

**PUBLIC STATEMENT by the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) on behalf of the churches listed below.**

**20 October 2023**

**End the armed conflict, protect civilians, free the hostages**

The NCCA President calls for peace in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.

“Our prayers are for peace and an end to armed conflict,” says Rev John Gilmore, President of NCCA.

“We reject completely the continuing use of strike weapons that are also impacting vulnerable populations and civilian infrastructure including homes, hospitals and clinics in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.”

“This current violent conflict is a cause of immense sadness for us all. We must protect civilians and free the hostages”, Rev Gilmore says.

The churches of the Middle East region are urgently appealing for the immediate cessation of the deadly violence and for Hamas and Israel to de-escalate the situation by ceasing their attacks.

Says Rev Gilmore, “the conflict between Israel and Palestinian armed groups have inevitable tragic consequences for the people who live in the region. Gaza is one of the most populated areas of the world and over 1 million people have fled south. People in Israel living near the border with Gaza are also fleeing. Too many innocent civilians have lost their lives in the past 12 days.”

“We are praying for all affected by this crisis, Israelis and Palestinians alike, and for a peaceful resolution to this conflict,” Rev Gilmore says.

NCCA’s international aid and development agency, Act for Peace, is accepting donations to support their local partner of 15 years, the Near East Council of Churches (NECC) in Gaza. Clinic staff have stayed behind to continue to provide medical care to those Palestinians who can’t evacuate – including children, the elderly and pregnant women.

The NECC runs three health clinics in Gaza’s vulnerable neighbourhoods and has been handling a large influx of casualties, focusing on critical immediate medical assistance and trauma treatment.

Dr Lubna, the Head of the NECC Health Department spoke with Act for Peace last week. “There is a severe shortage of drugs and medical supplies facing the hospitals in Gaza. The electricity being cut off has affected the operation of medical equipment, particularly oxygen pumps.”

In a short update this week NECC staff report that “Hospitals are flooded with dead and injured people. Medical teams are helpless. The death toll among civilians has increased dramatically and most of them are women, children, and elders.”

NCCA welcomes the Australian Government's announcement of an initial \$10 million in humanitarian assistance for civilians affected by the conflict in Gaza and that the Foreign Minister, Senator Penny Wong, has stated that the Government stands ready to provide further support.

"We fully support the Australian Government's call for the international community to work for the establishment of a corridor to enable humanitarian needs to be met in Gaza and for the protection of, and unimpeded access for, humanitarian workers who are delivering lifesaving support," says Rev Gilmore.

The Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem issued a statement on 13 October, which urged immediate actions to address the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The situation at the Gaza strip is unbearable without access to water, food, medical support, and electricity. As tensions continue to rise, more innocent and vulnerable people are paying the ultimate price, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches have pointed out.

Many church aid and relief agencies are accepting donations to support their local partners to respond to the escalating humanitarian needs in the region.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has called for respect for international law—including the Geneva Convention—international humanitarian law, and for human rights to be respected and upheld to protect all civilians and for the immediate release of all hostages held in Gaza.

WCC General Secretary Rev Jerry Pillay said in a statement on Sunday: "We call upon the State of Israel with the support of the international community, to allow humanitarian support to enter Gaza so that millions of innocent civilians, including many children, may receive medical treatment and basic supplies."

Rev Pillay underlined the urgent need to act. "Moreover, we call on all parties to de-escalate this war in order to save innocent lives while serving the cause of justice."

Rev Pillay concluded: "We call on all leaders to work for just peace in the Holy Land. Only justice will lead to peace, safety, and security for all."

**ENDS**

**\*Public Statement from NCCA President, Rev John Gilmore, on behalf of Anglican Church of Australia, Antiochian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Assyrian Church of the East, Chinese Methodist Church of Australia, Churches of Christ in Australia, Congregational Federation of Australia and New Zealand, Coptic Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, Indian Orthodox Church, Quakers Australia, The Salvation Army, Uniting Church in Australia, Australian Baptist Ministries.**