

**Washington, D.C.** - During President Bush's trip to the Middle East, Congressmen David Price (D-NC) and Ray LaHood (R-IL) were joined by 50 of their colleagues in calling on the President to work toward the stabilization of Gaza as the best way to move the peace process forward.

In a letter sent to the President today, Price and LaHood express their "deep concern over the ongoing crisis in southern Israel and Gaza," and they argue that the status quo of terror and violence promises to derail progress toward a negotiated settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians in the near future. The congressmen recognize that if violence continues and negotiations stall, popular support for the peace process will be undermined, along with any hope of substantial progress on this critical international challenge.

The letter condemns ongoing rocket fire from Gaza into southern Israel, which is terrorizing Israeli residents, and it calls attention to retaliation by the Israeli military, which is also claiming innocent civilians and inflaming passions among the Palestinians. Israel's economic blockade of Gaza, which is ruled by Hamas, has also "exacerbated an already grave humanitarian situation," the letter states. "In this climate, popular support for Hamas remains strong while the credibility of the current Israeli-Palestinian peace talks is weakened."

In addition to condemning rocket attacks against Israel, the congressmen call for an end to the blockade of Gaza "in a secure and timely manner," in order to "create a climate more conducive to a successful peace process." Although they do not encourage direct negotiation with Hamas, which is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, Price and LaHood call on the President to explore the possibility of a ceasefire between Gaza and Israel to keep peace negotiations on track. The letter suggests that Palestinian President Abbas or another third party engage the leaders of Hamas toward this end.

The Price-LaHood letter is signed by Reps. Brian Baird, Tammy Baldwin, Earl Blumenauer, Madeleine Bordallo, Leonard Boswell, Charles Boustany, Steve Buyer, Lois Capps, Michael Capuano, Christopher Carney, Howard Coble, John Conyers, Susan Davis, Peter DeFazio, Lloyd Doggett, Mike Doyle, Keith Ellison, Sam Farr, Eni Faleomavaega, Chaka Fattah, Wayne Gilchrest, Charlie Gonzales, Maurice Hinchey, Rush Holt, Darrell Issa, Marcy Kaptur, Dennis Kucinich, Barbara Lee, Stephen Lynch, Ed Markey, Betty McCollum, Jim McDermott, Jim McGovern, Michael Michaud, Brad Miller, Gwen Moore, Jim Moran, James Oberstar, John Olver, Donald Payne, Nick Rahall, Charles Rangel, Ciro Rodriguez, Adam Smith, Pete Stark, John Tierney, Stephanie Tubbs Jones, Zach Wamp, Mel Watt and Peter Welch.

The letter is supported by Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, Churches for Middle East Peace, Americans for Peace Now, the Arab American Institute, Israel Policy Forum, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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