad, which has ultimately resulted in several deaths.

Goods allowed into Gaza by Israel have been reduced to 20% of pre-siege levels and are mainly limited to basic foodstuffs, and medical and hygiene products. As you are aware, the import of construction materials and spare parts into the Strip continues to be virtually banned. This prevents reconstruction and/or reparation of civilian infrastructure, most notably of thousands of homes destroyed during "Operation Cast Lead", which resulted in the displacement of an estimated 340,000 Palestinians, many of whom remain homeless to date.

In the West Bank, Israel's unlawful policy of settlement construction and expansion continues unabated. Settlements and their associated infrastructure, most notably the Annexation Wall, further movement restrictions for Palestinians, land expropriation, and displacement. This structure further carves up the West Bank into isolated enclaves, undermining the exercise by the Palestinian people of their inalienable right to self-determination. While Israeli officials have recently expressed that they may "consider" a temporary freeze in settlement construction, excluding already commenced construction, Israel insists on accommodating "natural growth" within settlements.

While we welcome the EU's repeated condemnation of Israeli settlement activity as unlawful and as an obstacle to peace, it is equally important for the EU to strongly emphasise that its demand to freeze settlement activity includes any construction and/or expansion to accommodate so-called natural growth. The population growth rate of Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is 4.7%, compared to an annual growth of the Jewish population in the State of Israel, which is 1.7%. Thus, the smokescreen of "natural growth" is used to mask continuing emigration of Jewish-Israeli settlers to the West Bank, as well as the creation of essentially new settlements appended to existing ones. Such practices are clearly aimed at illegally securing Israeli geo-demographic dominance over the area. Unless this form of artificially induced growth is counteracted, Israel's colonisation of the West Bank will continue indefinitely.

A further cause of concern is Israel's policy of demolishing Palestinian houses either for punitive reasons or under the pretext of lack of building permits. Building permits are rarely granted to Palestinians by the Israeli authorities, thus also severely curtailing Palestinian development. In 2008, Israel demolished 377 homes in the OPT with Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem being particularly vulnerable to this arbitrary practice. They are facing new threats of wide-scale displacement as Israeli authorities have issued over 1,050 demolition orders since the beginning of the year. In the meantime, 29 residential structures have already been destroyed in East Jerusalem alone, resulting in the displacement of 170 people, including 80 children.

As the country holding the EU-presidency for the coming six months, Sweden has a particularly important role to play with regards to the EU's declared commitment to the "peace process." While we commend the EU's decision to refrain from adopting a new EU-Israel Action Plan at the recent EU-Israel Association Council Meeting, the EU has equally refrained from publically confirming the freezing of the upgrade of EU-Israel relations. On the contrary, incremental steps, tantamount to an upgrade in stealth, are being implemented, such as cooperation talks in the field of aviation and with regard to Israel's participation in Europol.

While we appreciate the EU's continued criticism of Israel's unlawful policies outlined above, mere words of condemning violations and recommending measures have not led to any sustainable peace efforts. It is time for the EU to take concrete action and to reaffirm its commitment to international law, particularly in its relations with third states in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The EU must implement the economic and diplomatic tools at its disposal to pressure Israel to comply with its obligations under international law if the EU wishes to revive the peace process.

Any genuine efforts to establish a lasting peace in the region must embody a sense of justice, which requires as an unavoidable starting point, that the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people be recognised and protected. This implies not only addressing the core of the problem – the occupation itself, and bringing it to an end - but also necessitates that international law be understood as the essential over-arching framework for any diplomatic intervention, including negotiations. Experience of conflict resolution from Latin America to West Africa to Eastern Europe has demonstrated repeatedly that peace initiatives not founded on pillars of justice and the rule of law always unravel.

In light of the above, we urge you, Your Excellency, to ask the EU to leave no doubt in the minds of Israeli authorities that Israel's obligations towards the occupied population are legal obligations and not a matter of beneficence. To this end, the EU must demand that Israel put an end to its unlawful practices, to immediately lift the blockade on the Gaza Strip, including opening all border crossings to allow the movement of goods and people to and from the area, to immediately cease all settlement activity, including "natural growth", to stop its policy of house demolitions and finally, to condition any upgrading of its relations with Israel on the country's upholding of its obligations under international law.

Trusting that you will give these matters the attention they deserve, we remain at your disposal for any further information you may require.

Sincerely yours,

*Al-Haq*

*Al-Mezan Centre for Human Rights*

*Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Centre*

*ADDAMEER Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association*

*AL-DAMEER Association for Human Rights - Gaza*

*Defence for Children International – Palestine Section*

*Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling*

*ENSAN Association for Democracy and Human Rights*

*Ramallah Centre for Human Rights Studies*