

Malnutrition widespread amongst Palestinian children

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A study released August 5 reveals a drastic deterioration in the health of thousands of Palestinian children since the beginning of the Israeli military crackdown.

The report, by the US Agency for International Development, showed more than one-fifth of young Palestinian children are malnourished. This is more than a threefold increase since the last study two years ago. The plight of children under 5 years of age was particularly alarming. Twenty-two percent of Palestinian children under age 5 were malnourished, up from seven percent in an agency survey two years ago. Of that number, nine percent suffered from acute malnutrition—resulting from poor nutrition over the short term—and 13 percent suffered from chronic malnutrition—longer-term deficiencies that can result in stunted growth. About 20 percent of children under 5 had some form of anaemia.

The study, carried out by Johns Hopkins University and the humanitarian group CARE, found that the Gaza Strip was particularly hard hit, with 13 percent of children suffering from acute malnutrition, putting it on the same level as Nigeria, Somalia and Bangladesh.

A market survey also showed shortages of protein-rich foods, such as fish and chicken, among retailers. About half of retailers and wholesalers surveyed said they had shortages of infant formula.

About half of the 1,000 households surveyed in June said they had to borrow money to buy food. Some 70 percent of Palestinians are now living on \$2 a day.

An all too typical case is that of Fatima Abu Awili, 35, an unemployed seamstress living in Gaza's Beach Refugee Camp, who depends on aid from a United Nations agency to feed her five children. She said, "We sold all that we can sell of our furniture to provide food to the children and we fear that in the future we will have nothing to sell and no one to borrow money from."

Awili manages to scrape by with donated lentils, rice, potatoes, milk and sometimes chicken, but she can't

afford the healthy food a doctor recommended for her and her newborn.

Following the release of the report, the Palestinian Health Minister, Riad Zanoun, declared a state of emergency. "I call on the international community to work to end the real reason behind the health deterioration, which is the occupation, the curfew and the Israeli army. Without the real intervention of the world, all our efforts will only be temporary ones," said Zanoun. Palestinian officials have called on the US to provide health experts, vitamins and medical equipment.

As damning as the USAID study is of the affects of the recent Israeli offensive against the Palestinians, another earlier report paints an even bleaker picture.

The study, released just four days before the USAID report, was conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics for UNICEF and was taken between March 23 and June 30. No data was collected in April due to a six-week-long Israeli raid on Palestinian cities in the West Bank that effectively shut down government offices.

The study surveyed 5,228 households (as opposed to the USAID's 1,000 sample), including 3,684 children, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It had a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points. It found that 45.5 percent of Palestinian children aged 6 months to 5 years are suffering from chronic malnutrition (a four-fold increase since September 2000), their growth having been stunted as a result of poor diet. Another 32.5 percent have acute malnutrition, where they were found to weigh less than they should for their age or height group.

Compared to statistics from 2000, the survey found a 22.6 percent increase in the number of children suffering from moderate stunting due to malnutrition and a 36 percent increase in the number of children who are underweight for their age. There was an increase of 50 percent in the number of children suffering from low weight for their height.

Around 65 percent of households surveyed said they had faced difficulties getting food for their families during the 22-month-long Palestinian uprising due to Israeli curfews and loss of income as a result of Israel travel restrictions and blockages. A total of 85 percent surveyed specifically blamed Israeli blockades.

Fresh produce has become scarcer and more expensive. Israeli forces continue to raze groves of fruit trees to widen buffer zones around Jewish settlements on the pretext of stripping possible cover for possible attackers, say Palestinian officials.

The full scale of the health crisis facing Palestinian infants can be seen at Gaza's only humanitarian agency that specialises in nutrition—Ard el Insan Palestine. Mothers cradling thin, listless children waiting for treatment inundate the agency.

I'tedal el-Khateeb, executive director of Ard el Insan Palestine, said thousands of needy Palestinian mothers may be beyond its reach in outlying desert districts which are isolated by their proximity to heavily guarded Jewish settlements. Khateeb said, "The number of cases it [the agency] deals with has tripled since the start of the uprising ... the most dangerous sign for malnutrition is the increasing use of tea and bread at all ages. Mothers attribute this to poverty."

The children who come to Ard el Insan have rickets, anaemia, skin ailments and parasites. Once a week, the Gaza clinic's staff visits isolated areas in the Mediterranean coastal strip, dispensing treatment as well as fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs, brown rice, beans, and iron-rich plum jam. But Khateeb said such trips are often thwarted by Israeli closures that may last days without explanation. West Bank suppliers of medicines have been cut off by Israeli blockades, while donations of vehicles were being held up at Gaza's borders by Israel's 100 percent tax regime on imports.

The increase of cases has drained Ard el Insan's \$650,000 annual budget—70 percent was gone by July 1.

Aid agencies linked to both studies have pointed to recent Israeli government policy as being responsible for the devastation of the Palestinian economy, rising unemployment, food shortages and poverty.

All available data points to the unavoidable conclusion that Israeli policy in the West Bank and Gaza over the past months has amounted to a form of collective punishment, ruining the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians uninvolved in any violence, and driving their children into destitution.

The findings embarrassed Israeli officials, who

promised they would ease curfews and blockades on Palestinian towns and cities, including dismantling some roadblocks and issuing fresh permits for Palestinians to work in Israel. Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres briefed the White House on the government's efforts to return Palestinians to work in Israel, such as reissuing 7,000 to 20,000 work permits, opening industrial parks on the border and easing restrictions on Gaza fishermen. On July 16, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon telephoned United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to ask for an international effort for the West Bank. The following week, Daniel Kurtzer, the US ambassador to Israel, calling the situation in the territories "a humanitarian disaster," urged Israel to lift travel restrictions on Palestinians.

The orchestrated display of humanitarian posturing by the Israeli and US governments is largely for public consumption, but it is motivated by real political concerns—above all the fear that the appalling decline in living conditions will provoke a social explosion in the West Bank and Gaza that will be beyond the ability of the Palestinian Authority to police. As the *Baltimore Sun* put it, "The Israeli government must not waste any time in implementing relief measures. And the Bush administration should hold Israel to its pledge. It is in Israel's interest to improve the welfare of Palestinian families: If growers are watching crops rot in fields, if farmers are killing off livestock to eat, if parents can't properly feed their children, who can say how they will respond?"



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