

Bishop urges US action to halt spread of Gaza violence

WASHINGTON – In an appeal to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., asked that the United States “take immediate action to help end the escalation of violence between Hamas and Israel.”

“More than words are needed,” said Bishop Hubbard, chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on International Justice and Peace, in a Dec. 30 letter to Rice. “We ask you to urge the president to send a high-level personal representative to the region immediately to help negotiate a cease-fire and make provision for humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza.”

The Israeli government Dec. 31 rejected the idea of a 48-hour cease-fire, but government officials were talking to U.S. and European leaders about ways to reach a long-term diplomatic solution. The Israelis also suggested they were open to increasing humanitarian aid, but on Dec. 30 an Israeli gunboat rammed into a smaller vessel carrying three tons of medicine and supplies for Gaza that was chartered by an activist group called the Free Gaza Movement. The ship, although damaged, managed to dock safely in Lebanon.

Israel began a series of airstrikes Dec. 27 in Gaza in an attempt to stop Hamas rocket attacks into southern Israel. Hamas is a paramilitary organization that runs the Gaza Strip. At least 370 known deaths had occurred as of midday Dec. 31 as a result of the airstrikes.

“The toll in human deaths and suffering, the negative effects on progress in negotiations for peace and the risks of wider war caused by this escalation of violence cannot be allowed to continue,” Bishop Hubbard said.

He added the U.S. bishops would “encourage Catholics to support active U.S. engagement to achieve a cease-fire and we are prepared to do whatever we can to be helpful to efforts to halt the violence and restore progress toward peace.”

The Gaza Strip, part of the Palestinian territories, lies West of Israel between the

Jewish state and the Mediterranean Sea. It also shares a southern border with Egypt, which has not opened the border since the attacks began.

“At a time when the attention of Christians is drawn naturally to the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, it is tragic that innocent civilians are once again the victims of armed conflict and a humanitarian crisis,” Bishop Hubbard said. “A cease-fire and humanitarian relief are indispensable initial steps on the road to a two-state solution – a secure Israel living in peace with a viable Palestinian state – with justice and peace for both peoples.”