

NZ obliged to help

Despite the seeming hopelessness of the Middle East vortex, New Zealand has a small contribution it can and must make, writes KENNEDY GRAHAM.

The Press Fri 15/6/07

The terror and carnage that passes for peace in the Middle East continues unabated.

Having personally witnessed the trauma and tragedy of a Palestinian house demolition by the Israeli Defence Force, felt the shared fear of Israeli citizens at sidewalk cafes in Tel Aviv and delighted in children's laughter at Rafa'a refugee camp in Gaza Strip, I know how tempting it is to despair at the prospect of peace in the Middle East and take refuge in the self-absolution of distance and selective disapproval.

Yet somewhere in the vortex of violence that swirls through that troubled and tormented region, there remains a stubborn belief in a comprehensive settlement that meets the minimum needs and aspirations of both peoples.

The question remains for the international community of what to do in real time — how to restore a minimum of stability and security required to bring the arduous diplomatic task of rebuilding trust between the negotiators, then cement the deal with a genuine process of political legitimisation through public approval.

The principal negotiating issues at stake — the right of each side to exist as a recognised state within secure borders, the end of occupation and return of territory, the repeal of annexation and the right of return of the generationally-dispossessed — have all been pushed and prodded by keen minds and shrewd characters for half a century now.

As with most deep-rooted

conflicts, it is always possible to reach an intellectually precise solution that reflects a mid-point of clashing interests in the immediate Israel-Palestine crisis.

The challenge, as always, lies in the right mix of political cement — judging the timing of a deal, attracting an optimal amount of international support and, most difficult of all, future-proofing against the destructive impact of an assassination or suicide attack that leaves moderation dead in the water. It is this last vignette that proves to be the killer, literally.

The age-old sub-regional crisis has now become more volatile and intractable as a result of the politically misguided and legally unacceptable invasion of Iraq by three states whose collective repute was worth more, and the disastrous consequences that have followed.

The recent twin crises of successive Gaza assaults and the Lebanon incursion have further inflamed passions and entrenched positions. They have weakened political leadership in each area, and to some extent emboldened the militants.

Should New Zealand have recognised the Hamas government? Should it recognise a new technocratic government? Does Hamas need to amend its charter and drop its constitutional vow to attack and eliminate Israel?

Might Ehud Olmert bring himself to apologise, on his knee as King Hussein of Jordan once did, before a distraught mother? Might the United States president, indeed the US congress, clamber out of the lobby vortex

that engulfs Washington and thus New York, and bring a more even-handed strategic policy to bear on the crisis?

Might the Palestinians find a non-violent path to peace, as Gandhi once did, rather than repetitively blow the prospect of peace to smithereens and themselves along with it?

Is there anything, in particular, that New Zealand might do to assist with a Mid-East peace? We are as far removed as it is possible to be. Yet in today's global community, the influence of every country on critical global issues turns more on the quality of its input to the debate.

Our Government must be seen to be impartial in its perception and judgement of events in the Middle East — which does not mean a studied neutrality that consciously positions itself at an equidistant point between two belligerents. We should stake our position principally on the strict application of international law.

Our policy towards the Middle East, as with everything else, must today be determined by global, legal considerations, impartially applied. There is no magic wand for the Middle East crisis. But there is a torch we can shine, however faintly, from afar. And the light that it shines reflects back on us.

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»» **Separate state B1**

Palestinian PM

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will swear in a new prime minister and emergency cabinet today, a top aide said, replacing the Hamas-led government he fired after the group's bloody takeover of the Gaza Strip. Abbas has tapped Salam Fayyad, a technocrat who won respect in the West as finance minister, to serve as prime minister of the new government,

which will comprise 11 lawmakers. The US, Israel and European states plan to open the financial taps to the new government, after a 15-month embargo of the Hamas-led administration pushed the Palestinian Authority to the brink of financial collapse.

Children at risk

LONDON: Children as young as 3 should wear sunglasses to protect

NZ Herald Sun 17/6/07