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UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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GLOBAL HEALTH CAUCUS,
CO-FOUNDER

CONGRESSIONAL
NATIVE AMERICAN CAUCUS,
CO-CHAIR

April 28, 2016

Dear Colleague:

Forty-six percent of the 4.68 million Palestinians living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are children under 18 years of age. This enormous youth population is growing up under a dehumanizing military occupation that severely limits basic opportunities and instills a sense of hopelessness. Any path towards the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires Palestinian children to be treated with dignity and respect for their inherent human rights.

I am requesting colleagues who have demonstrated a strong commitment to human rights to join me in a letter to President Obama urging the appointment of a "Special Envoy for Palestinian Children." The role of the "Special Envoy" is to travel to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel to hear directly from Palestinian youth, human rights and legal experts, NGOs, Palestinian and Israeli officials, including police and military leaders. The goal is to promote greater human rights and opportunities for Palestinian youth, as well as establish a framework for engagement by the next U.S. administration.

The appointment of a "Special Envoy" will help to ensure Department of State makes the human rights of Palestinian children a priority. Furthermore, the letters sends a clear signal that Members of Congress and the American people have an expectation that the government of Prime Minister Netanyahu will respect and protect the rights of Palestinian children under their control.

To join the letter to President Obama as an original author please contact Charles Martin at 225-6631 (Charles.Martin@mail.house.gov) as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Betty McCollum".

Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

Letter: Special Envoy for Palestinian Children

May XX, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We are deeply appreciative of your administration's efforts in pursuit of a negotiated peace to end the violence and settlement expansion that are the hallmarks of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict will certainly continue to require American leadership, for the foreseeable future any move to advance the peace process is in the hands of Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Abbas, and their respective governments.

Regardless of the manner in which Israeli and Palestinian political leaders decide to act upon their common future, a reality that must be acknowledged is that forty-six percent of the 4.68 million Palestinians living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are under 18 years of age. These children deserve to grow up with dignity, human rights, and a future free of repression.

This enormous youth cohort represents another generation of Palestinian children growing up under military occupation with very few opportunities to improve their lives. These children live under the constant fear of arrest, detention, and violence at the hands of the Israeli military, as well as the threat of recruitment or conscription into armed groups. We view this as an unimaginably difficult and at times hopeless environment for children that only fuels the conflict.

The recent attacks against Israelis, including those perpetrated by Palestinian youth, are profoundly disturbing and must be condemned. These attackers are often using crude weapons knowing they will likely be killed by Israeli security forces. Appropriate measures must be taken by security forces to defend themselves and innocent civilians. At the same time, the root cause of such violent acts must be examined and understood within the context in which they are taking place. Does a life of utter hopelessness and the collective psychological trauma associated with the Palestinian people living for decades under Israeli military occupation directly contribute to the violence?

The people of Israel have a right to security and we support U.S. policies which advance Israel's security. We also strongly believe that human rights – including the human rights of Palestinian children – must be protected and promoted, never ignored. As far as U.S. policy is concerned, we should expect an Israeli child and a Palestinian child to receive equal treatment from the authorities and the legal system. If in fact we are truly seeking security for Israel then it is in the interest of the American people to advance the cause of security, human rights, equality, dignity, justice, and opportunity for Palestinians, just as we do for Israelis.

We must raise our profound concern regarding a longstanding policy of detaining, interrogating, and imprisoning Palestinian children as young as 12 and 13 for up to a year, sometimes longer, without a trial and in violation of international standards. Recently, the Associated Press

reported that a 12 year old Palestinian girl was imprisoned by Israel's military justice system. UNICEF, Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, and other international NGOs have documented these human rights abuses against Palestinian youth. A report released in April by Defense for Children International-Palestine, based on the testimony of 429 Palestinian children detained by the Israeli military or police, found that three-quarters endured some form of physical violence following arrest. Israeli interrogators used position abuse, threats, and even solitary confinement to coerce confessions from some of these children. Such blatant abuses are unacceptable and contrary to U.S. interests and values.

The situation on the ground is rapidly deteriorating and we must act now. At the end of February, there were 440 Palestinian children in Israeli military prisons. This is the highest number since data became available from Israel Prison Service in 2008. For the first time in nearly four years, Israel has reintroduced the use of administrative detention against children. This is a procedure whereby a child can be detained without charge or trial, often renewable indefinitely. According to the most recent data from the Israeli Prison Service (February 2016), there were seven Palestinian children being held under administrative detention orders.

Mr. President, we believe the U.S. has a critical role to play in shaping the environment for peace between the people of Israel and the Palestinian people. Palestinian youth is one of the most critical demographic groups to building a secure future. We must act now to send a clear signal that we value their lives and well-being.

Therefore, we urge you to appoint a "Special Envoy for Palestinian Youth" to travel to the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Israel to hear directly from Palestinian youth, human rights and legal experts, NGOs, Palestinian and Israeli officials, including police and military leaders. Such a fact finding mission will provide the Obama Administration with vital information necessary to actively promote human rights, but also establish a framework for the next U.S. administration. Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have obligations under universal human rights norms and international human rights instruments for which they are accountable and a "Special Envoy for Palestinian Youth" will serve the important role of highlighting their respective successes and the shortcomings that demand action.

We are also calling on the Department of State to elevate the human rights of Palestinian children to a priority status in our bilateral relations with Israel and our ongoing engagement with the Palestinian Authority. The immediate appointment of a "Special Envoy for Palestinian Youth" will send a strong signal that truly reflects the spirit of your administration's tenure in the White House. Conversely, ignoring the trauma being inflicted on millions of Palestinian children undermines our American values and will ensure the perpetuation of a conflict and occupation we all want to see ended peacefully.

Sincerely,

Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

cc: Vice President Joseph Biden
Secretary of State John Kerry
Ambassador Samantha Powers
Hon. Susan Rice, National Security Advisor