Statement on Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

05.09.2009 | World Counil of Churches (WCC)

1. While the decision of the United Nations (UN) of 1947 (Resolution 181) to establish two states in the land of Palestine was partially achieved with the creation of the state of Israel, the second part of this resolution is still waiting for realization: the establishment of a Palestinian state.

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The ongoing settlement policy of the state of Israel in the territories which have been occupied since 1967 is an obstacle to the fulfilment of that promise and decision of the community of nations for a viable Palestinian state. The continuous settlement of lands beyond Israel's internationally recognized borders (the 1949 Green Line borders) is almost universally rejected and met with widespread incredulity because it is illegal, unjust, incompatible with peace and antithetical to the legitimate interests of the state of Israel. Even as Israel's own right to exist in security evokes sympathy and solidarity around the world, its policies of expansion and annexation generate dismay or hostility as they represent a direct indicator of the nature of the occupation.

2. There are some 200 settlements with more than 450,000 settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. They make the peace efforts by the international community more vulnerable and virtually impossible. Even the "settlement freeze" requested by Israel's most important ally is met with yet another cycle of intentional delays, temporary concessions and tactical preconditions – eroding goodwill, destroying hope and pre-empting the meaningful negotiations which a good-faith freeze could facilitate. This refusal to freeze expansion further indicates a rejection of dealing with the core issue of the occupation and settlements as such.

3. It is heartening that the US administration and governments of many other states have expressed their determination to remove obstacles to peace and settle the Israel-Palestine conflict through negotiations that are both substantive and conclusive. This will begin a new relationship within the wider Middle East. However, it is discouraging that events in Occupied Palestinian Territory and East Jerusalem demonstrate yet again the unyielding nature of Israel's occupation and the continuous way of creating new obstacles to peace.

4. Instead of freezing the settlement activities, work continues on large urban settlement projects and on many smaller projects. The Israeli government is still planning to build some 2,500 new housing units in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel's policies cause new and repeated displacements of Palestinian citizens inside the occupied territory. The demolition of houses that took place in June 2009 in East Jerusalem created untold suffering to the Palestinians. House demolition orders against hundreds of families were delivered by Israeli municipal and military authorities and hundreds of church-owned properties are at risk, especially from the expansion of Israeli-controlled settlements and housing in East Jerusalem. These are only isolated examples of a much larger tragedy.

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5. The existence of these illegal settlements and their corresponding infrastructure including the separation wall, the confiscation of Palestinian lands beyond the Green Line, the so-called “security zones”, and the wide network of tunnels, by-pass roads and check points, deny Palestinians’ access to large parts of their land and water resources. They restrict their freedom of movement, diminish their basic human dignity and, in many cases, their right to life. They also have dramatic effects on the Palestinians’ right to education and access to health care system. They destroy the Palestinian economy by impeding movement of products, making the existence of a viable Palestinian state almost impossible to achieve. This increases the sense of dispossession and despair among the Palestinian population and contributes to fuel tensions in the region that will pose a great threat to the security of Israel.

6. The illegal settlements in and around Jerusalem endanger the future of the holy city that should be negotiated as part of a comprehensive peace agreement. The settlements isolate Jerusalem from the rest of the Palestinian West Bank, separating families and cutting economic, religious and cultural vital ties. The related Israeli policies in regards to the restriction of residency rights for the Jerusalemites through confiscation of their identity cards, limiting permits for construction of buildings and refusing family reunification, etc. are aiming at transforming the nature of the holy city that should be open to all and shared by the two peoples and the three religions.

Recalling the consistent position of World Council of Churches’ (WCC) assemblies, central committees and executive committees on this question, inter alia, rejecting any nation keeping or annexing the territory of another (Heraklion 1967, Uppsala 1968), the central committee of the WCC is:

7. Seized of the necessity for the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to enforce their declaration of 5 December 2001, which reaffirms the illegality of settlements and of settlement growth, and calls upon the occupying power “to fully and effectively respect the [Convention]” (Geneva 2002).

8. Reminded of our long-standing assessment that “unilateral actions have radically altered [Jerusalem’s] geography and demography” (Harare 1998), that United Nations Resolutions 181, 194, 303 and subsequent decisions prescribe special status for Jerusalem as a “corpus seperatum under a special international regime”, and that the Geneva Conventions prohibit changes in the population and character of occupied territories which include East Jerusalem.

9. Convinced of the need for “an international boycott of goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories and for member churches and faithful to join in non-violent acts of resistance to the destruction of Palestinian properties and to forced evictions of people from their homes and lands” (Geneva 2001).

10. Convinced that churches must not be complicit in illegal activities on occupied territory – including the destruction of Palestinian homes and lands and the construction of settlements, related infrastructure and the separation barrier – and have opportunities to take economic measures that are “equitable, transparent and non-violent” against these illegal activities and in support of peaceful solutions to the conflict (Geneva 2005).

11. Dismayed at the imposition of expanding boundaries for one side and ever smaller confinements for the other, “extending Israeli civilian and military presence inside Palestinian territory, undermining all peacemaking efforts and…the whole concept of a viable and contiguous Palestinian state” (Geneva 2004).

12. Reiterating that Christian holy places in Jerusalem must be “integrated and responsive to Christian communities” whose “life and roots” in Jerusalem are increasingly threatened by settlement policies there (Nairobi 1975).

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13. Recognizing the importance of research, documentation and debate about settlements by civil society groups, faith based and international organizations, and within Israeli society, including the Israeli government's Sassoon Report of 2005.

14. Reiterating the WCC call to member churches to accompany and encourage the commitment to non-violence and active engagement in peace negotiations leading towards a comprehensive and just peace in which two nations can exist side by side in security and within internationally recognized borders.

Accordingly, the central committee of the WCC, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, 26 August - 2 September 2009, calls member churches and related organizations to:

A. **Pray for** and **assist** people who are suffering because of the implantation of some 200 settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem with related roads and infrastructure, violence by settlers, military and police controls which favour settlers, and restrictions of human rights and basic livelihoods for Palestinian citizens.

B. **Hear** the call of the churches of Jerusalem for concrete actions by the international ecumenical community toward a just peace for both Palestinians and Israelis.

C. **Urge** both the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority to consider their own political sovereignty on the holy land with holy sites for the three monotheistic religions and continue to involve the "Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land" in the peace process and particularly regarding the status of Jerusalem and the holy sites.

D. **Call** upon their respective governments to distinguish between the legitimate interests of the state of Israel and its illegal settlements, and to align their actions with that distinction in the interests of peace.

E. **Monitor** and **question** governments that, on the one hand, provide Palestinians with humanitarian aid and development assistance while, on the other hand, pursuing foreign policies that allow Israel to inflict suffering on Palestinians, divide the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, maintain the blockade of Gaza, and impose various restrictions on the Palestinian economy.

The WCC central committee also:

F. **Calls** upon the occupying power to fully and effectively respect the Fourth Geneva Convention, including its prohibition against changes in the population and character of occupied territories.

G. **Calls** upon the government of Israel to urgently implement an open-ended freeze in good-faith on all settlement construction and expansion as a first step towards the dismantlement of all settlements.

H. **Invites** member churches and faithful to give moral and practical support to non-violent acts of resistance to the confiscation of land, the destruction of Palestinian properties and the eviction of people from their homes and lands, as the central committee recommended in 2001.

I. **Encourages** people on both sides of the conflict who have consistently supported the exchange of land for peace.

J. **Commends** member churches, specialized ministries and church peace networks for taking part in the World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel, 4-10 June 2009, convened by the WCC and with a focus on the issue of settlements.

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K. **Invites** member churches that have not yet adopted the 2007 Amman Call to do so and to join with other churches working for peace as part of the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum.

L. **Reiterates** the call for the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to enforce their declaration of 5 December 2001, which reaffirms the illegality of settlements and of settlement growth.

M. **Reiterates** the need for an international boycott of settlement products and services, for member churches to inform themselves about settlement products imported into their countries and for churches to practice morally responsible investment in order to influence businesses linked to the Israeli occupation and its illegal settlements.

N. **Requests** the US administration to ensure that the settlement issue is resolved as part of a comprehensive peace agreement which will include linked and sequenced steps between interim and final status measures.

2.09.2009

Prayer

The following prayer is offered as a resource to enable the churches' engagement with the issue articulated above:

Jesus Christ, our brother and Saviour,

who walked the roads of the Holy Land and lived as one of her people,

walk with those who find their roads blocked and their families divided through illegal actions in an occupied land.

Jesus Christ, our brother and Saviour,

who challenged injustice and offered new definitions of power,

challenge us to express non-violent support to all who suffer and to speak out against the injustice they experience.

Jesus Christ, our brother and Saviour,

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who embraced encounters with people from different faith and cultural communities,

embrace and uphold all who seek a just peace and reconciliation between divided peoples in the land of your human experience.

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