



December 4, 2024

President Joseph R. Biden Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

As presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), I write with distress, concern and a sense of urgency regarding the ongoing war in Palestine and Israel. The ELCA has a longstanding companion relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) in Palestine and continues to accompany the Palestinian people through various ministries and by supporting the Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem. The ELCA social statement *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (1991) declares, “Along with all citizens, Christians have the responsibility to defend human rights and to work for freedom, justice, peace, environmental well-being, and good order in public life” (Page 5).

Given the ever-deteriorating situation in Gaza — with the conditions for famine already present, especially in North Gaza — I implore your administration to hear and see the evidence being presented by the numerous humanitarian actors on the ground, and to determine if the state of Israel is complying with U.S. law — specifically the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 — as already articulated in your administration's Oct. 13 letter to the Israeli government. I implore your administration to take all necessary steps to insist that humanitarian relief be restored immediately for the sake of suffering people.

Already, this latest conflict has resulted in the killing of over 44,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and over 760 Palestinians in the West Bank. Almost the entirety of the Gaza Strip's infrastructure has been destroyed or rendered uninhabitable; as a result, over 104,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been injured, and the current health care system there cannot adequately treat or support them. Without dramatic intervention, nothing but a ghastly future is possible for the remaining 2 million Palestinians in Gaza.

The basic humanity and dignity of the Palestinian people continue to be eroded because of two new laws passed by the Israeli Knesset on Oct. 28. These two laws target the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and ban it from operating in Israel and Palestine. As an agency of the U.N., UNRWA has provided continuous, lifesaving humanitarian assistance and education needs to the Palestinian people across the Middle East region, including in occupied Palestine, for over 75 years. UNRWA is an integral part of the Palestinian community, employing 30,000 staff, the vast majority of whom are Palestinian.

These two laws passed by the Knesset will have the following impacts: 1) banning UNRWA from operating within Israel proper or in any occupied territory under Israeli military control, including Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and potentially Lebanon; and 2) banning any official contact between Israeli government officials and UNRWA staff, which will prevent deconfliction when both sides are operating in the same conflict space. These two laws will deprive millions of Palestinians access to lifesaving services, not just in Gaza but also in Jerusalem, the West Bank

and potentially even Lebanon, where UNRWA provides services to the Palestinian refugee community. Additionally, the Knesset, under the current governing coalition in Israel, have continued to threaten to label UNRWA a “terrorist entity” under Israeli law.

The inability of UNRWA to carry out its mission moving forward will have devastating consequences and will be a matter of life or death for many Palestinians. Furthermore, labeling a U.N. agency as a terrorist organization would set a terrible precedent and would endanger the lives of UNRWA employees. Such a law would create a legal foundation upon which to criminalize humanitarian assistance and strip humanitarian aid workers of the legal protections necessary to operate in conflict zones, potentially making them “legitimate” military targets. This contravenes international humanitarian law.

As Christians, we recite the Lord’s Prayer, asking God to “give us this day our daily bread.” We are asking God not only for the food that nourishes our bodies but also for the people, processes and natural resources required to meet our basic human needs every day. We must ask, then: how can the Palestinian people receive their “daily bread” — the humanitarian aid and social services necessary to survive — when the very institution charged with supporting them is now being prevented from carrying out its humanitarian duties?

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Elizabeth A. Eaton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

cc:
The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State
The Honorable Lloyd James Austin III, Secretary of Defense