

**Statement by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Leader of the High Level Fact-Finding Mission
into events at Beit Hanoun on 8 November 2006
Press Conference, Gaza, 29 May 2008**

We were appointed by the Human Rights Council as a fact-finding mission to investigate the attack on November 8 2006 in Beit Hanoun which left 19 people dead. We have a three point mandate: the assessment of the situation of victims, addressing the needs of survivors and to make recommendations on ways and means to protect Palestinian civilians against any further Israeli assaults. The mission returns to Geneva tomorrow and we will be reporting to the Human Rights Council at its session in September, so these are impressions on our part for it is to the Council first that we are obliged to present our report.

We have tried three times in 18 months to secure the cooperation of the Israeli Government to no avail, and in the end we were forced to come to Gaza through Egypt.

We want to begin by thanking the Government of Egypt for their facilitation of our mission. We also want to thank all of the United Nations personnel for their logistical support. We want to say thank you also to the UN in Egypt and to the Secretariat of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for their efficient and friendly help, as well as to the interpreters who have assisted us. We want to thank all the people we have met here in Gaza, members of NGOs, but especially the survivors and victims of the attack itself. I also want to express my deep appreciation to Professor Christine Chinkin, my co-expert on this mission.

All we had heard about the conditions in Gaza - the deprivation, the sense of despair, the lack of economic activity – had not prepared us for the stark reality we saw. We saw a forlorn, deserted, desolate and eerie place. Hardly any pedestrians as would be the case in a more normal setting. We were struck particularly by the absence of the sounds of children shrieking and playing. Usually, when there is a convoy in a normal situation, children will rush out to wave, to be funny and to laugh. We saw none of this. There was no hustle and bustle as in a normal urban setting. There are hardly any vehicles on the road because of the scarcity of fuel. We saw more donkey- and horse-drawn carts.

We are in a state of shock, exacerbated by what we subsequently heard from the victims and survivors of the Beit Hanoun massacre. For us, the entire situation is abominable. We believe that ordinary Israeli citizens would not support this blockade, this siege if they knew what it meant for ordinary people like themselves. No, they would not support a policy which limits fuel supplies or automatically cuts off the electricity supply. They would not support a policy which jeopardizes the lives of ordinary men and women in hospital, that cuts off water and food from hospitals jeopardizing the lives of babies. No, they would not support a policy that results in what happened in Beit Hanoun on 8 November 2006, when a mother scooped up the brains of her baby lying with its skull cracked open by an Israeli shell, the same mother rushing out into the street to find her son staring at his bowels hanging out and then seeing him scoop them up and shove them back into his abdomen. No, they would not.

As a matter of principle, Professor Chinkin and I wanted to go to Israel to hear directly from the Israeli authorities their version of the events. We wanted to meet any other interested parties and NGOs. But we also wanted to go to Sderot to meet with victims and survivors of the Qassam rockets. We care about all people. That is why we told Mr Hanijeh that the firing of those rockets is a gross violation of human rights, and asked for them to stop the firing.

We are the descendents of Abraham: Jews, Christians and Muslims. We revere the teaching of scripture. And so we call on Israel to end the siege, the blockade.

Why?

First, because it is a gross violation of human rights. In terms of the scripture that Jews and Christians alike invoke, the blockade is contrary to the teaching of those scriptures. Those scriptures speak about a God: a God of the Exodus, a God notoriously biased in favour of the weak, of the oppressed, of the suffering, of the orphan, of the widow, of the alien. And this God will not be mocked! The God who sided with the slaves against the Pharaoh, the God who sided with Naboth against King Ahab, who sided with Bathsheba's husband against King David. The God who came down to deliver the Israelites from their bondage, who was not deaf to their cries, not blind to their plight, who knew their suffering, is the same yesterday, today and forever!

The siege is contrary to the Jewish tradition of siding with the oppressed. In South Africa, the most outstanding stalwarts in our fight against apartheid were often Jews. People like Helen Suzman, people like Joe Slovo. Almost instinctively, Jews must be on the side of freedom, justice and peace.

The siege must stop because it is not in the interests of Israelis. There can be no justice, no peace, no stability, not for Israel, not for the Palestinians, without accountability for human rights violations. This includes accountability for the human rights violations which occurred in Beit Hanoun on 8 November 2006. Israel has admitted that it made a mistake, but this falls far short of accountability and due redress for victims and their families. Accountability applies also to those firing rockets into civilian areas of Israel. The culture of impunity on both sides must end! True security and peace will not come from the barrel of a gun. It will come through negotiation: negotiation not with your friends. Peace can come only when enemies sit down and talk. It happened in South Africa. It happened more recently in Northern Ireland. It will happen here too.

Please, please, Israelis and Palestinians: for the sake of your children, for the sake of your future, for your sake, for God's sake, for all our sakes. Please, please end the injustice and sit down and talk to one another. It is possible for Israelis and Palestinians to live amicably side by side in two sovereign, viable states.

There can be no peace, there can be no security, there can be no freedom in isolation. Israelis and Palestinians will be free, will be secure, will prosper only together.

My message to the international community is that our silence and complicity – especially on the situation in Gaza - shames us all. It is almost like the behaviour of the military junta in Burma. Gaza needs the engagement of the outside world, especially of its peacemakers.

Finally, to you our brothers and sisters in Gaza: you will be free. Your isolation and loneliness will end. We want you to know that we are with you, and we will come back to celebrate with you your freedom!