

*****PRESS STATEMENT*****

THE GAZA CONFLICT: AN OXFORD UNIVERSITY LED MEDIA RESPONSE:

THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY SPEAKS OUT

Israeli bombardment has levied a hideous toll on the impoverished population of Gaza, 80 per cent of whom were already reliant on UN handouts prior to the current onslaught. So far, conservative estimates from the UN suggest 3000 have been killed or injured by the offensive. Politics aside, the sheer devastation both in terms of infrastructure and human carnage are facts that exist independently of prejudice and misconceptions about the Middle East conflict. People are dying in horrific and scandalous numbers. UN general assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann has described Israel's action as a 'monstrosity' and we can only concur with this description.

Israel has fostered a humanitarian crisis in the most overcrowded strip of land on earth. Gaza's 1.5 million citizens are victims of a punitive war which has cost the lives of innocent men, women and children. In addition, Israel has struck at religious sites, medical facilities and academic institutions, most recently the UN-run school. As students and academics, we recognize the importance of the now destroyed Islamic University as the first and most important institution of higher education in Gaza. It served more than 20,000 students, 60 percent of whom are women. Since Palestinian students from Gaza are barred by Israel from studying either in the West Bank or abroad, the educational significance of the Islamic University cannot be overstated and its destruction contributes to conditions of dismal despair already reigning in the area.

The Oxford University Islamic Society would like to join hands with other Oxford University societies and over 100 prominent academics in unequivocally condemning Israeli excesses over the last 12 days. Whilst we condemn the loss of civilian life in Israel due to rocket fire, the response has been utterly disproportionate. With the recent ground incursion, we can be certain scores more will undoubtedly perish.

We are witnessing a criminal and belligerent disregard for human life. We believe there can never be a military solution to this impasse. The solution lies in a bilateral desire for a just peace, only achievable through the cessation of violence and the instigation of dialogue. If the election of Hamas was an act of desperation on the part of many Palestinians, Israel ought to consider who exactly might replace them after the carnage they are inflicting on its population is over.

We commend Gordon Brown and David Miliband's call for an urgent ceasefire and immediate halt to all violence, reiterated by a unanimous UN Security Council press statement and the EU. However, the international community must move beyond statements and **take action** to alleviate the suffering in Gaza and foster a **bilateral diplomatic process to resolve the current crisis and its underlying causes**.

The United States may be alone in its ability to restrain Israel. We urge the existing and incoming United States Administration to recognise and respond to its position of responsibility in this conflict: President-Elect Barack Obama needs to rise to the first major challenge of his career, and effectively implement the change we are all hoping to see.

The blockade on Gaza should be lifted **without delay**, allowing for the delivery of *full* humanitarian aid. The border with Israel should be opened, and remain open. Israel has a responsibility to prevent further loss of life and we urge Hamas to immediately desist from launching rockets into Israel.

Israel must understand that the only way to stop the rockets, and gain lasting security, is to end its illegal siege and occupation and agree to a just peace. History shows that an oppressed people will inevitably turn to violence, however wrong this may seem.

Finally, we implore all British media outlets to report the war on Gaza in a fair and balanced way; namely by dispelling the illusion that this is a war of equals. Palestinian anger must be understood in the context of Israeli occupation and the over 18 month long siege of Gaza. Israeli media statements need to be exposed to far tougher and informed questioning. Journalists and media outlets have a responsibility to pressure the Israeli government into allowing them into Gaza to witness their actions first hand. Merely reproducing Israeli reports and footage because this is what is on offer is not acceptable and is irresponsible journalism.

We are ready to aid the media by offering a different perspective on the conflict, in the hope that our contributions will help achieve fairer and more balanced reporting.

Note to editors: Some of the counter-signatories are available for interview and media response. Please contact president@ouisoc.com to co-ordinate this.

A LIST OF SIGNATORIES APPEARS ON THE NEXT PAGE

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