

Open Letter to Sheffield Hallam University Leadership Team

14/11/2023

calling for the University to condemn the Israeli genocide and for solidarity action with the Palestinian people, as was done for Ukraine after the Russian invasion. The Open Letter garnered nearly 300 signatures from Hallam staff and students and was posted on the internet and social media.

At this moment, Israeli forces are engaged in an explicitly genocidal assault on the whole population of Gaza. The death toll has now surpassed 6,500 half of them children (Al Jazeera 26/10/23). We are writing to you with a heartfelt plea to condemn this war crime and publicly disassociate the University from the government's support for an event so monstrous that it will reverberate down the ages as one of the most inhuman acts of our time. We will be asked in the future how good people could allow such killing and devastation to be perpetrated in front of the world's eyes. We hope the University will stand on the right side of history.

We also condemn the attacks on civilians by Hamas on 7 October: this is no time for selective outrage or condemnation. However, as António Guterres, UN Secretary General, has said: *'It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum. The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing.'*

Before October this year, Gaza was already reduced to an open-air prison of 2.2 million people, half of whom are under 18. In fact it is more accurate to call Gaza a concentration camp where a whole population were forced to fend without adequate food, water or power, with the majority of the population reliant on UN aid, unable to move freely to find work and build their lives. And since the construction of the Apartheid wall around Gaza there have been repeated bombings of the Gaza strip by the Israeli state, the most devastating being those in 2008 and 2014 when over 2000 Palestinians lost their lives on each occasion.

But now we are witnessing on our TV screens a genocide being planned, announced and then executed on the whole of Gaza with no protest or pushback from the UK political establishment. Indeed, the UK government shamefully declined to support a resolution at the UN for a

ceasefire. To cut off food and water to one child is a murderous act; to cut off food and water to a million children, at a stroke, while blowing them up in a frenzied barrage from the skies, is an accelerated genocide on an enormous scale. To try to force 1.1 million people to abandon their homes and move many miles, without means of transport and under constant bombardment, constitutes not just a crime against humanity but a genocide. MP Crispin Blunt has already warned government ministers and opposition MPs of the 'legal peril' they face in their complicity with Israel's war crimes and the International Centre for Justice for Palestinians, of which he is a director, has communicated its intention to prosecute those responsible.

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began last year, the University issued a statement in opposition to the invasion and in sympathy with the Ukrainian people. The University also quickly established a Memorandum of Understanding with a Ukrainian HE institution and arranged and facilitated staff and student exchanges between our two institutions as well as other forms of solidarity and support. For all these reasons we ask that the University does not stay silent on Palestine. At the same time as its assault on Gaza, Israel has also enacted siege conditions on the occupied West Bank and continued its arrests and deadly assaults on civilians, including students, in Palestinian towns and villages. We are all proud of our Helena Kennedy Centre and our University of Sanctuary Status, along with our Refugee Rights Hub. Gaza, a precarious sanctuary for Palestinian refugees, is being destroyed as we write. Furthermore, we already have a Memorandum of Understanding, signed in January 2022, with An-Najah National University in Nablus. The University has so far neglected to make public this fact (though the Helena Kennedy Centre has recently referred to it) and has done little to engage with Nablus colleagues to develop its potential.

In the light of all of this, we appeal to you to publicly condemn the genocidal actions of the Israeli state, to spell out clearly the illegality of its actions under international law, and to send a message of friendship and solidarity to our colleagues at An-Najah National University.

This is no time for people of good conscience to abandon their principles - it is a time to do all we can to stop a genocide already underway. We urge the University to speak out now.