Jerusalem and Washington bring Palestinians to the brink of starvation

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The House of Commons International Development Committee has recently published a report of the findings of its visit to Israel and Palestine.

It paints a devastating picture of the impact of the economic sanctions imposed against the Hamas government of the Palestinian Authority (PA) by the United States and the other major powers, including Britain. In so doing, it demonstrates the collusion of the whole of Europe and of the United Nations with Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and its brutal suppression of the Palestinians.

The electoral victory of Hamas—branded by the US as a terrorist organisation for its militant opposition to Israel—led, on the insistence of the US and Israel, to the economic boycott and isolation of the PA.

Israel illegally withheld the tax and customs it collects on behalf of the PA, US$60 million a month or approximately 50 percent of the PA's monthly revenues, while the Quartet, the US, European Union, Russia and the UN, cut off all direct aid to the PA, depriving it of a further 25 percent of its budget.

Most of the PA's money is spent on the payment of salaries to its employees, the Palestinian public sector, including doctors, teachers and officials. It is also the "financier of last resort" for Palestinian utilities and public institutions, which can no longer pay their creditors as the international banks have withdrawn credit and other facilities in part because they fear anti-terrorism litigation from the US.

The PA's own tax revenues have plummeted as a result of the increase in unemployment and poverty. The combined effect has been to bring the Palestinian economy to a halt and its people to the brink of starvation.

The report's findings, the result of both a visit to Israel/Palestine and data provided by various aid agencies, are shocking.

* Real GDP declined by 9 percent in the first half of 2006 and was predicted to fall by 27 percent by the end of 2006, with personal income falling by 30 percent.

* 160,000 public sector workers have not been paid since March 2006, affecting 25 percent of the population.

* Their coping strategies include: postponing paying bills (83.5 percent), living on past savings (26.3 percent), selling jewellery (29.6 percent) and reducing consumption of fresh meat (88.6 percent). Fully 65 percent are reliant on informal borrowing just to subsist.

* 70 percent of the Gazan workforce is without work or pay.

* 51 percent of the Palestinians now depend on food assistance, a 14 percent increase on last year.

* Malnutrition rates in 2004 were as bad as parts of sub-Saharan Africa. It is the main public health problem, with 37.9 percent of children under five and 31.1. percent of women of child bearing age being anaemic. Twenty-two percent of under-fives are deficient in vitamin A and 20 percent are deficient in iodine.

* Infant mortality is 25.2 per 1,000 live births, while under-five mortality is 29.1 per 1,000 live births.

* Hospital fees are unaffordable to most Palestinians. The effect of the closures imposed by Israel, non-payment of salaries and subsequent strikes by staff have interrupted the supply of medication and equipment. This has drastically reduced access to hospitals and healthcare.

* While the average number of births in Hebron is about 600, last September, just 100 babies were delivered in public hospitals, with a further 200 traced to private or NGO hospitals. Three hundred could not

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be traced and were assumed to be home deliveries, most without access to trained midwives.

* 25 percent of Gaza's residents do not have sufficient access to water.

* The bombing of Gaza's power plant by Israel during the summer offensive has further restricted access to water, causing problems for the hospitals and an increase in diarrhoea, particularly in children under three.

* Palestinians consume an average of 83 cubic metres of water per person per year, compared with Israeli consumption of 333 cubic metres and settler consumption of 1,450. Settlements on hilltops often drain their waste water into the valleys below, contaminating the Palestinians' water supplies.

* Only 7.3 percent of West Bank land is irrigated compared with 50 percent of comparable Israeli land.

* 64 percent of Palestinians fell below the poverty line in 2006, but this figure rises to 78 percent in Gaza. This has grown from 20 percent in 1998 and 54 percent in 2005.

* In the first half of 2006, a massive 1,069,200 people had consumption levels below the deep poverty line, an increase of 418,400 in just six months. They had an average daily consumption equivalent to about US$1.66 per person per day, which is below the accepted level of consumption of US$2.10 needed to meet basic needs.

* Real per capita consumption had fallen by 12 percent in 2006, with food consumption down by 8 percent.

Faced with this appalling humanitarian crisis, in May 2006 the UN took the unprecedented step of upping its appeal for humanitarian aid from US$215 million to $384 million. The 2007 appeal will be for about $450 million.

The report states that such high levels of assistance far exceed per capita levels in many poor countries in sub-Saharan Africa and are not sustainable in the long run. But without a settlement of the conflict, such aid will be vital.

These conditions are not simply the result of the economic sanctions imposed after the election of Hamas, but part of an ongoing deterioration in living standards following the *intifada* provoked by then Likud leader Ariel Sharon to scupper any chance of a resolution to the Israel/Palestine conflict in September 2000.

Israel's brutal suppression of the uprising was accompanied by curfews and restrictions on movements, which include road blocks, border crossings, mounds, trenches, flying checkpoints and a separate system of underground passes for the Palestinians, and the construction of the Security Wall. The report labelled these "discriminatory," saying, "Palestinians are being treated as second class citizens in their own country."

These, together with the network of settlements and their supporting infrastructure, have suffocated trade and prevented the Palestinians from accessing services.

Manufacturing has declined. Foreign and local investment has all but ceased, despite labour productivity levels 40 percent higher than for other workers in the region. Israel has been able to benefit—without sanctions from Brussels—from its trade relations with the EU while depriving the Palestinians of similar benefits.

International aid has been running at the rate of $300 per capita or approximately $1 billion per year since 2000, reflecting the catastrophic decline in the Palestinian economy and living standards.

As the report states, "Above all, they [the restrictions] are destroying the Palestinian economy and creating widespread poverty."

As might be expected of a report compiled by British parliamentarians, the response to its own findings is to meekly question the degree to which the restrictions, justified in the name of "security," served their stated purpose. But its findings would suggest to any objective reader that the regime of sanctions and other restrictions imposed by Israel with the backing of the US and Europe constitute a deliberate attempt to starve the Palestinians into submission, killing as many as possible while forcing many more into exile: a form of ethnic cleansing by economic means.

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