

Gaza: from economic to humanitarian disaster

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Gaza's humanitarian crisis began long before the world decided that the Palestinians had to be punished for voting in the Hamas government.

Since Israel's occupation in 1967 of the little land left to the Palestinians, Gaza has suffered miserably. Israel did everything in the 25 years before Oslo (1993) to shut off opportunities for economic growth and made sure that Gaza's infrastructure remained undeveloped. Despite the optimism of the Oslo Accords, Israel's vice-like grip on Gaza continued and the people found themselves increasingly denied freedom of movement which again impacted on their economic development. Unable to produce or invest, the Palestinians became more and more dependent on imports from Israel.

Nothing changed after Israel removed the deliberately implanted 7,000 Jewish settlers to a massive publicity campaign around Israel's "painful sacrifice for peace". Instead, the Palestinians were left hopelessly impoverished and were literally strangled economically and socially by Israel's formidable military cordon around the Gaza Strip. This, despite Israel claiming that it had disengaged and was no longer occupying Gaza. All imports and exports came to a standstill and Palestinian businesses were forced to close. In January 2006, Israel closed Karni crossing – the commercial and humanitarian lifeline of Gaza with a 200 truck per day capacity. Truckloads of farming produce destined for Israel and international markets were suddenly unable to get through. According to UN-OCHA, this meant more than \$US30 million in losses to the Palestinian economy as farmers had no choice but to donate their crops or destroy them as they rotted.

By the time Hamas was elected to government, the Palestinians had been reduced to dependency on international donors. This situation was exacerbated when Israel and the world decided to cut off funds for the government's operating budget because the elections had not produced the results they had wanted. Barely two months later, as former World Bank president James Wolfensohn stepped down from his role as envoy to Israel and the Palestinians, he reported that if Israel continued its regime of restrictions on trade and labour and the flow of donations weakened further without a turn around by 2008, 74 percent of the Palestinians would be living beneath the poverty line and unemployment would reach 47 percent. In particular, he pointed to the systematic restrictions of movement Israel has imposed on the Palestinians in the West Bank and at the Gaza Strip border crossings saying that these measures are largely to blame for the tremendous damage done to the Palestinian economy.

Since Hamas re-took power in Gaza after routing Fatah forces, the Palestinians there have been living under a state of siege. Israel has adamantly refused to let through some 104

boxes of basic food stuffs being provided by UNRWA to more than half of Gaza's population, despite saying that aid through UNRWA would be given passage. Israel cites "security considerations" as the reason. The only opening is through the Karm Abu Salem Crossing in the southern Gaza Strip and its 15 truck per day capacity cannot serve a 1.4 million population in desperate need. According to the UN, at least 100 trucks a day need to be going into Gaza.

The shortages of food, water supplies, fuel and medicine are so alarming that organizations like UNRWA and OXFAM are calling for an immediate re-opening of Gaza's border. The World Food Program says that Gaza's food stocks will only last for another two weeks, four at most, if more shipments are not let in. Hospitals and clinics have only barely been able to function with the help of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

This week UNRWA stated that 90% of the Gazan population is on their food supplies aid program list. This number is expected to rise as food aid remains stranded due to Israel's border closures. In a report submitted to the UN Security Council, Michael Williams, UN messenger for the peace process in the Middle East said that, "basic survival supplies in the Gaza Strip will not last for more than a week" and that more cases of starvation, malnourishment and illness would occur if the Karni crossing is not re-opened and allowed to operate at full capacity. Also calling for an immediate re-opening of the border was the Director of Oxfam International Jeremy Hobbs: "The entrapment of Gaza is completely unacceptable. . . Withholding aid as a political weapon is bringing untold suffering to an entire population."

All this is being done against the background of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land and the continual denial of their right to self-determination in their own land. This has been tolerated by the entire world community for decades. Now, in an outrageous abuse of human rights and political intrigue, the Palestinians in Gaza are being isolated and pushed deeper into destitution and despair while the funds Israel and the West withheld for 18 months are pouring into the government coffers of the Palestinians in the West Bank. Such man-made decisions used to further political interests are a crime against humanity.

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