

7 January 2009

The Hon Julia Gillard MP  
Deputy Prime Minister  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Deputy Prime Minister

### **Violence in the Middle East**

Please accept our New Year greetings sent on behalf of the Australian Psychological Society. We share with the wider Australian community a genuine pleasure in having a woman occupying such high office for the first time in our history. We hope you can seize the opportunity to make some genuine and profound progress in the key social issues that you were elected to address.

We wish to offer comment from a psychological perspective about the current situation in the Gaza Strip.

As psychologists we understand the key factors that typically lead to an escalation of conflict, and we have all seen this unfolding over the past weeks between Israel and Hamas. The situation rapidly arises in which each side believes that the other side is the aggressor and acts in what they see as 'defence', thereby justifying their own aggressive actions. What we call a defensive spiral emerges, and 'enemy images' are created - each party sees the other side as simply evil, therefore ignoring the other side's legitimate interests or concerns. The most important intervention is one in which the violence is stopped through international pressures for a ceasefire. Then, it can be possible for the conflicting parties to seek solutions using diplomatic processes such as mediation and negotiation. It is not necessary for parties to like or trust each other for such negotiations to be successful.

We believe it is very important that the Australian Government call for an immediate ceasefire to stop the violence and change the situation on the ground in Gaza. We urge the Australian Government to do everything in its power to support a peace process based on parties understanding each other's legitimate needs and concerns, and seeking solutions based on non-violent methods of conflict resolution.

It is easy to see the ongoing problems in the Middle East as intractable and unsolvable. But we believe that it is particularly important not to throw away the resolve for peace just when it is being most sorely tested. The Australian Government can help the world to remember that peace is possible. We have seen this demonstrated repeatedly in other parts of the

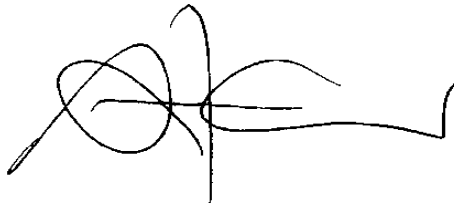
world (e.g., Ireland), where deep-rooted, often violent conflict went on for many generations, and the prospects of peace seemed faint. The well-developed processes of peace-building, diplomacy, and negotiation have the potential to resolve disputes and rebuild peace in seemingly impossible situations.

The social leadership that your Government can take at a time like this by calling for a ceasefire and an internationally supported peace process helps not only to bring about a humanitarian solution in Gaza, but also has the potential to reduce the conditions in these countries that give rise to terrorist thinking, to stop the continual cycle of violence and retribution, to begin to redress the root causes of the violence in the Middle East, and to remind the global community that there are alternatives to violence as a way of resolving conflict throughout the world.

We need this quality of leadership from our elected Government. We are sure that Australia can make a distinctive contribution that need not simply echo the positions of the superpowers.

The international community, which includes us, needs to maintain pressure on world leaders and the UN more than ever to build a peaceful future to ensure that there is adherence to the Geneva Conventions and international laws, and that serious efforts are made to redress the root causes of violence, such as poverty, inequality and injustice.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Simon Crowe', with a stylized, cursive script.

Professor Simon Crowe FAPS  
Acting President  
Australian Psychological Society