

January 31, 2010

To:  
Mr. Shimon Peres  
President of Israel  
Jerusalem

MK Reuven Rivlin  
Knesset Speaker  
Jerusalem

Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu  
Prime Minister of Israel  
Jerusalem

**Re: Assault and delegitimization of human rights organizations in Israel – warning  
and request of meeting**

We, the undersigned organizations, are writing to you to warn of increasing assaults on human rights organizations. We are very concerned about this and believe it is the duty of Israel and its agents to condemn it and support reinforcing the status of those who work for human rights and social change.

Instead of congratulating the Knesset on its birthday, on Tu B'Shvat, for the fruits of democracy, we unfortunately are forced on this day to warn of its spoiled fruits. The immediate cause for this letter is the unbridled and incendiary attack by extremist organizations recently (NGO Monitor, Im Tirtzu and others), who chose to undermine the legitimacy of human rights organizations, including the New Israel Fund. We believe that this behavior is the result of a deep and worrisome delegitimization of the organizations, which comes from senior government officials.

During the last months we have witnessed a series of invective comments by various officials who wish to delegitimize the civil society organizations who work for human rights and social change. We have also seen the actual actions taken by government agencies against these organizations in order to curb their activities and maybe even silence them, instead of confronting the substance of the arguments brought forth by the organizations.

So, for instance, the former head of the Oz unit, Mr. Tzuki Sela, claimed that organizations who help refugees and asylum-seekers "aim to destroy Israel." Interior Minister Eli Yishai backed that claim and added on another matter that the organizations "help undermine the Zionist enterprise." In another case, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and IDF Spokesman Avi Benayahu denied the legitimacy of Breaking the Silence's publishing the testimonies of officers and soldiers about human rights violations during Operation Cast Lead and criticized the fact that the organization receives support from international bodies. Israel even demanded that European countries stop funding

Breaking the Silence. Another example is the statement by Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon against human rights organizations, saying "your enemies will come from within."

Meanwhile, the Israeli security authorities have recently acted to curb the organizations on the ground. For example, the ISA summoned demonstrators and human rights defenders for investigation and in some cases warned activists they must "refrain from political activity." Furthermore, military authorities announced that they were stopping responding to requests by the organizations on behalf of the residents of Gaza, including in the cases of patients who need urgent and life-saving medical care. Only after the organizations protested and international parties intervened did the Army retract that statement. The Army has also recently placed severe restrictions on organizations working in the territories to provide medical care, accompany residents to their agricultural work and children to school, and help residents file complaints of violence by security forces or settlers. The entrance of Israeli organizations into Gaza was completely forbidden earlier this year, after the organizations criticized the policy of siege on the Gaza Strip. And if that were not enough, human rights organizations are often described by security forces as extreme, lunatic and provocative elements and even as lawbreakers, in order to justify banishing them from the area while undermining their work.

Those statements and actions are grave and worrisome first of all because they violate the fundamental values of Israeli democracy. The freedom to criticize the government, to oversee its activity and to help those who are hurt by it are all legitimate courses of action in a democracy, which in fact guarantee its existence and its thriving over time. In fact, the importance and strength of a democracy derive from its protection of human rights and minorities from the majority and defense of the freedom to express and promote views that are not part of the consensus. Therefore, cultivating a hostile public atmosphere towards those who defend human rights, and using power to curb their activities, undermine the foundations of the democratic regime.

Furthermore, harassment of organizations for human rights and social change in itself hurts disempowered populations: primarily the Palestinians in the territories, labor migrants and asylum-seekers, for whom the organizations are the first course of representation and sometimes the only one. Thereby, those populations, who rely on the help of the human rights organizations on a daily basis, are hurt by curbing the activity of the organizations and denying the legitimacy of their existence in our society.

Denying the organizations' legitimate right to operate and to criticize government activities also contradicts the UN declaration of 1999 on "the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms," joined by Israel. The UN declaration states that "Individuals, groups, institutions and non-governmental organizations have an important role to play and a responsibility" in safeguarding human rights (article 18). Therefore, the various provisions of the declaration are concerned with the necessary defenses of the right to act for human rights, separately or in association

with others, to seek information, publish it, raise public awareness, appeal to government agencies whose policy violates human rights, participate in peace-seeking activities against the violation of human rights and to ask for and use resources provided for the promotion of human rights. The preamble of the declaration even states that the absence of peace and security "does not excuse non-compliance." Furthermore, in reports Israel submits to the UN according to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it takes great pride in the freedom of activity supposedly given to human rights organizations in Israel. The proclamations and activities against the organizations described above completely contradict those reports.

In light of the aforementioned, we call on you to publicly denounce the increasing assaults on the human rights and social change organizations in Israel, and to condemn the attempts to de-legitimize those organizations. We also ask you to act to stop any attempt to curtail the legitimate and legal activity of the organizations, including investigations against activists and restrictions on the freedom of movement of members of the organizations and on their ability to marshal resources, whether such attempts are made through legislation or official policy or any other way.

**We would appreciate your granting us a meeting to discuss the matters raised in this letter at your earliest convenience.**

With sincere thanks,

CEOs of the organizations

ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Israel  
The Association for Civil Rights in Israel  
Bimkom - Planners for Planning Rights  
B'Tselem  
Gisha  
The Public Committee against Torture in Israel  
Yesh Din  
Hamoked - The Center for the Defence of the Individual  
The Hotline for Migrant Workers  
Israel Religious Action Center  
Kav LaOved - Worker's Hotline  
Physicians for Human Rights - Israel  
Rabbis for Human Rights

cc:

Cabinet ministers  
Knesset members