News
Social Justice



Israeli tanks stand near the Israel-Gaza border, as seen from southern Israel, July 14, 2024. (AP/Tsafrir Abayov)

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Washington, D.C. — July 24, 2024

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More than 200 Christian leaders from an array of traditions have signed a letter calling for a permanent cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war and the release of hostages taken by Hamas, as well as a list of other measures aimed at providing relief in Gaza.

"We speak out as Christian leaders with a deep concern for the common good for all affected by war and conflict without exception," reads the letter, which was organized by Churches for Middle East Peace, a coalition of Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches based in Washington.

“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."

Besides a cease-fire and the return of hostages, the letter goes on to call for "the release of Palestinian prisoners held without due process," as well as a free flow of humanitarian aid and a halt on shipping arms into the region.

"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," the authors said. "It is time for the international community, as well as Israeli, Palestinian, and regional decision makers, to act. Our common humanity demands it."

The letter comes as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits the U.S., where he is expected to address Congress on Wednesday (July 24) and meet with President Joe Biden on Thursday. A cover letter from CMEP addressed to Biden implores him to use Netanyahu’s visit to annul "monetary and diplomatic cover for Israel to continue its military assault on the people of Gaza."

Among the signers of the letter were Roman Catholic Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini, bishop of Huehuetenango in Guatemala, and Bishops Steven Biegler of the Diocese of Cheynne in Wyoming, Stephen Lowe of the Diocese of Auckland in New Zealand, Christian Carlassare of the Diocese of Rumbek in South Sudan and Coffi Roger

Anoumou of the Diocese of Lokossa in Benin.

The presidents of the Maryknoll Sisters and the Sisters of St. Joseph Philadelphia, both orders of nuns, also signed.

Among the Protestants signing the letter were the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, bishops of the United Methodist Church, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, Community of Christ, the Church of England and the Anglican Church of Sri Lanka.

In addition, the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, a conference minister in the United Church of Christ and the clerk of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) signed it.

The heads of the National Council of Churches, Pax Christi Korea, the Asian American Christian Collaborative and The Witness, A Black Christian Collective, also signed the letter.

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The letter warned that the conflict has the potential to expand into the surrounding region, including the possibility of full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah. It also cautioned that as nonviolent resistance to decades of occupation is continuously met with "unjustified violence," individuals will increasingly turn to armed resistance.

"The window for constructive dialogue between combatant parties is rapidly closing. It will be replaced by more violence and further erosion of hope and trust," said the letter.

It cited the more than 3% of Gazan Christians who have been killed since Oct. 7 and the displacement of Christian populations in the West Bank fleeing the region’s violence.

Signatories charged world leaders with "violence, impunity, denigration, frustration, and flouting of the rules-based international order," urging them to step forward with "courageous and creative leadership."

In the cover letter to Biden, the Rev. Mae Elise Cannon, executive director on behalf of the CMEP board, argued that the United States and Biden administration had "moved beyond complicity" in the loss of life in Gaza.

According to a May report from the Council on Foreign Relations, since Oct. 7 the U.S. has enacted legislation providing at least $12.5 billion in military aid to Israel. This support, the letter said, along with "inadequate action to ensure delivery of aid" to Gazans, has made the United States "the primary partner to Israel in its ongoing military assault against Palestinians in Gaza."

The letter adds to growing Christian criticism of Israel since October, when the country began a ground assault into Gaza after Hamas militants launched an attack in southern Israel that killed nearly 1,200 people and resulted in about 200 being kidnapped, according to government officials. In subsequent months, the Israel-Hamas war has led to the deaths of more than 39,000 Palestinians, many of them children, according to the Hamas-run health ministry.

Black Christian leaders, various Christian denominations and large Christian coalitions have called for a cease-fire in the region for months, with some staging protests outside the White House. Pope Francis has also spoken out, as have Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem, which is in the West Bank.

Churches for Middle East Peace plans to host a prayer vigil at the United Methodist Building in Washington D.C. on Wednesday to call for an end to violence and military action in Gaza.