

Agencies say world powers are failing to bring peace to Holy Land

LONDON - A group of major world powers is failing to bring peace to the Holy Land, said a report by aid agencies and human rights groups.

The Sept. 25 report said, "Unless there is a swift and dramatic improvement, it will be necessary to question what the future is for the Middle East Quartet," which includes the U.S., Russia, the European Union and the United Nations.

"The Middle East Quartet is failing, making inadequate progress toward improving the lives of Palestinians," and is not "improving the prospects for peace," said "The Middle East Quartet: A Progress Report." The report was signed by 21 nongovernmental agencies, including the British bishops' Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, known as CAFOD.

The report said the Quartet has made some progress but that the lives of Palestinians have not changed or have deteriorated since the peace summit in Annapolis in 2007.

Israel has enforced travel restrictions on Palestinians and has not been held accountable for its actions, the report said.

"Nearly one year on, we are seeing exponential settlement growth, additional checkpoints and, because of this, further economic stagnation," it said. "There is no 'new reality' in the West Bank - the economy continues to stagnate and the blockade of Gaza continues."

The result of the failures of the Quartet, the report said, is a "drastic toll" on the daily lives of Palestinians.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Quartet representative to the Middle East, also was criticized.

The report said Mr. Blair had been "successful in securing substantial funding

pledges” but that his “impressive aptitude for fundraising has not yet led to the prompt delivery of projects, nor improved the lives of Palestinian women, children and men for the better.”

A spokesman for Mr. Blair, who asked not to be named, said he and his representatives welcome “what the report says about the effort Mr. Blair is making.”

“In the West Bank, the downward slide of the past few years has been halted,” the spokesman told Catholic News Service in an e-mail Sept. 25.

He said there seems “to be a recognition by the Israelis that positive changes on the ground in the West Bank are imperative.”

Israel has taken some steps “to help promote Palestinian economic development and capacity-building,” he said, adding that “much more could and should be done to take advantage of the momentum provided by Palestinian and donor efforts.”

The report was issued before a Quartet meeting in New York Sept. 26. The meeting occurs at “a critical moment to demonstrate that (the Quartet) can play an effective role in bringing peace to the Middle East,” the report said.

Meanwhile, Annabel Williams, CAFOD’s program officer for the Middle East, told CNS in a Sept. 25 telephone interview that the agency agreed firmly with the conclusions of the report.

“We share the main concerns over the access and movement situation. We are also very concerned by the increase in settlement growth and the fact that the isolation of Gaza still continues,” she said. “There is a need for a return to normal civilian life for the Gazans.”

She added: “We are not laying the blame at anyone’s feet. That’s not our role; it is to address the issues and advise the Quartet to make changes. It is really calling for the Quartet to look at its strategy in this.

“It needs to look at how it can address its failures and move forward,” she added.