

# US Presbyterians reject Israel divestment

RACHEL ZOLL - AP Religion Writer - Associated Press

By a razor-thin margin, the largest Presbyterian group in the United States rejected a proposal Thursday to divest from three companies that do business with Israel. Pro-Palestinian advocates vowed to try again.

The Presbyterian General Assembly voted 333-331, with two abstentions, to reject the divestment plan. A second vote instead affirmed a policy of investment in support of peace in Israel and the Palestinian territories. That proposal passed by a much wider margin, 369-290 with eight abstentions.

The votes came after days of discussion and more than two hours of floor debate at the meeting of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Pittsburgh. The policymaking body will meet again on Friday, but there is little chance the divestment plan could be revived.

Divestment advocates said the targeted companies — Caterpillar Inc., Hewlett-Packard Co. and Motorola — profit from the occupation by providing bulldozers, surveillance technology and other products to the Israeli military.

Major Jewish groups from across the political spectrum had lobbied furiously against the measure, including the liberal-leaning pro-Israel groups Americans for Peace Now and J Street. The American Jewish Committee, a public policy group, said the proposal demonized Israel and threatened Christian-Jewish relations.

The Israel Palestine Mission Network, a pro-Palestinian Presbyterian group, said they were "disappointed," but said they will continue their efforts to "alleviate the suffering of Palestinians and to help bring peace and justice to Israelis and Palestinians alike."

The vote would have given pro-Palestinian advocates a notable victory at a time when the divestment movement appears to be gaining momentum. Pension funds in Norway and Sweden have divested themselves of holdings in some firms involved in building in settlements or helping to erect Israel's contentious West Bank separation barrier. European activists have stepped up pressure on companies by exposing their West Bank ties and picketing stores that sell goods produced in Israeli settlements.

Last week, the U.S. investment firm MSCI Inc. announced it had removed Caterpillar from three of its popular indexes that track socially responsible investments, citing concerns about the Israeli military's use of company bulldozers in the Palestinian territories. The MSCI decision led mutual fund giant TIAA-CREF to divest \$72 million in Caterpillar stock.

Caterpillar has come under scrutiny because of the Israeli military's use of armored-

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

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plated Caterpillar bulldozers. Caterpillar says it does not equip bulldozers with armor or sell directly to the Israeli military. Instead, equipment is first sold to the U.S. government and then resold to Israel and outfitted for military use.

At the Presbyterian meeting, church members made emotional pleas both in favor and against the proposal.

Nicholas Nott, a delegate from the Presbytery of Great Rivers in Peoria, Ill., home of the Caterpillar headquarters, defended the company.

Nott had worked for Caterpillar for decades. He expressed concern about the plight of Palestinians and regret about any use of Caterpillar equipment that contributed to their suffering. But he also cited Caterpillar's humanitarian work in response to disasters such as the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti.

"You are being shown a very narrow side of Caterpillar machines," Nott said.

But Rick Ufford-Chase, who served as a General Assembly moderator, the church's highest elected office, when the divestment debate began in 2004, said he was heartbroken by the outcome Thursday.

"No investment will make any difference if we fail to dismantle the apparatus of the occupation," said Ufford-Chase, executive director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. He told the delegates they should be "naming the occupation for what it is: a form of apartheid. We must stand with our Palestinian brothers and sisters."

**Source URL (retrieved on 10/22/2014 - 12:54am):**

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