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Church leaders petition for Palestinian rights

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Dec. 3, 2012 NCR Today

Last week's successful bid before the UN for an upgrade in Palestinian status from observer to non-member state was just one of several petitions levied on behalf of Palestinian rights, including two significant ones from religious leaders.

As the Palestinians made their case in New York, US religious leaders and their secular partners held a press conference at the Methodist Building in Washington, D.C., to highlight support for a letter [1] by Christian leaders asking Congress to make US military aid to Israel contingent upon its government's "compliance with applicable US laws and policies."

Israel is the largest recipient of US military aid. According to the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, members of Congress and/or the State Department have investigated or requested investigations into Israel's potential misuse of U.S. weapons at least five times since 2000; however, no public action has been taken to hold Israel accountable for its violations of U.S. laws.

Fifteen representatives of US churches and religious organizations signed the letter, including the executive director of Maryknoll's Office for Global Concerns and the justice and peace director for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

The signers said they had worked "for decades to support both Israeli and Palestinians in their desire to live in peace and well-being." The authors said they recognized both communities bore responsibility for the violence in the region, but noted that "unconditional US military aid" was contributing to deteriorating conditions and impeding the path to a just and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

"This is made clear in the most recent 2011 State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices covering Israel and the Occupied Territories, which details widespread Israeli human rights violations committed against Palestinian civilians, many of which involve the misuse of U.S.-supplied weapons," the letter states.

The letter urged Congress to immediately investigate " possible violations by Israel of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act and the U.S. Arms Export Control Act which respectively prohibit assistance to any country which engages in a consistent pattern of human rights violations and limit the use of U.S. weapons to 'internal security' or 'legitimate self-defense.' "

Steve Martin of KairosUSA, the organization promoting the congressional letter, said its authors have come under "aggressive criticism" from several Jewish advocacy organizations, at least two of whom have backed out of long-standing interfaith dialogues because they considered writing the letter to be a break in goodwill.

But 30,000 people, me included, have signed an online petition in support of the Christian leaders' appeal, prompted, no doubt, by the recent bombardment of Gaza. Thursday's press conference, which included a Jewish rabbi and representatives from Jewish Voices for Peace, was intended to highlight this support.

Over in India, the Office for Justice, Peace and Development of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India asked the Indian government to beef up its stated support for Palestinian statehood with "more effective action [2]." In a Nov. 23 letter to India's Minister of External Affairs, the bishops urge waging a boycott against what it called Israel's illegal settlement enterprise.

The letter noted that Israel's Jewish-only settlements, which have enabled more than half a million Israeli citizens to live in occupied Palestinian territory, are systematically obstructing the possibility of a two-state solution with an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, a solution India has endorsed often enough.

"The Israeli government is preparing the settlements for international competition through subsidization," the letter states. "Settlement products include agricultural items such as dates, citrus fruits, paprika, potatoes, and herbs, as well as manufactured products like cosmetics, carbonation devices, plastics, textile products, and toys. Over 43 per cent of land in the West Bank, along with the vast majority of water and natural resources, have been seized from Palestinians and allocated to settlements. (Is this not an Israeli provocation?) Palestinian trade and the economy are severely restricted by various physical and administrative obstacles imposed by Israeli authorities, which significantly diminish the competitiveness of Palestinian goods while increasing the unpredictability of delivery time and quality."

India is Israel's eighth-largest trading partner in the world, the third in Asia. Against this backdrop and the recent military incursion in Gaza, the Office of Justice, Peace, and Development urged the government to "reconfirm the illegality of Israeli settlements" by boycotting all "Israeli and international businesses that profit from Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands until the enterprises bring their operations up to par with international human rights standards and humanitarian law."

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[1] http://www.kairosusa.org/?q=node/55
[2] http://persecutedchurch.info/2012/11/23/cbci-office-for-justice-peace-and-development-calls-for-more-effective-action-against-israeli-settlements-in-palestine/