



• Monday, 17 May 2021 •

Dear Fellow South African,

Our experience with the democratic transition is a lesson about the power of empathy, negotiation and compromise.

The escalating situation in Israel and Palestine affirms once more what we South Africans know too well, that intractable conflicts can only be solved through peaceful negotiation.

It also demonstrates that unless the root causes of a conflict are addressed, in this case the illegal occupation by Israel of Palestinian land and the denial of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, there will never be peace.

The latest violence was sparked by an Israeli court decision to evict a group of families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in East Jerusalem to make way for Israeli settlements.

The sight of men, women and children being evicted from the homes their families have lived in for generations brings back painful collective and personal memories for the majority of South Africans – of forced removals and land dispossession.

It was a pain and humiliation faced by my own family, and by many South African families. My family was forcibly moved to different parts of the country on two occasions.

Being forced from one's home at gunpoint is a trauma not easily forgotten, and is carried across generations. As a country we are still living with the residual effects of the callous acts carried out in the name of apartheid spatial planning.

For all who believe in equality, justice and human rights, we cannot but be moved and indeed angered, at the pain and humiliation being inflicted on the Palestinian people; for it echoes our own.

Israel's actions are a violation of international law. They show a total disregard for successive United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that call for an end to the occupation of Palestinian land and for the fulfillment of the rights of the Palestinian people.

Since Israeli security forces launched assaults on worshippers at Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem last week, the violence has now engulfed the Gaza Strip, large parts of the West Bank and a number of Israeli cities. It has claimed the lives of dozens of people, including children.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) at least 40 children have been killed in Gaza since 10 May. Over half of them were under 10 years old.

It is also deeply troubling that Israeli forces last week destroyed a multi-storey building that housed a number of media organisations, sending a chilling message to media reporting on the violence.

The senseless and continued Israeli bombardment of Gaza will have devastating consequences for more than two million people who have been suffering under an illegal Israeli blockade for 14 years. As is always the case, it is civilians who will bear the brunt, with their homes and livelihoods destroyed.

Every effort must be made to dissuade both sides from further escalation, and to end the violence that is causing fear, death and misery on both sides.

We call on all parties involved to show restraint, to respect human life, and to cease the current hostilities.

Far too many lives have been lost to this intractable conflict. The continued occupation of Palestinian land and the suffering of the Palestinian people is a blight on the conscience of humanity.

As South Africa we are committed to being part of international efforts aimed at reviving a political process that will lead to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state existing side-by-side in peace with Israel, and within internationally recognised borders.

The two-state solution remains the most viable option for the peoples of Israel and Palestine, and must continue to be supported.

Just as Israeli security forces were attacking worshippers at the Al Aqsa Mosque, we in South Africa were preparing to commemorate the centenary of the Bulhoek Massacre at a religious site in Ntabelanga in the Eastern Cape. On 24 May 1921, colonial security forces armed with machine guns and artillery opened fire on worshippers, killing more than 160 people and wounding nearly 130.

The massacre laid bare the brutality not only of the police force of the Union of South Africa, but also the racist system that it was charged to uphold.

Just like the dispute in the Sheik Jarrah neighbourhood, the atrocity at Bulhoek was not just about a local dispute; it was fundamentally about the forced dispossession of land, about colonial occupation, about racial discrimination and about the violent suppression of dissent.

As we reflect on the crisis in the Middle East and particularly on the suffering of the Palestinian people, we would do well to recall the words of Selby Msimang, a founding member of the African National Congress.

In the aftermath of the Bulhoek massacre he wrote: "History has shown that the human soul naturally revolts against injustice."

The protests and the revolt of the oppressed people of South Africa against colonialism and apartheid proved the veracity of this prophecy.

As lovers of freedom and of justice, we stand with the Palestinian people in their quest for self-determination, but also in their resistance against the deprivation of their human rights and the denial of their dignity.

As citizens of a country that was able to turn its back on race-hatred and bloodshed and build an inclusive society rooted in human rights for all, it is our collective hope that the people of Israel and Palestine will follow a similar path; that they will find each other, and that they will find peace.

With best regards,

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