



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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September 15, 2016

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

As Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I write to add my voice to those organizations, including some Jewish ones, who decry the injustices being perpetrated against Palestinians by the Israeli government in the West Bank village of Susya. These Susya residents are at imminent risk of losing their homes, their livelihoods, and their dignity.

Susya is home to 55 Palestinian families. They have been living in this location for the past 30 years, but have been forcibly resettled several times. In 1986, the Israeli government declared the main residential area of Susya an archaeological site and drove out all of its residents. Most of the families relocated to nearby land, which was later labeled as Area C, but they were displaced again, in 2001 and in 2011, by the Israeli government on the grounds they lacked building permits.

In fact, all of the homes and community structures occupied by Palestinians in Area C, nearly half of which were funded by international donors, have outstanding demolition orders. Israel retains full jurisdiction over planning and zoning in Area C. Planning proposals presented by Palestinians to the Israeli government to request the issuance of building permits on their own land have been continually and arbitrarily denied. Thus, the Palestinians live in tents and survive off basic agriculture.

The arbitrary nature of Israeli government action in the case of Susya is similar to actions Israelis have taken in the Cremisan Valley. There they confiscated the Palestinian agricultural lands of over 50 Christian families and are building a wall that encroaches on a Salesian monastery, convent and school, and may threaten to separate them from each other and the people they serve. After a court decision stopping construction of the wall was overturned, work on the separation wall in the Cremisan has intensified. Bulldozers mowed down the owner's olive groves, cranes are now implanting sections of concrete, eight meters high in this valley.

The construction of a separation wall and the unjust confiscation of land belonging to Christian families in Cremisan, like the forcible displacement of the villagers in Susya, ultimately harms the prospect for a peace agreement. The ongoing policy of settlement construction and development in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, designation of land for exclusive Israeli use, and denial of Palestinian development, including the recent high rate of demolitions, is steadily eroding the viability of the two-state solution.

Letter to Secretary of State Kerry
September 15, 2016
Page 2

We must not be indifferent to the problems in Israel and Palestine. In April 2016, Pope Francis sent a message to the participants in a major peacebuilding conference stating that, “Conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced. Of course, the purpose is not to remain trapped within a framework of conflict, thus losing our overall perspective and our sense of the profound unity of reality. Rather, we must accept and tackle conflict so as to resolve it and transform it into a link in that new process which ‘peacemakers’ initiate.”

We know of your past tireless efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and commend you for your dedication. Our position is consistent with EU diplomats on the ground and with several Jewish groups in the United States in urging you to pressure Israel to stop its settlement activities and to protect the innocent families of Susya and Cremisan. As you know, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has long supported a two-state solution, a secure and recognized Israel living in peace alongside a viable and independent Palestinian state. But actions by Israel, such as the separation barrier and settlement expansion that constricts more and more communities in the West Bank, makes the possibility of a future peaceful resolution less likely, putting both Palestinians and Israeli citizens at risk.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oscar Cantú', written in a cursive style.

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace