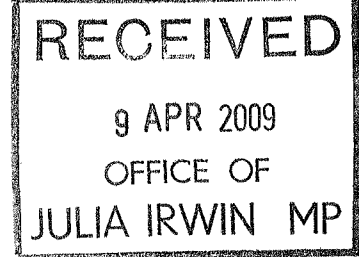




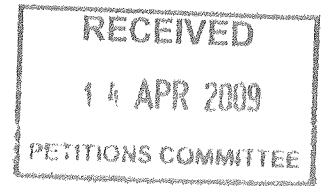
THE HON STEPHEN SMITH MP



MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600

1 APR 2009

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair - Standing Committee on Petitions
Federal Member for Fowler
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Julia

Dear Madam Chair

Thank you for your letter dated 26 February 2009, regarding a petition recently submitted by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils for consideration by the Standing Committee on Petitions. This letter responds to the petition, as required by Standing Order 209(b).

The petition is in support of an immediate cease-fire to the conflict in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel. As you would be aware, on 18 January Israel and Hamas declared unilateral cease-fires. The Government welcomed the cease-fires, but remains concerned by and condemn ongoing Palestinian rocket attacks into Israel.

The Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and I have all condemned Hamas's acts of aggression, including the firing of over 300 rockets into southern Israel which precipitated the conflict. This was entirely appropriate. At the same time, the Government called on both Israel and Hamas to halt the violence. Throughout the conflict, the Government 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 shares the petitioners' concern at the conflict and its impact on civilians. The Government fully supported United Nations 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 2 March, the Parliamentary Secretary for International Developmental Assistance, Mr Bob McMullan, attended the International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Economy for the Reconstruction of Gaza, in Sharm el-Sheikh, as Prime Minister Rudd's Special Envoy. At the Conference, Mr McMullan announced that Australia would contribute \$20 million to assist the efforts of the Palestinian Authority, as well as United Nations (UN) agencies and other donors, to meet the recovery and reconstruction needs of the Palestinian people.

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 provided \$75 million in assistance to the Palestinian people since the end of 2007.

The conflict highlights that a lasting resolution to the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank can only be brought about through peaceful means. The Australian Government remains committed to supporting a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for their own state, and Israel's right to live in peace within secure borders.

Yours sincerely

Best Asher

Stephen Smith