



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Palestinian bishops allowed to enter Gaza on third attempt

Jerusalem – (March 11, 2009) – After three attempts in five weeks, three area bishops were finally allowed to enter Gaza to visit churches and humanitarian projects. Anglican Bishop Rt. Rev. Suheil Dawani, ELCJHL Bishop Munib Younan and Greek Catholic Archbishop Elias Chacour made their pastoral visit to Gaza on March 10. Earlier, bishops Dawani and Younan were the only two of a delegation of five bishops denied entry at the Erez Crossing between Israel and Gaza on Feb. 4. Later, the three bishops applied for permission to enter Gaza on Feb. 24 but were denied for undisclosed reasons.

On the March 10 trip, the delegation visited the Anglican Al Ahli Hospital, which served more than 400 patients and casualties during Israel's recent Gaza offensive. There they were briefed by hospital director Suheila Tarazi and Dr. Maher Ayad. The bishops visited staff and patients and prayed in the hospital church for the war dead and wounded, and for peace and justice.

Constantine Dabbagh, director of the Near East Council of Churches Refugee Works, and Dr. Salim, of the NECCRW clinic, updated the bishops about their work. The clinic was bombed during Israel's month-long bombing campaign in Gaza, forcing them to resume their work in a small provisional center. Other dedicated personnel are working in one of the poorest areas of Gaza City to restart mother and child programs as well as a program for malnourished children.

Driving to and from the Erez Checkpoint the delegation witnessed scenes of horrendous destruction. Each factory along on one two-kilometer stretch in the industrial zone had been hit. Residences and a hospital had been bombed.

After witnessing the devastation, the three bishops expressed thanks and gratitude for the churches and related agencies that supported the people of Gaza throughout the bombing campaign. These include the Al Ahli Hospital, the NECCRW clinics and vocational training centers, the YMCAs and their activities, as well as the Action by Churches Together Palestine Forum and its emergency relief efforts.

"We urge our partners to continue to support our diakonia and relief work in Gaza," Bishop Younan said. He called for the implementation of international law and human rights in Gaza "so the border points will be opened and all the necessary building-material will be allowed in for rebuilding."

Bishop Dawani said he encouraged Gazan Christians, who "looked forward and longed for being able to build up what has been destroyed and carry on their living toward a more normal situation in all the hardships they have been facing during an almost two-year siege and the recent war."

Archbishop Chacour said he was shocked by the extent of the destruction that had taken place in Gaza, especially to infrastructure and in the industrial areas. Noting their meeting with a woman who had lost her husband and three boys in a bombing attack, Chacour said, "There is a tremendous need for psycho-social assistance to help and counsel people so they can cope with life again through all traumatic experiences."

The three bishops call on all parties to abstain from all acts of violence and work for a peaceful, negotiated resolution based on justice and international law.

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