

Bishop Hubbard, Christian leaders welcome new Middle East peace talks

WASHINGTON - The chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace joined 27 other Christian leaders in welcoming the renewal of direct peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders brokered by the United States.

Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., and leaders representing Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and evangelical churches and organizations that constitute Churches for Middle East Peace urged President Barack Obama to be vigilant in the effort to help both parties to find acceptable solutions to the long-standing conflict.

"This conflict continues to undermine the social, economic and spiritual fabric of the lives of all persons in the region, including Christians who have lived in the Holy Land since the earliest days of our faith," Bishop Hubbard said in a separate statement released by Churches for Middle East Peace.

"With majorities of both Israelis and Palestinians supporting a durable peace, it is incumbent on their political leaders and our own to do everything possible to help bring about a just peace," he said.

Other Catholic leaders who signed the letter to Obama were Sacred Heart Father Thomas Cassidy, president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men; Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns; and Franciscan Father Larry Janezic, executive director of the Franciscan Action Network.

The Aug. 30 letter was released as the United States prepared to host meetings between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas Sept. 2.

The faith leaders said major compromises will be needed "at considerable risk and cost" from both parties so that an agreement can be reached.

The leaders called upon Obama and U.S. negotiators to “empower both sides to take risks for peace.”

“We have no illusions about the difficulty of the task ahead,” the letter said. “Both sides hold deep convictions contrary to those held by the other.”

A major stumbling block is expected to be the construction of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. A 10-month moratorium on settlement construction in the West Bank is set to expire Sept. 26, and Israeli officials have said it is unlikely to be extended despite demands by the Palestinian authorities to extend it and to halt construction plans in East Jerusalem.

Israel has occupied the West Bank and East Jerusalem since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

The faith leaders also pledged to reach out to American Jewish and Palestinian communities to explain their stance and encourage their support for negotiations as the peace process moves forward.

The White House announced the resumption of talks Aug. 20 and said it hoped that both sides could reach a settlement in about a year. Talks were suspended in December 2008 after Israeli forces attacked the Gaza Strip in a violent three-week barrage. Israeli officials said the attack was needed to stop Palestinian rocket attacks into Israel from Gaza.