

Gaza must be rebuilt now by Jimmy Carter

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We can wait no longer to restart the peace process. The human suffering demands urgent relief.

It is generally recognised that the Middle East peace process is in the doldrums, almost moribund. Israeli settlement expansion within Palestine continues, and PLO leaders refuse to join in renewed peace talks without a settlement freeze, knowing that no Arab or Islamic nation will accept any comprehensive agreement while Israel retains control of East Jerusalem.

US objections have impeded Egyptian efforts to resolve differences between Hamas and Fatah that could lead to 2010 elections. With this stalemate, PLO leaders have decided that President Mahmoud Abbas will continue in power until elections can be held – a decision condemned by many Palestinians.

Even though Syria and Israel under the Olmert government had almost reached an agreement with Turkey's help, the current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, rejects Turkey as a mediator on the Golan Heights. No apparent alternative is in the offing.

The UN general assembly approved a report issued by its human rights council that called on Israel and the Palestinians to investigate charges of war crimes during the recent Gaza war, but positive responses seem unlikely.

In summary: UN resolutions, Geneva conventions, previous agreements between Israelis and Palestinians, the Arab peace initiative, and official policies of the US and other nations are all being ignored. In the meantime, the demolition of Arab houses, expansion of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and Palestinian recalcitrance threaten any real prospect for peace.

Of more immediate concern, those under siege in Gaza face another winter of intense personal suffering. I visited Gaza after the devastating January war and observed homeless people huddling in makeshift tents, under plastic sheets, or in caves dug into the debris of their former homes. Despite offers by Palestinian leaders and international agencies to guarantee no use of imported materials for even defensive military purposes, cement, lumber, and panes of glass are not being permitted to pass entry points into Gaza. The US and other nations have accepted this abhorrent situation without forceful corrective action.

I have discussed ways to assist the citizens of Gaza with a number of Arab and European leaders and their common response is that the Israeli blockade makes any assistance impossible. Donors point out that they have provided enormous aid funds to build schools, hospitals and factories, only to see them destroyed in a few hours by precision bombs and missiles. Without international guarantees, why risk similar losses in the future?

It is time to face the fact that, for the past 30 years, no one nation has been able or willing to break the impasse and induce the disputing parties to comply with international law. We cannot wait any longer. Israel has long argued that it cannot negotiate with terrorists, yet has had an entire year without terrorism and still could not negotiate. President Obama has promised active involvement of the US government, but no formal peace talks have begun and no

comprehensive framework for peace has been proposed. Individually and collectively, the world powers must act.

One recent glimmer of life has been the 8 December decision of EU foreign ministers to restate the long-standing basic requirements for peace commonly accepted within the international community, including that Israel's pre-1967 boundaries will prevail unless modified by a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians. A week later the new EU foreign policy chief, Baroness Catherine Ashton, reiterated this statement in even stronger terms and called for the international Quartet to be "reinvigorated". This is a promising prospect.

President Obama was right to insist on a two-state solution and a complete settlement freeze as the basis for negotiations. Since Israel has rejected the freeze and the Palestinians won't negotiate without it, a logical step is for all Quartet members (the US, EU, Russia and UN) to support the Obama proposal by declaring any further expansion of settlements illegal and refusing to veto UN security council decisions to condemn such settlements. This might restrain Israel and also bring Palestinians to the negotiating table.

At the same time, the Quartet should join with Turkey and invite Syria and Israel to negotiate a solution to the Golan Heights dispute.

Without ascribing blame to any of the disputing parties, the Quartet also should begin rebuilding Gaza by organising relief efforts under the supervision of an active special envoy, overseeing a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and mediating an opening of the crossings. The cries of homeless and freezing people demand immediate relief.

This is a time for bold action, and the season for forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

Jimmy Carter was president of the United States from 1977 to 1981 and is a member of the Elders.