

16 June 2010



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
House of Commons
London
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Dear Tessa

Thank you for your letter of 2 June to the Foreign Secretary on behalf of your constituents, about the interception by Israeli forces of a flotilla of vessels carrying aid to Gaza. I am replying as Minister responsible for our relations with the Middle East.

As the Foreign Secretary set out in the House of Commons on 2 June, the British government deeply deplores the loss of life that has occurred. It is a matter of grave concern to us that the Israeli actions should have ended in such heavy and tragic loss of life.

The Government's first responsibility was to ensure the safety of the British nationals who were involved. We immediately pressed Israel to provide full information on British nationals detained during their operation. This was made more difficult because many of those on board the boats did not have passports. However British consular staff visited the prison where the flotilla passengers were being detained, provided consular support to British detainees, and pressed for their release at the earliest possible opportunity. As far as we are aware, all of the British nationals involved have now left Israel.

We have underlined the need for a full, credible, impartial and independent investigation into the events of 31 May. We have made clear that we want to see a process that ensures full accountability and commands the confidence of the international community, including international participation.

Israel's announcement of an inquiry headed by former Supreme Court judge Yaakov Tirkel is an important step forward. We welcome the appointment of Lord Trimble as an international observer. Clearly it is very important that it is a truly independent inquiry and a thorough investigation that the international community can respect.

We will be better able to draw further conclusions once the conduct of the inquiry becomes clearer. What is important now is that the inquiry is able to proceed swiftly, transparently and rigorously.

These events have captured the world's attention, but they should not be viewed in isolation. They arose from the unacceptable and unsustainable situation in Gaza, which is a cause of public concern here in the UK and around the world. It has long been the view of the Government that restrictions on Gaza should be lifted; a view confirmed by UN Security Council Resolution 1860 which called for the sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and called on states to alleviate the humanitarian and economic situation persisting there.

It is essential that there be unfettered access not only to meet the humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza, but to enable the reconstruction of homes and livelihoods and permit trade to take place. The Palestinian economy, whether in Gaza or the West Bank, is an essential part of a viable Palestinian state which we hope will one day live alongside Israel in peace and security.

We are doing what we can to offer practical support to the people of Gaza. Following the end of the Gaza conflict in 2009 the UK pledged £26.8 million to the people of Gaza for humanitarian aid and early recovery activities, of which over £24 million has already been spent, providing, for example, food for nearly one million people.

A solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is firmly in the national interests of the UK, as well as those in the region. We want the new generation of Palestinians to grow up in hope, not despair, believing in a peaceful settlement with Israel; not impoverished and susceptible to terrorist recruitment. We want the next generation of Israelis to live free from the fear of rocket fire and able to enjoy peaceful relations with their Arab neighbours. Whilst we cannot deliver this for either side ourselves, as friends to both Israelis and Palestinians we will seek to buttress the diplomatic initiative of President Obama's Administration and the proximity talks that are underway, and we will be strong supporters of those building the institutions of a future Palestinian state while actively exploring with our European partners the scope for further EU action.

Yours sincerely



ALISTAIR BURT