

Emergency Motion: Stop the humanitarian crisis in Palestine – an immediate ceasefire and end to the siege of Gaza

Conference notes that on 27 December 2008 Israel launched devastating air raids on the Gaza Strip, killing more than 300 people in the first day, one of the deadliest days for Gaza residents since Israeli occupation began 41 years ago.

In total, more than 1,100 Palestinians have been killed over the past 20 days of Israel's military bombardment of Gaza, and more than 5,000 have been injured. 13 Israelis have been killed, including three civilians by Hamas rocket attacks.

On 6 January over 40 Palestinians were killed when an Israeli air strike hit a United Nations (UN) school that was sheltering refugees who had fled their homes to escape Israeli bombing. Earlier that day three people were killed when another UN school was attacked. On 15 January the UN's headquarters in Gaza was bombed by Israeli fighter planes and burned down. This destroyed vital emergency food supplies that the UN was distributing to Palestinian refugees.

Gaza has a population of 1.5million people and is one of the most densely populated places on earth. A high proportion of those Palestinians killed or injured in Gaza have been civilians. The International Committee of the Red Cross has accused Israel of failing to honour its obligation under international law to treat and evacuate injured civilians in Gaza.

For 18 months prior to this attack, Israel imposed an ever-tightening blockade on Gaza, preventing basic essentials such as food, medicine and fuel entering the territory. This has hampered aid workers response to devastating Israeli military aggression in Gaza, prevented ambulances from responding to the victims of bombings, and denied doctors from treating many of the injured. Another consequence of the blockade has been that many hospitals lack essential medical supplies which have resulted in even more patients dying.

Aid agencies, UN representatives, humanitarian organisations and UNISON have called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza as the only way to prevent more civilian casualties. The UN has warned of a humanitarian crisis as Palestinians are denied access to electricity and heating. Save the Children has reported a severe shortage of food. The World Bank has warned of a public health crisis as almost the entire population of Gaza has been without clean water and the sewage system verges towards collapse.

In the past week thousands of Israeli soldiers and tanks have launched a full ground offensive against the Palestinians whose Hamas government – democratically elected in free and fair elections in January 2006 – Israel does not approve of.

Conference believes the Geneva Convention puts protection of civilians from the effects of hostilities at the heart of international humanitarian law. Signatories of the Convention are obliged to ensure other signatories respect the Convention.

The military action by Israel violates international humanitarian law, in particular:

- the siege enforced by Israel constitutes collective punishment of a whole population for the actions of a select number of combatants;
- the aerial bombardment of built-up civilian areas has massively hit innocent civilians, a protected population under the Geneva Convention;
- the destruction of vast sections of Gaza's civil society infrastructure from police stations to water purification and power plants to television stations is grossly disproportionate and fails tests of reasonableness under international law.

The British government's response to Israel's actions has been disappointing and falls short of its full influence and obligations to act.

There can be no military solution to the situation in Gaza – only political negotiations can achieve a lasting settlement that provides a just peace for both the Israelis and the Palestinian people – and diplomacy has to be pursued.

Conference instructs the National Black Members' Committee to work with the NEC, Labour Link and International Committee to:

1. Condemn Israel's attacks on Gaza and the siege that preceded it which amount to collective punishment of the Palestinian people;
2. Send a letter to David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary, calling on him to demand the Israeli government immediately ends its bombing and siege, call for an immediate ceasefire, to make the space for Hamas to also end the rockets being fired at Israel;
3. Urge Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister, to directly intervene by calling in the Israeli Ambassador to express revulsion at the massacre of so many innocent people in Gaza; and stop Britain arming Israel while it continues to ignore calls for an end to the occupation and violates international law and the Geneva Convention;
4. Lobby the British government to dispatch urgent humanitarian and medical aid to the Palestinian people;
5. Support the demonstrations against Israel's attacks and occupation of Gaza and Palestine, and encourage UNISON Black members to attend;
6. Promote dialogue and anti-racist education to ensure no single community is unfairly targeted for the outrages committed by the Israeli government and military;
7. Work with Palestine Solidarity Campaign to build a broad coalition to campaign for a just solution for the Palestinian people, based on an end to the brutal Israeli occupation, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Submitted by National Black Members' Committee