

Thousands fill Toronto synagogue in solidarity

Megan O'Toole, National Post, With Files From Canwest News Service Published: Friday, January 09, 2009

More than 4,000 people packed into a synagogue in midtown Toronto last night to voice their support for Israel in one of several rallies held across the country in response to renewed fighting in the Gaza Strip.

Demonstrators waved blue-and-white Israeli flags outside the Beth Tzedec Synagogue while signs inside proclaimed "Freedom from Terror" and "Rally with the People of Israel."

The night's key address came from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who spoke in a pre-recorded address during a satellite telecast from Beersheva.

"We don't want much ... that our children, that our families in every part of the country will live in safety and security, that they will not hear the whistle of a missile," Mr. Olmert said.

Rally organizer Howard English said the rally's goal was to demonstrate national solidarity with the people of Israel and raise awareness of the plight of one million people in the state's south who are "tormented by Hamas missiles day after day."

Several politicians added their voices to the cause, including Peter Kent, Minister of State of Foreign Affairs, and Liberal MP Joe Volpe.

Mr. Kent reiterated the Conservative government's position as a "staunch and proud ally" of Israel, pointing to Ottawa's hope that a sustainable ceasefire can be achieved.

"We want the suffering on both sides to end," he said.

Across the street from the synagogue, a handful of demonstrators assembled to express their condemnation of the Israel's offensive, which has killed hundreds and sparked a humanitarian crisis.

The conflict, now in its 13th day, erupted on Dec. 27, when Israel moved to try to prevent rocket attacks by Hamas militants in the territory.

For security reasons, rallygoers were searched before entering the synagogue and prohibited from bringing in their own flags or banners. Organizers instead handed out Canadian and Israeli flags.

Many audience members became visibly emotional during a video that interspersed images of terrified Israeli children with those of masked terrorists firing rockets from inside the Gaza Strip.

Rally participant David Korman said the public was not properly educated about the terror Israelis live with daily.

"A lot of people try to live in peace in Israel, but they are bombarded daily, indiscriminately, targeted as civilians, and the world has paid no attention," Mr. Korman said.

According to statistics from the rally's organizers, more than 10,000 shells have hit the Western Negev region, home to one million Israelis, since 2001. More than 30 have died and more than 600 have been wounded, organizers said.

Earlier in the day, several prominent Jewish Canadians spoke out against Israel for its role in the latest violence.

Physicist Ursula Franklin and pianist Anton Kuerti were among a group gathered in Toronto that said the bombing of the Palestinian population in Gaza was a "horrendous" assault, and called for an immediate ceasefire and a lifting of the blockade of Gaza.