FACILITATING A TURKEY SHOOT

Posted on January 2, 2009 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Linda McQuaig, The Toronto Star, 30 December 2008

On Israel's 60th anniversary last April, Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised Canada's "unshakable" support for Israel.

By Linda McQuaig, The Toronto Star, 30 December 2008

On Israel's 60th anniversary last April, Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised Canada's "unshakable" support for Israel.

At the time, this struck me as odd. It would be understandable for a prime minister to offer Canada's "unshakable" support for principles – democracy, the rule of law, human rights, etc. But for a country? A country is led by a government, and a government is always fallible. Why would Canada promise its unqualified support for any country?

Such unqualified support is particularly problematic when the country is locked in a bitter struggle with millions of people whose land it has held under military occupation for more than forty years.

The problematic nature of Harper's promise has taken on a new dimension with Israel's intense bombing of the Gaza Strip, which has left more than 300 Palestinians dead.

Even before the bombing began on Saturday, the 2-year-old Israeli blockade had largely sealed Gaza's borders, creating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

Early this month, UN Special Rapporteur Richard Falk reported that Israel's siege of Gaza was allowing "only barely enough food and fuel to enter to stave off mass famine and disease." He described Israel's action as "collective punishment."

Falk, a Jewish-American law professor, called on the world community to take action to protect the 1.5 million people in Gaza, noting that "ome governments of the world are complicit by continuing their support politically and economically for Israel's punitive approach."

Canada, with its "unshakable" support, seems to fit into this category. Indeed, last March Canada signed an agreement with Israel establishing co-operation in "border management and security."

On Saturday, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon blamed the current violence squarely on militant Palestinian groups firing rockets into southern Israel. Cannon offered no criticism of Israel for dropping bombs on the densely populated Palestinian territory.

Ottawa's stance resembles that of the Bush administration, which has put all blame for the current bloodshed on Palestinians.

But, according to Falk, it was actually Israel that broke the truce between Israel and Hamas, the elected Palestinian government in Gaza. The truce had held for several months, Falk noted, until an

Israeli incursion into Gaza last month killed several people. After that, Palestinian militants resumed their rocket attacks, which have killed two Israelis.

Ottawa and Washington have emphasized Israel's right to defend itself. Neither government has suggested any comparable right for the Palestinians – even though it is the Palestinians, not the Israelis, who are acutely vulnerable.

Israel has total air supremacy, and a large nuclear arsenal. The Palestinians are without any means of self-defence (beyond the crude rockets they fire into Israel).

This extreme military imbalance means that the current fighting is not really a military conflict (as it's often portrayed in the media), but rather a turkey shoot.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu expressed outrage at the lopsided nature of the fight: "In the context of total aerial supremacy, in which one side in a conflict deploys lethal aircraft against opponents with no means of defending themselves, the bombardment bears all the hallmarks of war crimes."

The Palestinian rocket attacks on Israel should also be condemned. They are violent acts against civilians, and Israel has a right to defend itself. But this isn't an open-ended right. It doesn't include the right to impose collective punishment or to bomb a defenceless population.

The Harper government, in providing "unshakable" support for well-armed Israel, is helping facilitate the turkey shoot.

Linda McQuaig's column appears every other week. *lmcquaig@sympatico.ca*