

Mideast peace chances fading, warns president of Canadian bishops

Calling Gaza “an open air prison,” the president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and bishops from Europe and the United States are warning that peace between Palestine and Israel is slipping away.

“You end up with what is tantamount to a prison basically,” Archbishop Richard Gagnon told *The Catholic Register* on his return from a Jan. 11 to 16 visit by bishops of the Holy Land Co-ordination group.

“The Israelis don’t like that terminology, but having been in prison ministry for some time I can tell you it’s easier to visit a prisoner in one of our Canadian prisons than to get into Gaza and get out.”

The bishops split their five-day trip between Gaza and Ramallah in the occupied West Bank. Collectively, the 15 bishops are calling on their own governments to apply legal solutions to the 60-year-conflict.

“Our governments must do more to meet their responsibilities for upholding international law and protecting human dignity. In some cases, they have become actively complicit in the evils of conflict and occupation,” said the final communique of the bishops from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe.



Archbishop Richard Gagnon, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, speaks with a woman after concelebrating Mass with other members of the Holy Land Coordination at Holy Family Catholic Church in the Gaza Strip Jan. 12. Marcin Mazur, Catholic News Service

They also called for their countries to follow the Vatican's lead in recognizing the State of Palestine. More than 80 countries do recognize Palestine as a country, but Canada does not. Like the European Union, Canada does recognize the Palestinian right of self-determination.

"The path to peace has more to do with the enforcement of international law and justice, because that's the one thing that the world has agreed to," Gagnon said.

Assigning blame for the stalled peace process is less important than bringing all sides into compliance with international law, he said.

Hamas's constant missile attacks launched across the border at random, civilian targets are obviously illegal and have left Israelis fearful and angry, while constantly expanding illegal settlements on Palestinian land have led to despair among Palestinians.

Canadians can't just dismiss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as far away and unsolvable, Gagnon said.

“We need to think about this. We need to be informed more about it, and we need to encourage the path that has been established internationally – and to encourage our government to really ask the questions, to see what they’re doing and to encourage action on the international level,” he said.

Over the past year the U.S. president moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, officially recognized Israeli control of the occupied Golan Heights and said the U.S. no longer considers Israeli settlements in the Palestinian West Bank illegal.

Since April last year U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has directed State Department officials to avoid using the words “two-state solution.”

President Donald Trump has on his desk something he calls the “deal of the century,” which is rumoured to include something called “New Palestine” with most of the Israeli settlements remaining in the West Bank under Israeli administration.

“The growth of the settlements is such that it’s making a two-state solution very difficult, if not impossible,” said Gagnon.

The Gaza Catholic community of just 150 parishioners at Holy Family Parish in Gaza City is an inspiration, said Gagnon.

“In spite of all of this sad situation and the poverty in Gaza, you have the Christian community functioning according to our call through our baptism to spread the good news. They do, because the Christians operate a lot of different services for the whole community,” he said.