



**Statement of  
Senator Peter Welch  
Remarks as Delivered  
Need for Congress to Help Civilians in Gaza  
*April 10, 2024***

Madam President: It's been more than six months since Hamas' horrific attack on October 7<sup>th</sup>, that killed 1,200 innocent Israelis and led to the capture of 240 hostages. Around 130 people are still being held hostage, and an estimated 100 are alive and remain in captivity in absolutely horrific conditions. The cruelty that has been, and continues to be, inflicted on them is horrendous and obtaining their freedom becomes a more urgent priority every day.

But in the past six months, Israel's indiscriminate bombing has obliterated most of Gaza's infrastructure.

Nothing has been spared.

And more than 33,000 Palestinians have been killed, another 7,000 are believed to be buried beneath the rubble. And among the dead are hundreds of aid workers and health workers.

Nearly two million people have been displaced. Aid trucks are lined up for miles in Egypt waiting to get into Gaza, while the bombs and shells keep exploding. The magnitude of this calamity is staggering.

Now, six months into this war, Prime Minister Netanyahu has announced that a date has been set for an invasion of Rafah. Rafah today is jammed with an estimated one million desperate, destitute Palestinians who were ordered by the Israeli military to leave their homes in the north – homes that have since been demolished – and who are now sheltering under plastic with the few possessions they could carry, and not nearly enough food.

And last week, less than a month after José Andrés briefed me and other senators on the daunting challenges his remarkable organization, the World Central Kitchen, faces in getting food to desperate families in Gaza, Israeli missiles destroyed three of their vehicles and killed seven of their aid workers.

The descriptions and coordinates of the World Central Kitchen vehicles that were targeted had been shared with the Israeli military. There was nothing about those vehicles or the people in them that could reasonably have been confused with Hamas. The vehicles were far apart. They were labeled as World Central Kitchen vehicles. Each was targeted and destroyed separately.

The deadly attacks on aid and health workers in Gaza have become shockingly common. World Central Kitchen and other humanitarian organizations, which so many people depended on, have had to suspend operations in Gaza. This incident, and the killings of other aid and

health workers, must be thoroughly and independently investigated. Calling it a mistake begs the question: We need to know what happened and why.

This outrageous attack on aid workers, and Prime Minister Netanyahu's plans to invade the very place his government told Palestinians to go, is the latest evidence that the way the Netanyahu government is conducting this war is terribly wrong. It's yet another tragic reason why a ceasefire is immediately needed.

Madam President, our priority must be to secure a ceasefire to free the hostages and get adequate food, water and medical care to the Gazan population before more innocent people die needlessly. This was affirmed unanimously in the resolution recently adopted by the UN Security Council.

But rather than acknowledge Israel's responsibility to implement that resolution and secure a ceasefire, Prime Minister Netanyahu criticized the United States for allowing it to pass. He said the U.S. abstention "harms both the war effort and the effort to release hostages."

Madam President, I could not disagree more. After six months of relentless bombing, the war in Gaza has been a disaster. It has been a disaster not only for the Palestinian people, but for Israel, for the United States, for the hostages, and for the cause of peace and security in the Middle East.

Last week, families of the hostages were among the tens of thousands of Israeli protesters calling for Netanyahu to resign.

Madam President, we need to ask ourselves what could possibly need to happen before the United States finally stops financing a war strategy that has so disproportionately killed civilians, used food as a weapon, made Gaza unlivable, and that has no realistic vision of a peaceful future for either Palestinians or Israelis.

I believe that the time has already come. Israel does not need more bombs for Gaza. The United States should stop paying for this.

What Mr. Netanyahu consistently fails to acknowledge that the American people are paying for his war, a war that most Americans do not support.

It is their tax dollars that have purchased the bombs, tanks, artillery shells, machine guns, and ammunition that have been used by Israel in what has become a war not just against Hamas, but a war against the Palestinian people.

Overwhelmingly, Vermonters who have contacted me, like a substantial majority of the American people, are absolutely horrified by what is happening in Gaza.

In all the years he has served as Prime Minister, Mr. Netanyahu has never articulated a vision for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To the contrary, he has been on a mission, which he has confirmed publicly, to destroy any possibility of a future Palestinian state while preserving Israel as a Jewish state.

Those goals are fundamentally incompatible if Israel is to remain a democracy. And we support the Jewish democratic state of Israel. Yet, on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Netanyahu government announced the largest seizure of land in the West Bank since 1993.

Madam President, nothing can excuse the brutality of Hamas, we all know that, which for years has squandered precious resources that could have been used to improve the impoverished lives of the people of Gaza.

But just as Hamas' atrocities and the Iranians and others who aid and abet them should be absolutely universally condemned, so must we recognize that there is a long history to this conflict.

For years, the United States – Republican and Democratic administrations and this Congress – has unconditionally supported increasingly extreme right-wing governments led by Mr. Netanyahu, even though he has consistently acted in ways that are directly contrary to our policies, our principles, and our national interests.

In the West Bank, in the past three years alone, Israeli land seizures, settlement construction, demolitions of homes, and violence against Palestinians have soared in flagrant violation of international law.

But rather than hold the Netanyahu government accountable, U.S. officials kept repeating the same tired refrain that such actions are “an obstacle to peace.” And nothing changed. And despite evidence of human rights violations by Israeli soldiers, the Leahy Law has never been applied to Israel – not by this administration or any of its predecessors.

And meanwhile, Congress has continued to approve billions of dollars – unconditionally – for the Netanyahu government.

Madam President, I have spoken many times about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Month after month, as Gaza was being destroyed, I and others have called for greater access for aid trucks and protection of civilians and aid workers. I have called for an indefinite ceasefire. President Biden has called for a ceasefire. Vice President Harris has called for a ceasefire. And so has the UN Security Council.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has ignored it all, the humanitarian crisis has grown steadily worse, and the war is far from being won. Netanyahu's strategy in Gaza is reminiscent of that famous quote of an unnamed U.S. major in Vietnam, who said, “It became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it.” That's what's happening to Gaza. It won't work here as it didn't work there.

Nobody, nobody disputes Israel's right to go after the perpetrators of the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre. But that atrocity, and that security failure, did not provide license for Israel to go to war against an entire population killing tens of thousands of defenseless people, targeting aid workers, preventing life-saving aid from getting to the victims, all while the hostages remain trapped underground not knowing if they will survive another day.

This is not the Israel the American people have supported and defended – with my support – with \$300 billion since its founding 75 years ago – far more aid than we've provided to any other country.

And so, José Andrés said, “Israel is better than the way this war is being waged . . . You cannot save the hostages by bombing every building in Gaza. You cannot win this war by starving an entire population.” The words of Chef Andrés.

Madam President, I recognize that the Prime Minister makes his own decisions, and it is for the Israeli people to hold him accountable.

But he is not, and in my view has never been, a credible partner for the United States. Combating ruthless terrorists like Hamas is a challenge we face, Israel faces, the world faces. But this war is not making any of us safer from terrorism. It is creating the next generation of terrorists.

With an invasion of Rafah looming, the Biden Administration has warned Mr. Netanyahu that unless there is a credible plan to relocate the Palestinians who are trapped there, such an invasion would cause unacceptable civilian casualties. That, however, does not appear to have dissuaded Prime Minister Netanyahu.

World opinion has shifted sharply against Israel and the United States. The Administration, while calling for a ceasefire and more humanitarian aid, is simultaneously sending more bombs and ammunition to Israel. It's an inconsistency that is not sustainable.

It's long past time for the U.S. to adopt a consistent policy, to stop financing a war strategy that was deeply flawed from the very beginning – a strategy of unending death and destruction without any plan for what comes next.

Instead of prolonging this catastrophe, let's use our influence and our resources to advance a consistent policy for the Middle East. A policy that has to be grounded in the recognition that the people of Israel will never be secure without upholding the inherent rights and dignity of the Palestinian people as well.

Madam President, after six months of war the situation regrettably in Gaza is worse than ever. Hamas is not defeated, nor do the experts that I have spoken to believe it can be. Gaza is all but destroyed. Two million Palestinians lack the basic necessities of life and have nothing to return to.

We need to change course. The hostages need to come home. The killing needs to stop. The war needs must end.

Madam President, I yield back.