THE HON STEPHEN SMITH MP

— 1 JUL 2009

Ms Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Federal Member for Fowler
Parliament House
CANBERRA   ACT   2600
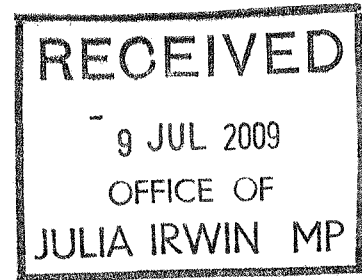
Dear Madam Chair

Thank you for your letter dated 11 June 2009, regarding a petition recently submitted for consideration by the Standing Committee on Petitions about Gaza and the West Bank. This letter responds to the petition, as requested by Standing Order 209(b).

The Australian Government was deeply concerned by the conflict in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel, as well as its impact on civilians. Throughout the conflict, the Government called on both Israel and Hamas to halt the violence, urged all parties to avoid actions which caused suffering to civilians, and consistently called on Israel to meet its humanitarian obligations to ensure the people of the Gaza Strip had access to basic necessities and humanitarian assistance.

The Australian Government fully supported United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1860, which called for an immediate, durable and fully-respected cease-fire. Ongoing violence has underlined the importance of consolidating current arrangements into such a cease-fire. Consistent with UNSCR 1860, this will need to involve an end to arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip and rocket attacks on Israel, and the opening of border crossings into the Gaza Strip. The Government fully supports ongoing negotiations in Cairo to this end.

The Government also recognises that the provision of humanitarian relief to the population of the Gaza Strip is an urgent priority. On 1 March, I announced that Australia would contribute $20 million to assist the efforts of the Palestinian Authority, as well as UN agencies and other donors, to meet the recovery and reconstruction needs of the Palestinian people. The Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, appointed as his Special Envoy the Parliamentary Secretary for International Developmental Assistance, Mr Bob McMullan, to present this contribution personally to the International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Economy for the Reconstruction of Gaza, in Sharm el-Sheikh.

This assistance was in addition to the $10 million which Australia committed in January for emergency and humanitarian relief in the Gaza Strip. The Australian Government has now committed $75 million in assistance to the Palestinian people since the end of 2007.

These issues highlight that a lasting resolution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict can only be brought about through peaceful means. As I said on 19 May, the Australian Government is convinced that all efforts to secure a just and enduring peace must be made, and made now. The status quo, with all its ongoing uncertainties, insecurity and tragedies, is not acceptable. It is not in the interests of Israel, the Palestinians, the Middle East region or the broader international community.

The Government believes that a two-state solution must be the basis for resolving the conflict, based on a state for Israel, where its borders are respected and it lives in peace and security, and a viable state for the Palestinian people, where likewise they have defined and respected borders, and live in peace and security.

Both sides must also honour the agreements they have entered into, including under the Roadmap for Peace. This means that the Palestinians must continue to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and to halt violence and incitement. Equally, Israel needs to freeze settlement activity. A way must also be found, while ensuring the safety and security of Israelis, to ease restrictions on the movement of people and goods in the West Bank and to relieve the suffering of ordinary Gazans until the Palestinian Authority is able to resume its responsibilities in the Gaza Strip.

The Australian Government will continue to look for practical ways to support the parties achieve peace and security.


Yours sincerely




Stephen Smith