
Cabinet Member Meeting
Council

9 September 2010
14 September 2010

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member (Policy and Governance) – Councillor John Mutton

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Assistant Chief Executive

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title:

Response to petition submitted on the end of the siege of Gaza

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

A petition about ending the siege of Gaza was submitted to Council on 6 July 2010 by Councillor Nellist on behalf of 287 signatories. The petition asks Coventry City Council to protest to the Israeli authorities on behalf of the city about the killing of aid volunteers during the attack on a flotilla of ships attempting to break the blockade of Gaza and to demand the end of the blockade. The petition was referred to the Cabinet Member for Policy and Governance. In the intervening period there has been some easing of the blockade of Gaza and the resumption of direct Israel-Palestinian peace talks in September 2010 has been announced.

This report sets out a brief summary of the background to the current position in Gaza and of the UK government's position, which is in-line with the petition, and asks the Cabinet Member for Policy and Governance to recommend to Council that he should write as Leader of the Council to the Israeli Ambassador to deplore the loss of life during the assault on the Gaza flotilla; welcome the resumption of direct peace talks and ask Israel to lift the restrictions on access to Gaza (as set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1860).

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member for Policy and Governance is asked to recommend to Council that he should write as Leader of the Council to the Israeli ambassador to:

- deplore the loss of life during the assault on the Gaza flotilla in May 2010;
- welcome the resumption of direct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks;
- ask that Israel lifts its restrictions on access to Gaza in compliance with UN Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

List of Appendices included:

None

Other useful background papers:

UN Security Council resolution 1860 (2009) – www.un.org

<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/204/32/PDF/N0920432.pdf?OpenElement>

Foreign Secretary's statement on Gaza Flotilla

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=News&id=22300485>

Foreign Secretary's statement to the House of Commons on Gaza Flotilla

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=PressS&id=22313385>

Has it or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it, or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

Yes

Report title:

Response to petition submitted to the council on the end of the siege of Gaza

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 A petition on ending the siege of Gaza bearing 287 signatures was submitted to Council at its meeting on 6 July 2010 by Councillor Nellist. The petition was referred to the Cabinet Member for Policy and Governance for consideration at his next Cabinet Member meeting.
- 1.2 The petition specifically states, "*We the undersigned, call on Coventry City Council to protest to the Israeli authorities on behalf of the city at the killing of nine aid volunteers, and the injuring of many more, who were on the flotilla of ships on 31 May 2010 seeking to break the Israeli government's four year blockade of Gaza; and demand that the economic and military blockade be ended, and the one and a half million people of Gaza be allowed access to goods and the freedom to move.*"

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 The domestic and international political background to the current situation in the Gaza Strip is very complex. The United Nations recognises the Gaza Strip as land which constitutes an integral part of territory occupied by Israel in 1967 following the Six-Day War and as one of the units forming the Palestinian territories.
- 2.2 The Gaza Strip and its current boundaries came into existence in 1949 as a result of the armistice agreement following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The Gaza Strip has land borders with Israel and Egypt and a sea border on the Mediterranean and has a population of 1.5 million people.
- 2.3 Under Israeli military administration until 1994, following the Palestinian-Israeli Oslo-Accords much of the Gaza Strip was transferred to the Palestinians through a phased transfer of governmental authority. After a long period of further unrest all Israeli settlements and military bases were dismantled in 2005 and Gaza became fully part of the Palestine Authority.
- 2.4 The political group Hamas won the Palestinian Parliamentary elections in January 2006. Hamas was not prepared to commit to previous agreements made between the Palestinian government and Israel and as result economic sanctions were imposed on the Palestinian National Authority. Rising tensions between Hamas and Fatah, the other largest political group, resulted in fighting breaking out in December 2006.
- 2.5 The conflict has continued and, despite a brief three month period of national unity government in 2007 achieved through a Saudi—brokered agreement, has resulted in the territory controlled by the Palestinian Authority being *de facto* divided into two entities: the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and the West Bank governed by the Palestinian National Authority. The existence of the two factions/territories, both of which claim the other is not a legitimate regime, has further complicated the situation in Palestine, as support for either or both from the other Middle Eastern states and members of the international community varies according to domestic religious and political circumstances; and international relations and ambitions.
- 2.6 As the conflict between Hamas and Fatah continued in 2008 in both the Gaza Strip and West Bank, rocket launches from Gaza into Israel intensified. On 27 December 2008 Israeli forces attacked targets in Gaza beginning the 22-day Gaza War. On 8 January the United

- 2.7 The Gaza Strip has been subjected to restricted movement of people and goods to a greater or lesser extent since June 1989. Barrier fences were constructed on both the Israeli and Egyptian borders with Gaza. Israel controls Gaza Strip's northern borders as well as its territorial waters and airspace whilst Egypt controls Gaza Strip's southern border, under an agreement with Israel. Both Egypt and Israel largely sealed their borders with the Gaza Strip following the Hamas takeover in June 2007. A large number of tunnels were constructed under the Egyptian-Gaza border and both Israel and Egypt reported smuggling of explosives and arms.
- 2.8 The blockade of the Gaza Strip has continued since the war ended in January 2009. Israel has said this is now primarily economic but the movement of people is still severely restricted and concerns have been raised by a wide range of organisations including the United Nations that even humanitarian aid including food fuel and medical treatment is not reaching the people of Gaza. Dual use items that could be used to manufacture weapons including steel pipes and fertiliser have not been allowed in. In March 2010, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that the blockade of Gaza was causing "*unacceptable suffering*" and that families were living in "*unacceptable, unsustainable conditions.*"
- 2.9 In 30 May 2010 a flotilla of ships set out from international waters close to Cyprus to break the Israeli naval blockade of Gaza. Organised by an Islamic aid group from Turkey, the IHH, this was the tenth and largest attempt by the Free Gaza Movement to ship supplies to Gaza and included eight ships registered in a number of countries carrying around 660 passengers from 37 nations and some 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid including: medical supplies, food, generators and building supplies such as cement which are articles banned by Israel as part of the Gaza blockade.
- 2.10 Israel requested that the ships dock at the port of Ashdod to have items permitted delivered by land which was refused. The Israeli Navy made contact with six ships from the flotilla on 31 May 2010 and boarded them. In the resulting confrontation to seize the ships nine activists from the flotilla were shot and killed; eight were Turkish and one was a US citizen. Having boarded the flotilla, Israeli naval forces towed the vessels to Ashdod where the activists were detained and then deported.
- 2.11 There was widespread international reaction to the event and the UN Security Council formally condemned "*those acts which resulted in the loss of lives*". In his statement on the Gaza flotilla on 31 May 2010, the UK Foreign Secretary William Hague said "*I deplore the loss of life during the interception of the Gaza flotilla...this news underlines the need to lift the restrictions on access to Gaza, in line with UNSCR 1860. The closure is unacceptable and counter-productive...I call on the Government of Israel to open the crossings to allow unfettered access for aid to Gaza, and address the serious concerns about the deterioration in the humanitarian and economic situation and about the effect on a generation of young Palestinians.*"
- 2.12 Following the Gaza flotilla raid, Israel and Egypt faced mounting international pressure and since June 2010 there has been an easing of the blockade although all goods bound by sea are still inspected. There is current speculation that the US, United Nations, EU and Russia are jointly consulting with Israel; the Palestinian Authority and Egypt on a fundamental change of policy towards the Gaza strip. In the meantime it was announced

- 2.13 The UK government's continues to oppose to the blockade of Gaza. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, has been forthright in his condemnation of the situation in Gaza saying in the House on Commons on 28 June 2010, "*Everybody knows that we are not going to sort out the problem of the Middle East peace process while there is effectively a giant open prison.*" More recently whilst on a visit to Turkey on 27 July 2010 the Prime Minister called again for Israel to relax its restrictions on Gaza, "*the situation in Gaza has to change. Humanitarian goods and people must be allowed to flow in both directions. Gaza cannot and must not be allowed to remain a prison camp.*" He also strongly condemned Israel for the attack on the flotilla, "*The Israeli attack on the Gaza flotilla was completely unacceptable.*" The UK government also gives aid to support Palestinians with £243 million over three years pledged to the Occupied Palestinian Territories from 2008 and £47million allocated to provide emergency aid to Gaza in 2009.
- 2.14 Although it is extremely unlikely that any action taken by the City Council alone will directly result in the ending of the blockade of Gaza by Israel, the council's voice would be added to a considerable number of others including those of the UK government and the United Nations. It is therefore recommended that, if the Council chooses to respond to the petition, it should ask the Leader of the Council to write to the Israeli Ambassador to deplore the killing of the civilians on the Gaza flotilla; welcome the resumption of direct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and asks that Israel lifts the restrictions on access to Gaza in compliance with UN Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1 There has not been any consultation undertaken on the contents of this report.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 A letter will be sent to the Israeli ambassador to the UK once the recommendations have been agreed.

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Legal Services

5.1 Financial implications

This report has no direct financial implications.

5.2 Legal implications

The actions proposed by this report support the policies of the UK government and the United Nations Security Council. There are no direct legal implications.

6. Other implications

- 6.1 A lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict can only be achieved by peaceful means. The city of Coventry, including the City Council, has worked to promote peace and reconciliation for many years including in the Middle East. Coventry Cathedral is currently working through its Community of the Cross of Nails in Israel/Palestine in eight centres. The city of Coventry has commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day for a number of years and the Israeli ambassador was welcomed to Coventry as one of the guests at the national Holocaust Memorial event on 27 January 2009. The proposed letter to the Israeli

ambassador about the current situation in Gaza needs to be seen within the context of this wider work being undertaken with both Palestine and Israel to bring peace to the Middle East.

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / LAA (or Coventry SCS)?

The Council is committed to the promotion of peace and reconciliation both abroad and at home.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

There are not considered to be any risks associated with the actions proposed in this report.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

None identified.

6.4 Equalities / EIA

The report will not impact directly on the citizens of Coventry so an equality impact assessment has not been undertaken. The escalation of violence in Gaza has resulted in heavy civilian casualties and the blockade has had a significant impact on the health and well being of all civilians living in Gaza, including children and older people; as it impacts on the provision of medical treatment; food; fuel and humanitarian assistance.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None identified.

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None anticipated.

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