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‘ONLY EYE WITNESSES CAN MOVE THE EU FORWARD’

Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the European Union urgently need to visit Gaza to witness for themselves the denigrating circumstances in which the people of Gaza live. Only then can they make foreign policy decisions that so heavily affect the people of Gaza.

A delegation of APRODEV directors visited Gaza during the World Council of Churches' World Week for peace in Palestine-Israel to experience for themselves the further deprivation of the people of Gaza as a result of the latest war. The effects of this war are compounded by the almost total isolation of Gaza because of the siege imposed by Israel, not allowing the import of enough humanitarian aid or materials to rebuild Gaza.

As organizations working in the region already for many years, the APRODEV agencies were not only shocked by what is occurring in Gaza, but also by the rapid expansion of Israel into the West bank by the ongoing massive enlargement of existing settlements which Israel defends as natural growth, and the consequences of this for the Palestinian people. The total lack of progress in the peace process, and the inability of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and the international community to move forward in this respect are astounding. The youth in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories know nothing other than war and tension. There is no human contact anymore between the two peoples. This fosters the lack of understanding that a life in peace and cooperation is possible.

All members of the delegation are European citizens and were particularly disappointed by the inappropriateness and ineffectiveness of the European Union policies to achieve peace. Around one billion Euros are spent each year by the EU and its member states in the occupied Palestinian territories on humanitarian aid and development, while its foreign policy in practice allows Israel to take measures that make any development of a vital Palestinian society impossible. This discrepancy needs to be addressed by the EU policy makers.

During their visit, the delegation met with their Israeli and Palestinian partners, with representatives of the EU, the UN and the Israeli government. They also met church leaders in Jerusalem. The church leaders reminded them of the precarious position of Palestinian Christians. Not only do they suffer under the occupation like the Muslims, but as a minority they are also particularly vulnerable due to the absence of the rule of law in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The APRODEV agencies support local organizations, composed of Israelis and Palestinians working towards a just peace for both peoples. Without the rule of law, not only inside the region, but also as a standard for the international community, a lasting peace will not be possible. The international community and in particular the EU must abide by their own rules and regulations. To often in this ongoing struggle, the rule of law is subordinated to political considerations, by all sides.

Coinciding with the delegation's visit was the speech in Cairo by US President Obama, the most influential party with regard to possible solutions to this ever lasting conflict. This speech gave signs of hope. As committed churches and development organizations, the delegation will closely follow 'his facts on the ground' and keep him to his promise, while meanwhile hoping that the EU

would also face up to its obligations, starting with a visit of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs to Gaza.

For further information, please contact:

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Aprodev is the association of the 17 major Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox development and humanitarian aid organizations in Europe. Its member organizations are Bread for the World and EED (Germany), Bread for All and HEKS/EPER (Switzerland), CIMADE (France), Christian Aid (United Kingdom and Ireland), Church of Sweden and Diakonia (Sweden), DanChurchAid (Denmark), EAEZ (Austria) , FinnChurchAid (Finland), Hungarian Interchurch Aid (Hungary), ICCO and Kerk in Actie (Netherlands), Icelandic Church Aid (Iceland), Norwegian Church Aid (Norway) and SolidaritéProtestante (Belgium).