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Stop the U.S.-backed war on Gaza!

John Dear | Jan. 13, 2009 On the Road to Peace

The bombing and invasion of Gaza should stop now. It is immoral and impractical; the indiscriminate wounding of children and civilians makes the heart sick. And as is often the case, here is bloodshed and mayhem funded and aided by the United States.

Joining my voice to those of friends around the world, I say: Stop the killings, end the occupation and pursue nonviolent methods of dialogue and cooperation toward a just, peaceful co-existence.

This, to me, is the Christian, nonviolent -- and decently human -- response. My friends and I, we do not support anti-Semitism. The epithet "anti-Israel" doesn't apply to us. We are pro-Peace. Which is to say, we don't plant our feet in one camp or another. We support both the Jewish vision of Shalom and human rights for Palestinian children. We want a nonviolent solution and nonviolent movement toward a nonviolent Mid-East and world so that no more children die. Simple as that.

During the last 17 days, nearly 800 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, say news reports, a quarter of the dead civilians. Over 3,000 have been injured. Gaza's infrastructure has been heavily damaged and humanitarian aid disrupted, if not completely cut off. At the same time, a dozen Israelis have been killed. This is no "fair fight," no war between peers. It's the systematic strangulation of Gaza.

The people of Gaza are vulnerable to begin with. About 80 percent of the 1.5 million people there rely on international food aid. And all of them, under occupation as they are, are reduced to a kind of apartheid, according to President Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Gaza, the massive prison yard -- no one can come or go. Oppression stifles like heavy wool. Life is precarious, human rights a distant dream. Peace cannot flourish in such a time and place. Violence is bound to erupt.

And of course, oppressed people, long steeped in the ways of violence, will reach for desperate measures, such as lobbing rockets. But the Israeli response, out of proportion, has once again set things back. The long-term prospects for peace are on shaky ground. Seeds are now laid for the next generation of wars and incursions.

The policy "eye for eye" was once adopted in ancient Israel to keep violence from spiraling. But it's long abandoned -- it's now a life for an eye, a village for an eye. And now all have become blind in spirit. And many

have died -- except of course politicians and generals and weapons manufacturers. They have become rich and powerful.

An eye for eye does not work. Retaliatory violence, in proportion or out of it, bears no good fruit, as the nonviolent Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. It sows the seeds for further violence, including terrorist attacks against the United States. For thousands of years it has failed to bear fruit in the Middle East. You would think that leaders would have learned this by now.

Something new is needed, some policy of substance and sense. For starters Israel should end its occupation and return the land it stole in 1967. And it should cobble together a two-state system, one that begins the process of building trust and coming upon, not just peaceful coexistence, but of neighborliness. And neighborliness would begin with Israel dismantling its nuclear weapons.

As for the United States, it has long been a promoter of unrest in the region. Without U.S. support in military and economic aid (about $3.5 billion annually) as well as weapons from U.S. military contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Israel could not carry out this invasion or maintain its occupation.

The United States has a role to play. It could pursue nonviolent solutions for a nonviolent society. Of course, the United States would have to become a new kind of society itself, one that stops funding war, dismantles its own arsenals, and covets skill in nonviolence instead of skill in war. But there are many good U.S. citizens already, often shuttled to the margins and ignored, who know a thing or two about making peace and are chafing to go and spread oil on the wounds of the world.

But as things stand, the hope of peace languishes. On Saturday night Jan. 3, the U.S. government blocked a U.N. Security Council statement calling for an immediate cease-fire. The U.S. single-handedly prevented the international community from working to end the killings. Apparently the Bush administration wants the war to continue -- this in spite of a recent poll stating that 71 percent of U.S. citizens want the United States to support neither side but to work for peace and reconciliation, as we did in Northern Ireland.

Meantime Gazans will suffer a lack of medicine, food, fuel and nearly every other staple. If the bombings and occupation don't end, frustrated and scared, they will listen to the voices agitating for violent resistance.

If Israel sincerely wants peace, there is only one road open. They must hear the grievances of the Palestinians, honor their human rights, and give them justice. Policies of the United States. inadvertently undermine Israel's security in the long run and fuel unending retaliatory terrorist attacks.

People of faith and good will around the world have denounced this invasion. Pope Benedict XVI called on the international community to help Israelis and Palestinians to discard the "dead end" of violence and pursue instead "the path of dialogue and negotiations." Jewish leaders like Rabbi Michael Lerner, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Phyllis Bennis, as well as groups like the Jewish Voice for Peace and Justice, Churches for Middle

East Peace, Catholic Relief Services, and Pax Christi USA, have demanded an end to the Israeli attacks on the people of Gaza and the occupation.

But as my cousin peace activist Danny Muller says, the bombing and occupation of Gaza are part of One Occupation -- the imperial first world occupation, led by the U.S. empire, of all disposable, expendable, marginalized people -- -from Gaza to Baghdad to Kabul to Port-au-Prince to Darfur. The whole mentality of imperial occupation, of stealing other people's resources, of denying anyone anywhere their basic human rights for our "national interests" is immoral, illegal, impractical and must end. Indeed, I think we North Americans don't realize that we too are occupied by an imperial military, from the Pentagon to Los Alamos, with its media propaganda, that keeps us acting like slaves to the culture of war and nuclear weapons. The good news of the Gospel, however, announces that the days of occupation are coming to an end.

It always strikes me as odd that people who claim to be so religious in the Middle East and the United States would allow war, injustice, occupation, much less the death of children. The God of Jews, Muslims and Christians is clearly a God of peace, shalom, and salaam, a God who sides with "widows and orphans," a God who condemns war and injustice, a God who does not condone the death of a single person however noble the cause, a God who wants the whole earth to become a promised land of peace. If we seek that living God, we will beat our swords into plowshares, love our neighbors and enemies, and welcome peace first and foremost.

We people of faith and conscience need to do what we can to support those movements and projects for disarmament, justice and reconciliation on all sides so that the Middle East and North America might fulfill their callings to be lands of nonviolence. What we need is a new politics of love, nonviolence and peace that would transform the world's landscape. I hope more and more of us can continue to pursue that universal love, with all its social, economic, political and international implications, and model the religious practice we expect from everyone else.

John Dear has two new books, *A Persistent Peace* (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and *Put Down Your Sword*, a collection of essays on nonviolence and peacemakers such as Cesar Chavez, Joan Baez, Dr. King, Sophie Scholl, Thomas Merton, and Franziska and Franz Jagerstatter. Both books are available from www.amazon.com [1]. For info, see: www.johndear.org [2].

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