

## LAUNCH OF “TO MY FRIEND IN GAZA”

Wednesday, 21 January 2009, Alexis, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA



### Speech by Marina Mahathir

Assalamualaikum and Good Afternoon,

Mr Youssef Oomar, UNICEF Representative Malaysia and Special Representative Brunei,

En Ifzan Ibrahim, from +wondermilk,

Ms Angela Leong from Alexis Bistro,

Members of the media,

Ladies and gentlemen.

Since December 27 2008 I have watched with horror the unfolding tragedy in Gaza. Every day the numbers of the dead have risen steadily until as of yesterday, 24 days after the attacks started, 1312 Palestinians have died including 417 children and 108 women. 5340 people have been injured.

As a human being, I mourn all these deaths and share the grief of those who have lost their loved ones and have seen their family members and friends maimed and disabled. But most of all, as a mother I have been horrified at a situation where children have been witness to so much violence, atrocities and death every day relentlessly for more than 3 weeks. Worse still, that these children should live in fear for their own lives and that of those they love and depend on.

All mothers want to protect their children. I empathize greatly with all those mothers in Gaza who have found themselves helpless to not only protect their children from death and injury but also from the extreme fear that comes with such a situation. How does any mother sleep at night when she does not know when she might lose her children next?

*This* mother could not sleep thinking of her sisters in Gaza and their children. One night, after thinking and thinking about how I could help, I realized that what the children of Gaza needed was to know that there are people around the world thinking of them, that they are not alone, that they have friends around the globe who are praying for their safety.



Thus was this project, To My Friend in Gaza, or Untuk Kawan Ku di Gaza, born. Malaysian children are invited to write letters, postcards, cards or make drawings which express their support and encouragement to the children of Gaza. These letters will be translated into Arabic and then will be handed over to UNICEF to be sent over to Gaza via UNICEF in the Occupied Territories.

Providing moral support to children in conflict or post-conflict situations is, I believe, an important way of helping the children heal from the emotional scars that they inevitably receive. I was encouraged by reports, for instance, that children in Timor Leste who were orphaned by the civil war there were delighted to receive letters from children in Japan. They were touched that someone cared about them after all that they had been through and this helped them recover faster. I believe that the same can happen to the children in Gaza.

It is also my belief that this recovery is important for those children because if we want peace to prevail in that part of the world in the future, children must grow up without believing that fear is the way to solve problems. They must have hope that there is a better world out there where people can live in peace. I think when our children reach out to them, it will give them that hope and that will stop them from being caught in the terrible trap of believing that violence is the only way of the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, this project was conceived and executed in all of one week. For this I have several people to thank. First of all, Mr Youssef Oomar from UNICEF who agreed without hesitation to support this project by agreeing to take the letters to Gaza. Secondly to Ifzan Ibrahim, from +wondermilk, who listened to me over the phone and understood what we needed in a logo for this project immediately, and donated his creative services and the printed materials.

I'd also like to thank Alexis Bistro for agreeing to host us here and for the canapés and drinks. And the staff of both UNICEF and Mosaique for helping out with all the myriad things that need to be done to ensure the smooth launching of this project.

Ladies and gentlemen, while today might be the launch of the project, in fact the news about it has already gotten out. Last week after I got UNICEF and wondermilk onboard, I decided to email my friends to tell them about it and to ask for their support. I also messaged friends on Facebook about it.



What has happened since proves the success of viral marketing. My friends forwarded these messages to their friends, wrote their own notes on Facebook and more and more people became interested to participate. Two days ago I received my first letters, from a total stranger who sent me five letters and cards made by some very young children from the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints in PJ. Today I received some more from another friend. What I thought of as a small and simple project has grown and grown.

Additionally, there have been other ideas that have stemmed from this. Parents are asking their children's schools to support by asking their students to write letters too. One of these parents, Puan Aimy Rashid is here along with Puan Wan Fatimah Ahmad, the head of the PIBG of Convent Bukit Nanas 1. This Friday Puan Aimy will be holding a talk on the situation of children in Gaza to the students there and then asking them to write their letters for this project. I believe there are many more schools that will be doing the same thing. One other idea is to put up some of these letters onto a website so that everyone can read them and perhaps even put them in a book. And perhaps we can also think of letters from Malaysian mothers to mothers in Gaza.

I can't thank everyone enough for the support. It just goes to show that there is no shortage of love and compassion among Malaysians, and that the simplest ideas sometimes catch the imagination best. So I'd like to thank all Malaysians, both children and their parents, in advance for their support of this project. InsyaAllah, we are all not only going to shine a little light for the children in Gaza but also hopefully in the long-term for the entire region.

Thank you.