



Foreign &  
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*From The Minister of State*

20 April 2009

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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 4 March to the Foreign Secretary on behalf of your constituents about the situation in Gaza. I am replying as the Minister responsible for the Middle East.

The EU Presidency on behalf of all Member States called the Israeli military measures "disproportionate". We support this view. From the outset we made it clear that we did not judge such a response to advance the peace process. We have been similarly clear in our condemnation of rocket attacks by Hamas on innocent civilians. We believe it is important to condemn all loss of innocent life, whether Israeli or Palestinian. We focused very hard on ensuring that in our response to Gaza we made clear our concerns about the actions of both sides. Our core objective remains securing a viable two-state solution and all our actions are focused on achieving that.

We welcome the ceasefire in Gaza. From the beginning of the Gaza conflict, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary argued for an urgent, immediate and sustainable ceasefire. The Foreign Secretary was at the centre of the negotiations that led to the 8 January passing of the UN Security Council resolution 1860. But the ceasefire remains fragile. For it to succeed and last, the focus must now be on less restrictive access for humanitarian and reconstruction supplies and the removal of unexploded ordnance.

Imposing sanctions is not the best way to engage or to influence Israel. It would advance neither the UK's influence nor the prospects for peace in the Middle East. It has not been clear what equipment was used by the Israeli Defence Force in Gaza. We have therefore been undertaking our own assessment based upon a variety of sources. The Amnesty report is a helpful contributor to that. When that process is complete we will make the information available to Parliament. I made this clear at the Foreign Affairs Committee evidence session, on 4 March.

As the Foreign Secretary said to the House of Commons on 19 January, where there is a clear risk of exports being used either for internal repression or external aggression, the export licence is not granted. Our record on exporting equipment to Israel has recently undergone judicial review, and the courts found no evidence to suggest that the UK is not properly applying EU and national export controls. The UK has refused export licenses to Israel in the past. In the last five years between nine and 26 applications have been refused each year.

The Foreign Secretary reiterated our current policy in the House of Commons on 31 March, stating that we take seriously all allegations of war crimes and have consistently said that



they should all be properly investigated. At the moment there are investigations by the Israeli government, the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross and we shall judge the need for any action after the results of those inquiries have been made public.

We supported the UN Secretary General's decision to set up a Board of Inquiry into the shelling of UN premises in Gaza. The Prime Minister offered Ban Ki-moon the UK's support during a meeting on 15 January. The UK will consider very carefully the results of investigations once they are available.

The decision to upgrade the EU's relations with Israel was taken against the background of the EU and Israel's shared interest in advancing the Peace Process. This is at the heart of our relations with Israel, and others states in the region. The EU has stressed its desire to arrive at a similar agreement with the Palestinians. However, the European Commission has halted negotiations with Israel on a new agreement to succeed the current EU-Israel Action Plan. The Commission and has made the following comments: "it is clear that the recent escalation of the situation in Gaza has not contributed to an atmosphere conducive to concluding the upgrading process with Israel" and that "at the present time, the priority in our relations with Israel remains focussed on Gaza and in particular the issue of access and provision of humanitarian aid". The EU will be revisiting this issue in due course.

The insecurity faced by the Israelis, and the indignities faced by Palestinians are an indictment of our collective failure to bring about the only solution that is possible in the Middle East: a solution creating a viable Palestinian state living alongside a secure Israel. We all have to contribute to achieving this.

Yours sincerely

BILL RAMMELL

(Approved by the Minister and signed in his absence by the Private Secretary)