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THE EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN TO

**END THE
SIEGE
ON GAZA**



The campaign's last parliamentary delegation holds a press conference at the Rafah Crossing from Egypt into Gaza. (2010)

Eyewitness Report

The Tragedy that is Gaza Today

In mid January 2010, the European Campaign to End the Siege of Gaza (ECESG) organized a 50-person delegation of MPs, politicians and former ministers into Gaza to witness firsthand the conditions on the ground one year after the 22-day Israeli invasion that laid waste to the Gaza Strip. Our goal was to collect and document the facts, and then return to our respective countries and the European Parliament to push for actions that will bring immediate humanitarian relief and an end to the siege, as well as peace and justice to the Palestinian people.

The itinerary of the delegation included meetings with members from the Palestinian Legislative Council; Ismail Haniya, Prime Minister in Gaza; and John Ging, Director of Operations for the UN Relief & Works Agency (UNRWA).

We also toured the areas most affected by the recent Israeli invasion, including Izbet Abed Rabu, the Al-Fakhoura School, the Al-Salam neighborhood and the neighborhood of the Al-Samouni clan, which lost 23 members during the war.

Upon leaving Gaza, we met in Cairo with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abo Al-Gheit, Speaker of the Egyptian Parliament Fathi Sorour and Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa.

During our visit to Gaza, the delegation viewed firsthand much of what has been documented by international organizations, ranging from bodies of the United Nations to Oxfam and Amnesty International. In addition to touring the most damaged areas of Gaza, the ECESG delegation met with a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that outlined the challenges they face in helping the people of Gaza. Among the conditions we observed for ourselves, as well as discussed with the NGOs, were acute crises in a number of sectors vital to community and family life.



The delegation of MPs witness the many destroyed buildings that have not been able to be rebuilt since the last Israeli invasion. (2010)

Destruction of Homes

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. More than 15,000 homes sustained significant damage during the attack, displacing 100,000 Palestinians. Today, as described to the delegation by Ibrahim Radwan, a spokesperson for the Engineering Syndicate in Gaza, it's estimated that nearly 3,000 homes still need major repairs, and about 3,540 need complete rebuilding. This is to say nothing of the backlog of homes severely damaged in previous military actions, houses left half-built due to lack of materials, and previously existing properties condemned as unhygienic or unsafe to live in.

During its tour of the Gaza Strip, particularly the northern areas, the ECESG delegation observed many examples of the impact of this destruction of shelter, a basic requirement for survival.

"I was immediately struck by the desperate condition of the inhabitants of Izbet Abed Rabu, a small village we visited in northeastern Gaza. Some 300-400 houses, a factory and farmland had been completely razed to the ground. Apart from the fact that a considerable amount of the rubble had obviously been removed, all that was left could only be described as a bomb site through which I had to pick my way carefully. We met a family who were obviously living in the most abject conditions - three or four generations, including an old

lady who was said to be over 100, living in a tent without washing facilities of any kind and only a makeshift fire on the ground for cooking."

-- Colin Low, member of the British House of Lords and president of the European Blind Union

A little-talked-about aspect of the Israeli destruction during Operation Cast Lead was the evidence seen by the delegation of systematic and targeted shooting by Israeli forces below many windowsills in the refugee camps we visited. The significance of this is twofold: First, the lack of evidence of physical assault or use of heavy-caliber weapons on the vast majority of the targeted buildings suggests that the attacks were not designed to rout an enemy, but rather to provide cover for advancing Israeli forces. The use of such unwarranted weapons on civilian buildings (which could easily penetrate the structures) indicates a deliberate breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention that was missed by the Goldstone Report. Second, it also corroborates reports documented by Israeli NGOs (such as Breaking the Silence) of Israeli forces placing a higher premium on force protection than allowed under international law and using live ammunition to intimidate the local population.

During our tour of the most destroyed areas of Gaza, we met with the Al-Samouni extended family, which lost 23 of its 48 members and was one



Delegation members listen to Gaza residents describe the devastation of their homes and families. (2010)

of the featured case studies in the Goldstone Report. The Israeli ground offensive reached the Al-Samouni neighborhood, a mostly rural area just south of Gaza City, around 4 a.m. on Jan. 4, 2009. In addition to the ground forces moving in from the east, it is believed that troops arrived by helicopter and landed on the roofs of several houses in the area. That is when their heartbreaking ordeal began.

One of the first houses to be targeted was the home of Ateya Helmi Al-Samouni, 45, and his wife (who shared their story with the delegation) and their four children. Faraj, the 22-year-old son, had already run into Israeli soldiers as he stepped outside the house to warn his neighbors that their roof was burning. The soldiers entered Ateya Al-Samouni's house by force, after throwing an explosive device. In the midst of the smoke, fire and noise, Ateya Al-Samouni stepped forward, his arms raised, and declared that he was the owner of the house. The soldiers shot him while he was still holding his ID and an Israeli driving license. The soldiers then opened fire inside the room, in which the approximately 20 family members were sheltered. Several were injured and Ahmad, the couple's four-year-old son, was in particularly serious condition.

At about 6:30 a.m. the soldiers ordered the family to leave the house. They were forced to leave Ateya's body behind, but carried Ahmad, who was still breathing. The family tried to enter the house of an uncle next door, but was not allowed to do so

by the soldiers. The soldiers told them to leave the area, but a few meters down the road, a different group of soldiers stopped them and ordered the men to undress completely. Faraj Al-Samouni, who was carrying the severely injured Ahmad, pleaded with them to be allowed to take the injured to Gaza City. The soldiers replied using abusive language. Faraj Al-Samouni, his mother and other members of the family entered the house of an uncle in the neighborhood. From there, they called the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS). At around 4 p.m. that day, a PRCS ambulance managed to reach the vicinity of the house where Ahmad was lying wounded, but was prevented by the Israeli armed forces from rescuing him. Ahmad died at around 2 a.m. during the night of Jan. 5.

The following morning those present in the house, about 45 persons, decided to leave. They made white flags and walked in the direction of Salah Ad-Din Street. A group of soldiers on the street told them to go back to the house, but they walked on, in the direction of Gaza City. The soldiers shot at their feet, without injuring anyone. Two kilometers further north, they found ambulances that took the injured to Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City.

The tale of their suffering was compounded by the eyewitness accounts of Mona Al-Samouni, 12, who saw her parents shot to death by Israeli soldiers, and Almaza ("Jewel") Al-Samouni, 13, whose mother and six siblings were all killed. Today, like a number of the many other children who witnessed horrific events during the invasion, Mona and



Almaza Al-Samouni, 13, describes to the delegation how the Israeli army killed her mother and six siblings. (2010)

Almaza suffer from depression and nightmares, becoming increasingly withdrawn and silent - common ways of coping with tragedies, doctors say.

Al-Haj Sobhi Al-Samouni, the head of the clan, stressed that the extended family has no political affiliation whatsoever; rather, they are merely farmers. How can these deliberate inflictions of pain and suffering be anything but war crimes? They must be investigated and their perpetrators brought to justice.

It is shocking that such destruction and trauma are still festering more than a year after the invasion. However, despite the end of active combat, Israel has continued and even tightened its restriction on the entry of construction materials into Gaza. Barely four trucks of construction materials a month entered Gaza during the last year, just 0.05 percent of pre-blockade monthly flows. As a result, spare parts and all kinds of construction materials – cement, gravel, wood, pipes, glass, steel bars, aluminum, tar – are in desperately short supply or completely unavailable, with little or no capacity to produce them locally given both the destruction of local industry and the lack of raw materials, which are also banned under the blockade. During the whole of 2008, for instance, only about 20,000 tons of cement were allowed entry. Even smaller amounts are permitted now.

What the Palestinians of Gaza desperately need now is a systematic, large-scale reconstruction operation. Piecemeal, temporary “humanitarian” missions that provide tents and other temporary solutions are wholly insufficient.

"The destruction impacts every aspect of daily life in Gaza, regardless of the residents' political opinion. It is unacceptable from a humanitarian point of view."

-- Joseph Zisyadis, Swiss parliamentarian



Two children study in the light of a candle during a frequent blackout in Gaza. (2009)

Few Places to Teach

This destruction is not limited to homes. Many other structures vital to the Strip's operation are affected as well. John Ging, Director of Operations for the United Nations Relief & Works Agency (UNRWA) in Gaza, talked with the delegation at length about the crisis in the schools, including damaged school buildings, a lack of supplies and children who cannot concentrate due to emotional trauma. As Mr. Ging so eloquently pointed out, the state of the schools will have a significant impact on future peace initiatives: Just over 52 percent of Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants are children under the age of 18, so today's youth will be tomorrow's decision makers.

Even prior to the Israeli military offensive, said Mr. Ging, the education system in Gaza was already severely weakened by the blockade, impacting the quality of education provided to students. Blockade restrictions have prevented the rehabilitation of aging educational infrastructure and much-needed construction of new schools to keep up with the annual increases in student population. Last school year, 82 percent of governmental schools and 88 percent of UNRWA schools were operating on a double-shift system, with different pupils using the same desk on a shift or rotating basis, in order to accommodate the growing number of students.

During the 2008-9 military offensive, the situation became even worse. Eighteen schools were destroyed and at least 280 were damaged. The ECESG observed two of the schools that were hardest hit in the Israeli offensive. One was the Al-Fakhoura School, an UNRWA school targeted by the Israeli army on Jan. 6, 2009. UNRWA had just transformed the school into a temporary shelter for dozens of local families who, like thousands of other local residents, had been driven out of their homes by the Israeli army's military onslaught. One of the four artillery shells struck the house of Samir Deeb, instantly killing him, his wife, three of his children, five of his brother's children and two female relatives. The other three artillery shells exploded next to Al-Fakhoura School. Twenty-seven civilians were killed instantly, and more than 50 were injured.

Under customary international law, it is illegal to target civilian areas, including schools, hospitals and United Nations facilities. The Israeli army claimed that Al-Fakhoura School was targeted because Hamas militants had fired at them from the school. However, an attacking force is obliged to take the necessary precautions to protect the civilian population. Given the densely populated, residential nature of the area surrounding the school, an artillery attack in the vicinity could



John Ging, UNRWA Director of Operations in Gaza, describes the challenges he faces. (2010)

reasonably be expected to cause excessive civilian casualties.

"It was entirely inevitable if artillery shells landed in that area there would be a high number of casualties."

-- John Ging, UNRWA Director of Operations in the Gaza Strip

John Ging also stated that his agency had provided the Israelis with exact geographical coordinates of all UN facilities in Gaza, including Al-Fakhoura School. He refuted military claims that Hamas gunmen had fired at them from the school. **"I can tell you categorically that there was no military activity in that school at the time of the tragedy,"** he said. **"They were innocent people."**

The delegation also visited the former site of the American International School, which teaches from a U.S.-developed curriculum that includes instruction in human rights but was almost totally destroyed early in the offensive, killing a school guard. The school re-located and re-opened within just a few weeks of the destruction of its 32,000-square-foot headquarters, but now must house its 250 students in a rented building of just 300 square feet. Although the rubble has been cleared from the old site, no rebuilding or reconstruction has been able to take place one year later.

To date, almost nothing has been rebuilt or repaired as a result of the ban on entry of construction materials into Gaza. With the start of the new

school year in September 2009, approximately 1,200 secondary students from North Gaza were not able to attend schools due to the lack of space to accommodate them and lack of alternative spaces for educational purposes.

There also is a chronic shortage of school supplies. For 240,199 school students who are not officially classified as refugees and thus not served by UNRWA – constituting more than half the student population – the Israeli ban on the import of paper and other basic educational materials remains firmly in place.

The consequences of a weakened education system, plagued by shortages of space and materials and an environment unfit for learning, are evident in the decline in school attendance and in the performance of students. In the first semester of the 2007-2008 school year, only 20 percent of sixth graders in Gaza passed standardized exams in math, science, English and Arabic.

"The Minister of Education told us that the exam results at the schools are falling since the most-recent Israeli offensive. Even worse, we were told by psychiatrists that children now routinely ask when they will die...The future of the region depends on the next generation of Palestinian youths, yet they are being severely damaged as each day passes under siege..."

-- Gerald Kaufman, member of the British Parliament



The Gaza power plant was damaged after being bombarded by Israeli forces. (2009)

Living in the Dark

Also making life difficult for Gazans is the extensive damage to the power infrastructure. During this visit, we witnessed a much-deteriorating situation, with disastrous impact on education and healthcare. While key power lines have been restored, 90 percent of the people of Gaza continue to suffer power cuts of four to eight hours a day.

The European Union is now actively making the situation even worse. Gaza's only power plant is dependent in part on shipments of diesel fuel that were formerly purchased by the European's PEGASE program. However, since November, the EU stopped earmarking funds for the fuel purchase, allowing the Palestinian Authority to allocate the monies as it wishes. This decision, combined with internal strife between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, has forced the Strip's power plant to cut service to more than 50 percent of residents.

The power shortages make the use of many electrical appliances and devices that we take for granted impossible: refrigerators, elevators, washing machines, water heaters, ovens, computers and phone chargers – to name just a few. Without electricity, children's schooling is severely restricted, particularly science and computer projects. Likewise, students have difficulty

completing their homework while they are cold and have inadequate light. In the healthcare sector, hospitals and clinics revert to hard-to-obtain generators when the power is cut. (Israel prohibits import of generators, making delivery through the tunnels the only option.) However, if a technical failure occurs or diesel fuel runs out, vital activities such as surgeries are disrupted – sometimes with life-threatening consequences.

"The people of Gaza do not deserve to live – metaphorically or in reality – in darkness."

-- Benita Ferrero-Waldner, former European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy



Children wait in line to get their share of clean drinking water. (2009)

Water: a Crisis of Quantity & Quality

The power cuts also severely impair the ability to access running water – with interruptions in supply a feature of daily life in Gaza, especially for the many people who live in high-rise flats (about half the residents of Gaza City), where the water must be carried to upper stories using electric pumps. Showering, brushing teeth, doing laundry and washing dishes become impossible. The water and sanitation infrastructure itself was also badly damaged and remains in desperate need of repair – at an estimated cost of US\$6 million. Yet, Gaza's Coastal Municipalities Water Utility, which ECESG delegations visited during previous trips, tells us that since June 2007, the Strip has been plagued by a shortage of spare parts needed to keep its equipment in good repair. Due to the ban on the importation of building materials, there has been almost no new construction of infrastructure for nearly three years.

The increased pumping needed to access increasingly scarce water has depleted the aquifer and accelerated the salination of the water. In addition, the loss of pressure in pipes means that polluted water from the surrounding ground can enter the pipes, and is then sent straight to consumers when the water supply restarts.

About 90 percent of the water supplied to Gaza residents is not suitable for drinking, according to

World Health Organizations standards, due to this infiltration of sea water. The WHO reported that at the end of 2008, 28 percent of illnesses in the Strip resulted from poor water quality, and conditions have only worsened since then. In early 2009, about 20 percent of samples from water facilities across the Strip were contaminated at levels that pose a public health risk. In Gaza, diarrhea, an easily preventable disease, causes 12 percent of childhood deaths. Likewise, of the 40,000 or so newborn babies born this year, at least half are at immediate risk of nitrate poisoning; the incidence of "blue baby syndrome" (methaemoglobinaemia) is exceptionally high. An unprecedented number of people have been exposed to nitrate poisoning over 10 years; in some places the nitrate content in water is 300 times World Health Organization standards.

Although there are industrial desalination plants, as well as home units, they cannot operate without electricity. The Israeli blockade also prohibits the importation of chemicals such as chlorine, which is used to help make the water safe for drinking.

As a result, tens of thousands of people rely on supplies of clean water provided by aid agencies, and hundreds of thousands more must buy water trucked in privately. The only alternative is to beg from neighbors or lower their standards of hygiene.



Sewage floods the Zeiton area due to a lack of fuel for the pumping station. (2009)

Sanitation: a Secondary Casualty

Another clearly evident consequence of the power shortages is a complete breakdown of the waste management systems. Ibraheim Radwan of Gaza's Engineering Syndicate described the impact of raw sewage that flows into the sea and sometimes in the streets, with contaminants leaching into tap water.

An uninterrupted supply of electricity is needed to pump waste water from private homes, carry it to purification plants and operate the facilities. During blackouts, diesel fuel can be used to operate the sewage system. However, the government has been forced to divide its scarce diesel supply between assuring water supply and waste treatment. The Strip's three purification plants now operate only sporadically. As a result, about 80 million liters of sewage now flow into the sea every day – more than half the daily sewage output of the Strip. Half is partially treated and half is totally raw.



Gazan children play close to a water treatment station. (2009)



Renal services, like this dialysis machine, are disabled without spare parts, which cannot be imported due to the blockade. (2009)

Healthcare in Jeopardy

During the ECESG visit, we met with an 11-year-old Palestinian, Loay Soboh, who lost his eyes in an Israeli air strike. One of our members, Colin Low, member of the British House of Lords and President of the European Blind Union, also met with Huda Naim Naim, the member of the Palestinian Legislative Council with responsibility for disability. She is in touch with a number of NGOs representing different types of disability and is endeavoring to set one up to represent blind people. To assist, Lord Low is planning to facilitate a dialogue with the World Blind Union (of which he is an officer) and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (for which he is an executive member). WBU and ICEVI have launched a major initiative called EFA-VI (Education for All Visually Impaired Children) that is designed to build on the UN's Education for All program by helping to address the failure to reach visually impaired children.

Meanwhile, Mohammed Al Aklouk, Chair of Gaza's Public Service Association, described how the crises in construction, power, water and sanitation affect the vital provision of healthcare for the blind and others in need.

Since the end of hostilities, most health services have resumed and are functioning as normally as possible within the constraints imposed by the

blockade. However, during the frequent period of electricity shortages, the Strip's hospitals and clinics are forced to limit their services, postpone surgeries and medical tests, and scale down lab services. Meanwhile, the lack of a reliable power supply endangers the proper storage of medicine, blood units and food.

Blackouts wreak havoc on medical equipment and computers, and other devices have been destroyed by surges when electricity is suddenly restored.

There also is a chronic shortage of specialized medical personnel and access to training, along with a lack of spare parts for damaged or malfunctioning equipment. In February 2010, the General Department of Pharmacy in Gaza reported that 104 essential drugs – including treatments for cancer, heart conditions, kidney disease and psychiatric disorders – and 123 types of medical supplies had run out due to the Israeli blockade and ongoing closure of the crossings. Yet referral to other facilities outside the Strip is often not an option. Israeli authorities at Erez Crossing often deny even seriously ill patients permission to exit Gaza for treatment in medical centers in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel or Jordan. Between January and July 2009, an average of only 51 percent of patients applying for access to medical care via Erez Crossing were permitted to exit, while the handling of more than a third of



Many ambulances like this one were destroyed during the Israeli shelling. (2009)

patient requests was delayed. These patients were not able to exit Gaza on time and missed at least one medical appointment; 73 percent were delayed for more than seven days.

Even when these immediate problems are eventually resolved, the legacy of the invasion will continue: Figures from the government in Gaza indicate that around 500 children have been left physically disabled following the Cast Lead invasion. Meanwhile, doctors in Gaza City are reporting an alarming increase in birth defects among women exposed to white phosphorous and other chemicals used in Israeli weapons.

“The white phosphorus that was used by the Israeli army in the heavily populated civilian area of Izbet Abed Rabu was still burning a year after the war.”
 -- Jolanta Szczypinska, member of the Polish Parliament



Al-Quds Hospital in Gaza City was bombed by Israel during the 2008/9 invasion. (2010)



Gaza hospitals still have a great need for medical supplies, a year after the Israeli invasion. (2010)



Homeless children are forced to live in tents, since the Israeli blockade has made it impossible to rebuild. (2010)

It's Not Just Physical

Dr. Eyad El-Sarraj, President of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, stressed to us that it is critical to consider the mental as well as physical health of Gazans.

The UN Inter-Agency Gender Task Force (IAGTF) published in April of 2009 the results of a household survey on the needs and perceptions of men and women in the aftermath of Israel's 23-day military offensive in Gaza. The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews with 1,100 adult men and women across the Gaza Strip in the first week of March 2009. Psychological trauma was consistently rated as a main concern by respondents regardless of gender, region or social group, and psychosocial services were deemed to be a critical need, like food and water, according to the survey.

Among the most vulnerable populations are children. According to a study by NGO Ard Al-Insan, 73 percent of Gaza children are still suffering from psychological and behavioral disorders, including psychological trauma, nightmares, involuntary urination, high blood pressure and diabetes. Similar research conducted by the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) suggests that the majority of children in Gaza are showing signs of anxiety, depression and behavioral problems, including aggression and bed-wetting.

Osama Damo, aid worker for Save the Children in Gaza, said: "This is a traumatized nation. Many children we work with are not able to sleep at night for fear of soldiers returning. Others cry at the sound of loud noises, mistaking them for military jets and tanks coming to bomb their homes. Young children in Gaza are surviving under extreme levels of stress, which will pose long-term dangers not only for their mental health, but for the future of the region."

Save the Children warns that until Israel's tight restrictions on the movement of goods and people in and out of Gaza are lifted and the threat of further conflict eased, the mental health of the 780,000 children living in Gaza could continue to deteriorate.

Dr. Ahmed Abu Tawanheena, Director of the GCMHP, has worked with victims of trauma in Gaza for 20 years. He said: "The safety and comfort for which children rely on their parents has been destroyed twice in one year: First, during the conflict, they saw their parents terrified and unable to protect them from the violence. Now, under the blockade, they see their parents are still unable to provide their basic needs, such as shelter or food. Many children report feeling abandoned by their parents and by the outside world, and parents are left struggling with feelings of guilt. It's a crisis



The children of the Al-Samouni family welcome the delegation. (2010)

which is threatening families and communities across the Gaza Strip."

Another mental health issue that is reaching crisis proportions as a direct result of the Israeli siege and invasion is domestic violence. The UN Security Council has found that gender-based violence becomes alarmingly pervasive during and after any conflict. The situation is no different for the women of Gaza. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), reports of domestic violence cases significantly increased during and after the 2008-9 Israeli invasion.



Delegation members gather in front of a mural outside the Al-Fakhoura School. (2010)



Children play in rough conditions near their homes. (2010)



Due to the Israeli blockade, crops can no longer be exported -- depriving many families of income. (2009)

Nourishing a New Generation

Amal Seyam from Gaza's Women's Affairs Center and Abdelkareim Aashour from the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Center described the need to rebuild the Strip's agricultural sector, to both wean its residents off of handouts and rebuild its industry.

Before the blockade, Gaza had a substantial agricultural sector, with a capacity to grow up to 400,000 tons of produce a year – a third of it for export. Farms also supplied a quarter of Gaza's food needs. The blockade had already dealt a severe blow to farmers by blocking all exports as well as supplies needed for farm operations. Nevertheless, before Operation Cast Lead, more than 40,000 people, or 13 percent of the workforce, worked in agriculture.

However, the invasion caused extensive additional damage to the agricultural sector. Tanks and other military vehicles demolished 17 percent of Gaza's cultivated land, including 17.5 percent of olive, date and other fruit orchards and 9.2 percent of open fields. Farmland was also destroyed by Israeli armored vehicles using it for access routes during the incursion. Greenhouses, livestock shelters, irrigation channels, wells and pumps were bombed or bulldozed. Meanwhile, the blockade prevents the import of replacement materials and parts.

In addition, between a quarter and a third of Gaza's agricultural land now lies within a "no-go area"

(called the "buffer zone" by Israel), which has been officially expanded to 300 meters but in reality extends anywhere between one to two kilometers into Gaza. As a consequence, many farmers have lost their livelihood. Taking direct damage caused by the offensive and the expanded buffer zone together, an estimated 46 percent of agricultural land has been put out of production.

Palestinians are well known for being generous. Their hospitality is, to some degree, measured by the variety of foods served to their guests. However, today, the population is now dependent on rations or food donations from outside. This loss of self-sufficiency and ability to offer hospitality creates a strong sense of indignity.

"Around 200,000 children are being fed by the UN, but because of the fall in funding from the EU and other sources, as well as the difficulty getting supplies in, it is now able provide only 60 percent of the nutrients children need every day in order to develop properly. The result: anemia, stunted growth, attention deficit disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc."

-- Baroness Jenny Tonge, member of the House of Lords, UK



Unemployment has reached unprecedented levels in Gaza, forcing many residents to recycle rubble for a living. (2010)

Employment: Toward Building an Independent Future

Mohsen Abu Ramadan of PNGO, the Palestinian network of civil society NGOs, urged us not to stay focused on immediate humanitarian relief, but to work now for the long-term, independent future of Gaza. For that, industry and employment are essential.

In just the three weeks of the invasion, 700 private businesses were destroyed or suffered serious damage to buildings, equipment or stock, resulting in a combined loss of US\$139 million. In the first three months after the offensive, joblessness in Gaza exceeded 40 percent of the workforce, affecting 140,000 people. An estimated 120,000 private sector jobs have been lost since the blockade was imposed.

While overpriced and often poor-quality consumer goods are entering Gaza illicitly via tunnels from Egypt, the highly inflated prices make them inaccessible to many and irregular trade cannot – and should not be encouraged to – sustain economic production. In addition, they are dangerous (more than 100 Palestinians have reportedly lost their lives when the tunnels collapse or are targeted by Egyptian or Israeli forces) and an excuse for delaying peace (due to charges of weapons smuggling by Hamas).

The tunnels play another destructive role as well. Many young people are forced, because they have no alternative employment options, to work in the tunnels and sometimes remain working underground for days on end.



Due to the Israeli blockade, there has been a total paralysis in the building and construction sector. (2010)



In the spirit of fostering dialogue, the delegation meets with the Hamas Prime Minister, as well as other governmental officials. (2010)

Finding a Solution

Hamas perspective

During meetings with the parliamentary delegation, Hamas officials reiterated that they are committed to reconciliation with Fatah; an immediate, long-term truce with Israel, in which both sides respect past agreements; and the creation of two, sovereign states along the pre-1967 borders. However, government officials claim, most funds are being channeled to the West Bank instead of Gaza and 80 percent of Gaza's population is living under the poverty line.

In addition, Hamas seems firm in its willingness to modify its positions – but only in return for concrete progress.

Prime Minister Ismail Haniya also called for all individuals accused of war crimes to be tried in an independent, international court. When asked how Hamas would fulfill the recommendations of the Goldstone Report for investigation of possible war crimes committed by members of Hamas, Mr. Haniya responded that a commission had been set up, and external lawyers would report back soon, following international standards.

“We find greater-than-apparent significance in the destruction of parliamentary, administrative and police buildings in the Gaza Strip when we place it

in the context of similar actions that have been systematically conducted in the past few years in areas such as Nablus and Ramallah (in the West Bank). By destroying the civilian infrastructure for both politics and policing, the Israeli forces continue to undermine the argument they make about Palestinians not being able to be a partner for peace that can deliver security.”

-- Robert Marshall-Andrews, member of the British Parliament



Delegation members meet with the Palestinian Legislative Council. (2010)

Arab League and Egyptian perspective

In a concluding meeting in Egypt, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa observed that despite the early hopes raised by U.S. President Obama's Cairo speech, there have been as yet no positive, concrete results. Settlement expansion, for example, makes negotiations impossible, he said. They must come to a "full stop," and negotiations must have a firm timeline monitored by the international community. The alternative, he warned, is a one-state solution!

Mr. Moussa agreed that the Arab League also has not done enough, and pledged to continue to advocate for the peace initiative it put forward in 2002. The league has not yet sent representatives to Gaza, for fear of being seen as "taking sides," but will do so soon, he said. Mr. Moussa ended by reminding us of the EU's own obligations. It was the EU, for example, that immediately froze funds for Gaza after Hamas won the parliamentary elections, rather than wait 100 days to give the movement a chance to prove the concerns wrong. He also called on Europe to boycott all products made in the illegal Israeli settlements.

In final meetings with officials from the Egyptian government, the speaker of the house and chairman of its Foreign Relations Committee told us it is unfair to criticize Egypt for its limited opening of the Rafah Crossing into Gaza. After providing a lengthy analysis of the political situation in the region, Egyptian Foreign Minister Abo Al-Gheit

emphasized that Israel is at fault for the siege, not Egypt, and that Egypt would never leave the Palestinians in Gaza without humanitarian aid. However, his bottom line message was this: Egypt will not help the Palestinian people at the expense of Egyptian state stability.



Civil organizations play a significant role in Gazan society, and the delegation talks with a number of NGOs. (2010)



The people of Gaza
await justice!
(2010)

Delegation's call to action

Despite occasional strong language on the severe humanitarian impact of the blockade, the EU has not translated its words into action. With the United States now admitting it "under-estimated" the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the European Union must take the lead, alongside the United States and other players, to secure an end to the blockade. The EU must resolve to undertake concerted action so that the end of Spain's six-month Presidency in June 2010 does not also mark the third anniversary of a continuing blockade on Gaza.

The delegation issues this call to action, which it will seek to implement through meetings with officials of the European Union and continuing personal advocacy:

- The siege on Gaza must be lifted.
- Any war crimes committed during the last war on Gaza must be investigated, and individuals suspected of committing such crimes should be arrested and tried in international court.
- The Palestinian Legislative Council should be invited to visit European capitals and to engage in talks with the European Parliament.
- The will of voters must be respected in all future elections, whether or not the international community approves of their choice.

- Violence against civilians should be condemned, from any source and for any reason.
- Fatah and Hamas must reconcile, since the division affects the Palestinian cause as whole. Any unity government they form must be recognized by the international community.

"What is clear to me is that the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is very dire, and regardless of the politics of the situation, all parties – the EU, U.S., Egypt, the Arab League and Israel – should take much more vigorous action as a matter of urgency to relieve it. If they do not, a deprived and traumatized generation fuelled by hatred and a desire for revenge will become a ticking time-bomb in the explosive cauldron of the Middle East."

-- Clare Short, member of the British Parliament

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The ECESG (www.savegaza.eu) is an umbrella body of non-governmental organizations across Europe that advocates the fundamental right of the Palestinian people in Gaza to live in peace and dignity without being subjected to any form of collective punishment such as the cutting of supplies of food, fuel and medicine or their denial of free access to travel outside Gaza Strip. The ECESG supports the restoration of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in Gaza and lobbies for pressure to be exerted on the occupying power to lift its siege and end the human tragedy there. It urges the participation of politicians and non-politicians alike to honor their duty to stop the suffering of nearly 1.5 million people trapped in Gaza under the most inhumane conditions.

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