

Palestinians under military and economic siege

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Israel has increased its military pressure on the Palestinians and is threatening to reoccupy the West Bank and Gaza.

The most advanced weaponry, including attack helicopters, F-16 fighter jets, tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery weapons, are now being employed against some of the poorest people on earth. In the last week, Israel has deployed F-16 fighter planes to drop two one-tonne bombs on a Palestinian police compound in Ramallah on the West Bank, seized Orient House—the PLO headquarters in Arab East Jerusalem—and launched an air and land invasion of Jenin. Its troops stand ready to invade Bethlehem.

Israel is equipped with advanced sensors, electronic aids and other sophisticated technology to provide surveillance, intelligence and targeting data to support its policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders and militants. It has systematically murdered dozens of people, many of them innocent bystanders and children, in its strikes against political leaders.

The scale of Israel's violence far surpasses that used to suppress the 1987 *intifada*, when tear gas, rubber- and plastic-coated bullets, stun grenades and live fire were deployed. Within the first two weeks of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, Israel's security forces had killed more people than in the first four months of the 1987 uprising. So far, 609 Palestinians have been killed, and 15,000 injured.

Israel has been criticised by international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International for its indiscriminate use of force, arbitrary killings, use of collective punishments such as confiscation of property and housing demolitions, and settler-related violence and destruction.

But while world attention has focused on the military confrontations and diplomatic manoeuvrings, little has been said about the economic warfare waged by Israel and the scale of the humanitarian disaster that has befallen the Palestinians.

Israel has laid siege to the Palestinian Territories for nearly 11 months. Its sea, air and land blockade has sealed off the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from the outside world and from each other. The borders of the territories with Egypt and Jordan are closed. External trade has come to a virtual standstill, with Palestinian goods stuck at Israeli customs yards.

Checkpoints on all the roads into Israel stop Palestinians from entering the country, including the 120,000 workers who had jobs on Israeli building sites and farms, and at hotels and factories. Further checkpoints on roads within the occupied territories mean that 15-minute journeys take more than two hours, if they can be completed at all. More than 200,000 workers within the domestic economy are unable to get to work.

The closures are even more onerous for Palestinians living in Gaza. Given that Gaza has the highest population density in the world, virtually no natural resources and little industry, it is totally dependent upon Israel. The Israeli lock-down has turned the area into a virtual prison.

Factories have stopped producing, as they are unable to market their goods. Prices of basic commodities have rocketed due to the cost of transporting through circuitous routes to avoid the blockade. Hundreds of buses have stopped operating, adding to the difficulties of getting to work

or reaching family members in need.

Israel has worked to strangle the Palestinian economy and drive the Palestinians even further into poverty and debt in numerous ways. It has withheld payment of most of the tax and VAT payments from the Palestinian Authority (PA) since the beginning of the *intifada*, preventing the PA from paying its employees. This is a direct breach of the Paris Accords, which state that Israel must return the money it collects on behalf of the PA within six days.

Unemployment was officially less than 15 percent before the uprising. This, however, was misleading, as it excluded the youth and those who had only sporadic employment. In reality, it was much nearer to 30 percent. Now it is more than 50 percent.

By November 2000, the Palestinian economy was believed to be losing \$3.4 million a day due to the loss in wages of those who normally travelled to work in Israel and \$6 million in tax receipts and customs dues withheld by the Israelis. This was further compounded by the loss in tourist income to the Holy Sites, previously a major source of income.

According to the UN, after only two months there had been a 10 percent reduction in the Palestinian economy's GDP and its growth rate had fallen from 4 percent to minus-10 percent. By late March Palestinian incomes had plummeted to one half of their previous level, and official unemployment was running at three times the level of last September.

Such a drastic deterioration in living standards in such a short time is almost unparalleled. Yet it is now happening to one of the most impoverished people in the world. In 1999, per-capita income in the West Bank was only \$2,000—compared with \$18,300 in Israel—but even this was twice the per-capita income in Gaza.

The current situation highlights Palestine's dependency upon Israel that was enshrined under the Oslo Agreements and in the Paris Economic Agreement. Under these arrangements, no plan was formulated for the development of a viable Palestinian economy: an autonomous and ultimately "independent" Palestine was to remain under Israeli economic domination.

According to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, 64 percent of the three million Palestinians are living in poverty, as opposed to 23 percent before the *intifada*, with poverty defined as a monthly income of less than \$434 for a household of two adults and four children. By the beginning of May, the PA's income had fallen from \$90 million per month to \$20 million.

Every month, the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) supplies more than half a million families with a basic food package containing flour, rice, oil, sugar and milk. Nevertheless, malnutrition is growing and has reached 14 percent. An increasing number of children suffer from stunted physical growth and slow mental development.

Israel has implemented a scorched earth policy and uprooted nearly 400,000 olive, citrus and almond trees. The Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ) reports that the wrecking of the Palestinian agricultural economy has included: closure and separation of villages and districts, bulldozing and burning of fruit trees, intimidating and even killing of

herdsman to prevent them from reaching their fields, destroying agricultural crops and equipment, closing the fishing harbour and limiting the movements of fishermen, and drastically reducing animal and dairy production.

Dr. Azzem Tbeleh, PA deputy minister of agriculture, told *Globes* business magazine that the actions of the security forces and settlers had by May caused more than \$300 million worth of damage to Palestinian agriculture.

The closures, blockades and curfews have had a devastating impact on all aspects of social life, including health and education. Each and every trip is fraught with risks. Cars and lorries are detained and searched. When a Palestinian leaves home, there is no certainty that he or she will return when expected.

In practice, the closures fall hardest on the most vulnerable: the old, the young and the sick. The closures have taken a massive toll on people's lives and health, in contravention of international law, including the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention.

Article 17 states: "The parties to the conflict shall endeavour to include local agreements for the removal from besieged and encircled areas of wounded, sick, infirm and aged persons, children and maternity cases, and for the passage of all religious, medical personnel and medical equipment on their way to such areas."

Seventeen Palestinians seeking medical treatment have died since last September because of delays at Israeli checkpoints. And this is only part of a far larger picture, since more than 70 percent of the Palestinian population live in rural areas that provide nothing more than the most basic medical services.

Palestinians are not allowed into East Jerusalem, the very heart of the West Bank. Israel has in effect divided the West Bank into two cantons, splitting up families and denying them access to secondary and tertiary medical care. This particularly affects emergencies and births, as even ambulances have been stopped at gunpoint.

Just a few examples show the appalling consequences of this violation of basic human rights.

Heavily pregnant women have been forced to walk for miles to circumvent road blocks so as to receive treatment and deliver their babies. UNRWA reports a 58 percent increase in the number of stillbirths and four cases of childbirth occurring at military checkpoints. The Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees report a 100 percent increase in home deliveries. UNRWA also reports a decrease in preventative services, including a 52 percent decrease in women attending postnatal care.

Both organisations say they are unable to carry out vaccination programmes on any consistent basis. Attendance fell 12 percent in the first four months of the *intifada*, leading to even greater health care problems in the future.

People requiring ongoing treatment, for example for kidney failure or cancer, must endure long queues for hours on end at Israeli checkpoints. The closure of international borders has prevented Palestinians from receiving specialised medical attention abroad in at least 90 cases.

Even if people are lucky enough to be given permits to travel abroad for medical treatment, that is not the end of the story. Sixty-four-year-old Fatima Sharafi died at the Rafah border crossing in the Gaza Strip. She was returning from treatment at Egypt's Nasser Hospital but was fatally delayed for several days at the border as she tried to re-enter Gaza to return home.

There have been at least 164 incidents where access has been denied to Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS) ambulances. There are numerous PRCS reports of direct Israeli attacks on medical personnel. To cite but one example, last January four PRCS medics were intercepted at an Israeli checkpoint, forced out of their vehicle, stripped, searched and beaten for over four hours.

There is also the mental and emotional damage created by the ever-

present climate of violence and fear. On most days, Israeli warplanes and helicopters circle overhead, setting everyone's nerves on edge as they await the next attack.

Dr. Eyad Sarraj, head of Gaza Community Mental Health programme, said, "Every single person in Gaza is traumatised, including myself. The most traumatised are the children. They have lost their world of security. They live in a cage with no roof and receive trauma from the sky and from the eyes of their parents. Some people are in a state of panic. Every family has at least one member who is a bed wetter. Even those who are 14 or 15 are afflicted. Children cope with trauma by acting it out, writing about it, painting pictures of what they have seen."

The confrontation with Israel "becomes a horrific game" which they play out by demonstrating and throwing stones. They die, "but they have no concept of death," he observed.

A UNRWA staff member said that he knew of at least one child, a 10-year-old girl, who was prepared to die in a demonstration so that the family would receive financial aid. A doctor who worked in a clinic said he saw a large number of cases of stress, depression, high blood pressure and sexual impotence.

The closures and blockades have severely affected the educational system. More than half of Palestine's population is aged below 16, but hundreds of schools and other educational institutions have closed or been able to function only intermittently. Teachers and students are unable to reach their schools. Starved of funds by Israel, the PA does not have the money to pay salaries.

Schools in the areas partially or fully controlled by Israel have been targeted by the security forces and dozens of students and teachers have been killed or injured. *News from Within* reports a number of incidents. One school was surrounded and attacked more than 20 times by bullets and tear gas. The Israeli army converted a number of schools into military bases, issuing decrees that closed the schools indefinitely. Last December, it surrounded the al-Sharageh school for girls near Tulkarm and opened fire, injuring tens of students. It did the same to Sadeh al Hartheyeh school, near Jenin.

The youth are being denied a proper education under conditions where schooling is effectively part-time, if it takes place at all. The situation is particularly affecting the most vulnerable children, the handicapped.

Geraldine Shawa, head of the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children, revealed that many who attend the organisation's schools are not only deeply disturbed, but also hungry. They must be fed, straining the Society's already slender resources. Furthermore, children from cash-strapped families cannot afford the fees for the school bus and the \$10 to \$15 a month for batteries for their hearing aids.

Deaf children are often more traumatised than hearing children because the deaf do not understand what is happening. While they cannot hear the explosions, they can feel the vibrations and sense the tension. "Someone has to explain the situation to them by signing," she said. "Often this is left to their teachers."

While the universities have largely remained opened, students who do not live near the university are frequently absent and classes have been cancelled, causing loss of time and money to the students. The academic year has been extended in an attempt to help some complete their studies.

Students have been a particular target of the occupation forces, with frequent attacks and arrests on the roads and at the checkpoints. Students at Bethlehem University coming from the south of the West Bank faced such frequent harassment at the hands of the armed forces that they could no longer attend classes.

The numbers of settlements and settlers continue to increase in defiance of international law.

According to Peace Now, the number of settlers increased by 53 percent since the 1993 Oslo Accords and now number more than 200,000. This excludes a similar number of settlers in the neighbourhoods of East

Jerusalem that have been incorporated into the city of Jerusalem.

Since 1993, 42 unofficial settlements have been established. Twelve were established after the 1998 Wye Accords despite then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's promises to US President Bill Clinton. Under Prime Minister Ehud Barak, 22,419 settlers took up residence in the West Bank.

Between June 1999 and October 2000, tenders went out for 3,499 more housing units. Since October 2000 and the outbreak of the current *intifada*, work has begun on 954 new publicly funded housing units in the settlements. Since Ariel Sharon became prime minister in February, a further 6,000 homes have been authorised in the occupied territories and in March this year 2,832 new homes were authorised in Har Homa.

Israel has implicitly sanctioned the actions of settler vigilante groups who act as another arm of the occupying forces. These groups have carried out murderous attacks on Palestinians and vandalised their homes, property and farms, preventing them from harvesting or sowing their crops. Despite their criminal activities, settlers involved in such actions are rarely prosecuted or even reprimanded by the authorities, even when video evidence of their depredations exists.

They enjoy the tacit support of the Israeli army, which often punishes Palestinians who retaliate under the guise of "restoring order". For example, the military have declared vandalised homes a "closed military area" for three months, and thus prevented the families from returning to their homes.

It is the settlers who determine many of the repressive, frustrating and humiliating conditions of daily life for the Palestinians. In one of the most notorious actions, they succeeded in getting the army chief of staff, Shaul Mofaz, to issue an order preventing Palestinian men from driving their cars anywhere on the West Bank unless one of the passengers was a woman.

Despite these wretched economic and social conditions, little aid has been promised and even less has materialised.

The World Bank pledged a derisory \$15 million grant. The European Union (EU) pledged \$50 million in aid to help pay the wages of PA employees and prevent the PA from going bankrupt. But this was entirely dependent on the International Monetary Fund confirming that the PA adhered to an austerity budget. The EU further demanded that the wages be paid by the Ministry of Finance, and not directly by the employers in the security services.

The US pledged \$75 million a year under a long-term aid commitment. That sum pales into insignificance beside Washington's annual handout of \$3 billion to Israel. In any event, the Palestinian aid has been frozen for months.

The World Food Programme asked the rich industrial countries for \$3.9 million for food in November, but little has been forthcoming. Even when food aid does arrive, it is subject to endless delays by the Israeli authorities.

Businesses in the Gulf have set up a special \$20 million Palestinian unemployment fund. Arab governments have pledged \$693 million since the fighting began and in March this year pledged a further \$240 million in emergency relief. Hardly any has been disbursed.



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