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As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ this Advent, we are dismayed that the place of our saviour's birth is once again wracked by violence, death and destruction.

We grieve that innocent children have been disproportionately affected by this conflict.

Of the 1,300 people killed in the abhorrent terrorist attacks of Hamas on 7 October, 33 were children. Of the 250 hostages taken, 34 were children. In Israel's exercising its right to self-defence, more than 18,000 people have reportedly been killed, over 40 per cent of whom were children. Thousands more have been injured.

We re-affirm our **position of 31 October 2023** that there is no equivalence between the atrocities of Hamas against Israeli civilians, and the right and duty of Israel to defend itself. We also want to be clear that we do not believe that the devastating loss of civilian life and humanitarian catastrophe resulting from Israel's bombardment and siege of Gaza can be morally justified.

The nature and scale of death and destruction we are witnessing across the region is horrific and is inconsistent with the obligations of international humanitarian law as affirmed most recently by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2712 (15 November 2023).

This war has claimed too many lives and destroyed too many homes. The extension of battle to Southern Gaza will only compound the existing humanitarian catastrophe. We appeal for the bloodshed and destruction to stop. An alternative strategy needs to be found that closes down on attacks on Israel from Gaza and ends the violence and blockade undertaken by Israel.

The recent truce (24-30 November 2023) provided a glimmer of hope amidst so much darkness. We were encouraged as hostage families were reunited, civilians found respite from bombardment, and some of the sick and injured found life-saving care and some supplies reached those most in need.

Intensified diplomatic efforts should seek to secure the release of all remaining hostages, the protection of civilians and full humanitarian access to Gaza, alongside steps to establish a reinvigorated political track to address the overarching conflict.

Israel's security cannot be achieved by continuing with a system of occupation that denies millions of Palestinians their rights and freedoms. The ongoing settler violence in the West Bank, which has resulted in the death to date of 8 Palestinians including one child, is a matter of grave concern as is the fact that since 7 October over 250 Palestinians, including over 60 children have been killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank. There has been much damage to Palestinian homes, farms and schools by settlers without the necessary restraint and prosecution by the Israeli authorities.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is more than another regional conflict but one with both international and domestic resonances. The current war in

Gaza risks sowing the seeds of the next several generations of vengeance and violence unless it is resolved equitably now. For this reason, we call on the British Government to appoint a dedicated Minister or Peace Envoy for the Middle East to work with other nations to focus diplomatic efforts and to signal a long term commitment to support any future peace process.

We ask that the Government, as with the US Administration, act to deny visas for travel to any one deemed to be committing acts of violence or undermining peace and security in the West Bank, particularly against Palestinians.

In our communities there is no place for either antisemitism or Islamophobia. It is unacceptable that children fear going to school because they will be spat at, shouted at and hated for no other reason than that they are Muslim or Jewish. We should not impute to children here that for which they cannot be held responsible in Israel-Palestine.

We condemn the fresh growth of antisemitism in Europe, a shameful feature of our Western Christian history that needs to be constantly rebuked. In schools, universities, on streets and in places of work and worship, antisemitism has been the root of so much racism. Once one group is allowed to be attacked, merely for religion, race or heritage it seems to open the gates of hell to all other forms of hatred.

We condemn all those hateful voices stoking prejudice against anyone, for any reason and call on the church to walk alongside those from different communities. Let us never stand silently by, but at whatever risk stand with those who suffer such hatreds.

But more than anything we ask that this Advent, parishes, chaplaincies and all places of worship pray for peace, for wisdom, for justice, and for hope as we give thanks for the birth of Jesus Christ and God coming to dwell with us amid our pain and joy. As each household or gathering comes together at Christmas, give thanks for what we have and pray for the Holy Land and for our brothers and sisters in Christ who live there.

We also warmly encourage support for the [Archbishops' appeal for the Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza](#).

### ***The House of Bishops***

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