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Negotiating peace in the Middle East before the trains collide

Tony Magliano | Aug. 19, 2013 Making a Difference

"The Israelis and Palestinians are like two trains on the same track heading toward each other," said Maryknoll Fr. Jack Sullivan.

Focusing on the issue of peace in Israel/Palestine for the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, Sullivan said in a phone interview that the Palestinians are extremely frustrated living under Israeli occupation, and their growing sense of hopelessness is "a disaster waiting to happen."

In the occupied West Bank, Palestinians have no sea or air access, cannot cross into Israel, and are forced to endure a seemingly endless series of checkpoints and roadblocks, Sullivan said. Because Israel controls the water, Israeli settlements receive as much as seven times the amount of water Palestinian villages receive.

He also said Palestinian building permits in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are highly restricted while Israel continues to build settlements in the occupied territories

The International Court of Justice has said Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are illegal according to international law.

The same court ruled that the Israeli separation barrier of walls, barbed wire and trenches in the West Bank is also illegal. This barrier, built overwhelmingly in occupied territory, effectively takes more land away from the Palestinians and prevents many Palestinians from normal access to their vineyards, olive groves and fields.

Gaza is even worse off. Israel's blockade is strangling the Palestinians there.

But new peace talks engineered by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry offer an unusual spark of hope.

Sullivan said for the first time, the core issues of borders, mutual security, the return of Palestinian refugees, and the future of Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the occupied territories will all be on the table. And unlike previous failed negotiations, these core issues will be dealt with first and in complete secrecy to avoid harmful outside pressure. A bold nine-month timetable for reaching final status agreement has been set.

At the conclusion of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2009, he said, "Let it be universally recognized that the state of Israel has the right to exist and to enjoy peace and security within internationally agreed borders. Let it be likewise acknowledged that the Palestinian people have a right to a sovereign independent homeland, to live with dignity and to travel freely. Let the two-state solution become a reality, not remain a dream."

During a recent press conference, Kerry said:

"While I understand the skepticism, I don't share it and I don't think we have time for it. I firmly believe the leaders, the negotiators, and citizens invested in this effort can make peace for one simple reason: because they must. A viable two-state solution is the only way this conflict can end, and there is not much time to achieve it,

and there is no other alternative. We all need to be strong in our belief in the possibility of peace, courageous enough to follow through on our faith in it, and audacious enough to achieve what these two peoples have so long aspired to and deserve."

Well said.

To help peace become a reality, send a message to your two senators [1].

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about Catholic social teaching. His keynote address, "Advancing the Kingdom of God in the 21st Century," has been well received by diocesan gatherings from Salt Lake City to Baltimore. Tony can be reached at tmag@zoominternet.net [2].]

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