

23 April 2008

The Hon Kevin Rudd MP
Prime Minister of Australia
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

In just over one hundred days of your prime ministership, the government has achieved some astounding milestones very much welcomed by those who have benefited and by those who have waited a long time to see such changes. There are others who also would like to be included in your embrace of a more compassionate Australia and no doubt that will come in time as you continue to fulfil the promises you have made.

We always hoped that your government's foreign policy would bring balance back to Australia's position on Israel/Palestine, and notwithstanding your motion in our parliament honouring Israel's independence, we believe that that balance can be effected by also recognising the suffering of the Palestinian people.

You referred to the event honouring Israel's independence as celebrating an "important occasion together". For Israel, it is a celebration: after the tragedy of the Holocaust that is to be expected. But as someone who knows the history of Israel's creation, you could not ignore another tragedy that has been visited upon the indigenous people of that land, the Palestinians. Theirs has been a continuous narrative of dispossession, displacement, exile and occupation - now well-documented in the historical record - and which has found no relief, despite solid international consensus on their inalienable national rights.

The similarity between the grievous losses suffered by our own indigenous Aborigines and the Palestinians is not fanciful. Both peoples have been the hapless victims of colonialism that has robbed them of their land and dignity and seen them treated as misfits or somehow sub-human. Your recent apology to the Aboriginal people was a moving moment in our history and we all shared in that gladly. It showed the possibility of reconciliation and a constructive way forward and sets an outstanding example to other nations which share a similar colonial history. The "Catastrophe" (al-Nakba) of Palestinian dispossession though is continuing and intensifying.

You referred in your motion to a vision of an independent and economically viable Palestinian state. Palestinians have that vision too, but each day they have seen that vision become an impossible dream. The reason is indisputable: Israel's illegal settlement building inside the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem has been continuing uninterrupted throughout the years of peace negotiations and in violation of international law and United Nations resolutions. Without calling for an immediate cessation of settlement building, there will soon be nothing left of that vision.

You spoke about Israel having the right to exist within secure and internationally recognised borders and this is not disputed. But, the Palestinians must also be able to feel secure. Under Israel's occupation and without liberty, the Palestinians have no security and no borders to call their own. So, it is perfectly legitimate for the Palestinians to ask - on how much of the land does Israel want to exist and how much more do the Palestinians have to suffer?

You are optimistic about the peace talks since Annapolis, but in recent days, that optimism is not shared by the Israeli Government or the Palestinian Authority. There is a reason for that too. Israel has reneged on the agreements brokered in those talks by taking unilateral steps to create new facts on the ground accompanied by an increasingly arbitrary and disproportionate use of military force against the civilian population. This has incited reprisals leading to the inevitable cycle of violence. Israel's acts have not only substantially increased the suffering of the Palestinians, but are also giving greater credence to reports of "apartheid" and "ethnic cleansing". In fact, men of peace like Nobel Prize winners Archbishop Tutu and former US president Jimmy Carter have publicly stated that Israel has institutionalised an apartheid regime



Australian Friends of Palestine
Australians for Palestine
Women for Palestine

ENDORSEMENTS

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Author and Broadcaster

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Bishop George Browning
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The Hon Alastair Nicholson AO RFD QC
Former Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia

Metropolitan Archbishop Paul
Primate of the Antiochian Orthodox Church in Australia,
New Zealand and The Philippines

Emeritus Professor Stuart Rees AM
Director, Sydney Peace Foundation NSW

Archbishop Stylianos
Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia

The Hon Murray Wilcox QC
Former Justice of the Federal Court of Australia

in Palestine. From experience, we know that such acts will eventually become hard for the international community to ignore.

We want to share your objectives, hopes and visions in the pursuit of peace for both peoples, but without recognising the suffering of the Palestinians and also respecting their inalienable rights, those aspirations will not be realised. An acknowledgement of the immense loss borne by all Palestinians would be a first step to bringing some balance into the 60-year-linked narratives of both peoples – a balance that has, until recent times, always stood Australia in good stead internationally.

Unfortunately, there has been a disturbing trend amongst Western politicians and commentators, to reduce the Palestinian struggle for freedom and independence to gratuitous violence and terrorism under the umbrella of radical Islam. From this, an erroneous belief has emerged that any statement sympathetic to the Palestinians will encourage or reward violence. Like most human beings though, Palestinians only want some compassion for their plight and a world willing to intervene on their behalf. Stripping them of their dignity is also stripping them of any hope for a better future.

With your government, there is an opportunity for Australia to be inclusive of its Palestinian constituents as well as its Jewish constituency and to redress the balance that has long been missing in our position on Israel/Palestine. That would not only be fair, but a way of giving back hope to a people too long marginalised. You have already demonstrated such leadership with our own indigenous people when some deemed it politic to do otherwise.

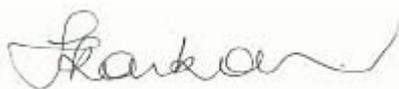
We believe that you could lead the way for others by recognising the Palestinian Al-Nakba of 15 May and moving a bi-partisan motion around that time that would acknowledge the enduring narrative of indigenous Palestinians and the suffering that has been visited on them over the past 60 years; that would acknowledge their courageous journey in their struggle for the right to exist in their own land; that would support the right of Palestinians to seek self-determination, national independence and sovereignty in a free Palestinian state within the 1967 borders; and that would commit Australia to working with international initiatives for a just peace for both peoples.

There is support for such a motion amongst Australians. Voices are being raised in defence of Palestine from many unexpected quarters. The latest has come from the National Council of Churches in Australia and without taking anything away from Israel's accepted and legitimate aspirations, it "affirms the right of the people of Palestine to be freed from more than 40 years of military occupation by Israel, to live within secure internationally-recognised borders without harassment or violence perpetrated by any state or by any others, and to determine democratically their own future."

It is indeed a humanitarian cause that has benefited from the relief pledged by your government and others, especially to those who are suffering the worst excesses under siege in Gaza. But there also has to be a political solution, and until that is resolved, Australia can play its part by taking an even-handed approach that offends neither one side nor the other while cooperating with international efforts seeking a just and peaceful resolution to the conflict.

We hope that you will consider favourably a motion recognising the Palestinian al-Nakba of 15 May, a day that continues to weigh sorrowfully and painfully in the hearts and minds of some 12 million Palestinians around the world.

Yours sincerely,



Sonja Karkar
Women for Palestine
Australians for Palestine



Assoc/Prof Bassam Dally
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on behalf of the organisations who have endorsed this letter

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- Arab Council of Australia NSW
- Australia Manufacturing Workers' Union VIC
- Australian Anti-Bases Campaign Coalition NSW
- Australian Arabic Council VIC
- Australian Arabic Palestinian Support Association NSW
- Australian Friends of Palestine WA
- Australian Muslim Advocates for the Rights of All Humanity QLD
- Australian Palestinian Club NSW
- Australian Peace Committee SA
- Australians for Justice and Peace in Palestine ACT
- Campaign for International Cooperation and Disarmament VIC
- Canterbury-Bankstown Peace Group NSW
- Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace VIC
- Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies NSW
- CFMEU – Brick Tile and Pottery Industry Division VIC
- CFMEU – Construction Division VIC
- Coalition for Justice and Peace in Palestine NSW
- Communist Party of Australia
- Council of Australian Palestinians NSW
- Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education NSW
- Fair Australia NSW
- Fair Go for Palestine QLD
- Friends of Palestine NSW
- Friends of Sabeel, Oceania
- Geelong Catholic Social Justice Committee VIC
- Geelong Trades Hall Council VIC
- General Union of Palestinian Workers NSW
- Grace Church Joondalup WA
- Green Left Weekly VIC
- Japanese for Peace VIC
- Jews Against the Occupation NSW
- Justice for Palestine Matters NSW
- Just Peace QLD
- Maritime Union of Australia NSW
- Maritime Union of Australia VIC
- Melbourne Palestine Solidarity Network VIC
- Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Justice and Peace Centre NSW
- Moreland Peace Group VIC
- Muslim Business Network QLD
- Newcastle Christians for Peace NSW
- No War SA
- Palestine and Jewish Unity QLD
- Palestine.net.au NSW
- Palestinian Community Association VIC
- Pax Christi Australia NSW
- Pax Christi Victoria
- Queensland Palestine Solidarity Campaign QLD
- Rally for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament Inc QLD
- SA Interfaith Network SA
- Socialist Alliance - Newcastle
- Socialist Alliance VIC
- Society of Friends (Quakers) Hunter Valley NSW
- Solidarity VIC
- Students for Palestine (Deakin University) VIC
- Sydney University Arab Students' Association NSW
- The Canberra Ecumenical Working Group on Palestine-Israel ACT
- Uniting Church Council North Melbourne VIC
- Unity for Peace VIC
- Women in Black VIC