US-backed Israeli siege creates humanitarian disaster in Gaza

Bill Van Auken
22 January 2008

The Israeli government's drastic tightening of a blockade against the Gaza Strip has deepened an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in the Palestinian coastal territory, plunging its 1.5 million people into cold and darkness and threatening to unleash both mass hunger and a serious health crisis.

The Israeli cabinet voted last week to seal all border crossings into Gaza, cutting off food, medicine and fuel for the population and turning the entire territory into a vast prison. By Sunday, the cutoff of fuel forced the shutdown of the Gaza Strip's only power plant.

"We have had to close the power plant for want of fuel," the plant's director Rafik Mliha told reporters. "This closure is going to have very serious consequences for residents, but also for the operation of hospitals and treatment plants."

Indeed, the Palestinian Committee on Human Rights quoted Dr. Hassan Khalaf, the director of Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital, as warning that patients' lives were being placed at severe risk, including 30 premature babies at the hospital who would die if power remained cut off. Meanwhile, the territory's second-largest medical facility, the European Hospital in the southern Gaza Strip, has been forced to suspend all major surgical operations.

The director general of the World Health Organization, Margaret Chan, warned Monday that the situation was grave. "Disruptions in the continuity of essential services take a heavy toll on people needing emergency care and those suffering from conditions such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes," she said.

Meanwhile, *Al Jazeera*'s correspondent in Gaza reported that raw sewage was pouring into the streets, fields and homes because the cutoff of fuel had shut down sewage treatment plants.

"Normally a pump would pump the sewage down the process line to a treatment plant ... but because there is no electricity the pump is standing still and as the sewage builds up it is flowing into the street," said the correspondent, Jacky Rowland. "This is a looming public health crisis."

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the main UN agency that aids Palestinian refugees, said that the shutdown of the power station would have "a devastating impact."

"Depriving people of such basics as water is tantamount to depriving them of human dignity," said UNRWA spokesman Christopher Gunness. "It is difficult to understand the logic of making hundreds of thousands of people suffer quite needlessly."

The fuel shortage also forced the shutdown of a number of bakeries in the territory, which, combined with the turning back of all humanitarian food aid—upon which over 1 million residents depend—triggered increasing panic among the population and long lines at bakeries still in operation. Prices on many basic commodities have doubled or even trebled.

UNRWA announced Monday that it may be forced to suspend all food aid to the Palestinians in Gaza by the middle of the week if Israel fails to reopen the border.

The Israeli siege against the territory's civilian population—ostensibly a retaliation for rockets fired by Palestinian militants against Israeli towns near the Gaza border—promoted condemnations of "collective punishment" not only from Arab governments, but also from the European Union and the French foreign ministry.

The international criticism prompted Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak to announce that on Tuesday Israel would allow a one-time delivery of diesel fuel and medical supplies to pass through the sealed border crossings. The government made clear, however, that it would maintain the blockade, preventing any delivery of gasoline. "As far as I'm concerned, the residents of Gaza can walk ... because they have a murderous terrorist regime that won't let people in the south of Israel live in safety," Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared at a meeting of his Kadima party on Monday, confirming the charges of collective punishment.

The Israeli government claimed that its decision to allow a limited amount of emergency aid through the border was taken in response to a reduction in the number of rockets fired at Israel. Olmert said Monday that he would "not allow a humanitarian crisis in Gaza." He added, however, that his government has no intention of letting the people of the territory "live comfortable and pleasant lives" as long as rocket attacks continue.

Earlier, the Israeli foreign ministry had issued a cynical statement claiming that the blackout of Gaza was a "ploy" by the territory's ruling Hamas party. "Noteworthy is the fact that while the Gaza population remains in the dark, the fuel generating power to the Hamas rocket manufacturing industry continues to flow unabated," it said.

For his part, Defense Minister Barak presented the barbaric blockade as an act of moderation, compared to the kind of all-out military assault that the Israeli regime is contemplating. "We are targeting the terror elements and we are saying to the international community that we are exhausting all possible options before Israel decides on a broad [military] option," a government spokesman quoted him as saying during Sunday's cabinet

© World Socialist Web Site

meeting.

In reality, the Israeli military has already unleashed a wave of murderous violence far out of proportion to the rocket attacks that are the pretext for this offensive. While militants in Gaza have carried out over 150 rocket and mortar attacks since last Tuesday, none of them caused serious injuries.

In response, Israel has attacked Gaza with helicopter gunships, F-16 fighter jets and surface-to-surface missiles, killing nearly 40 Palestinians—at least 10 of them unarmed civilians—and wounding hundreds.

The escalation began last Tuesday when Israeli forces killed 19 Palestinians, most of them Hamas members, and wounded dozens of others. The bulk of the killings occurred after Israeli troops backed by tanks stormed into a Gaza City neighborhood. Hamas militiamen sought to resist the incursion and were massacred.

In other strikes during the week, Raed Abu el-Foul, a senior member of the Popular Resistance Committees was killed together with his wife when an Israeli warplane fired a missile into their car in northern Gaza on Thursday. In a separate raid, another missile killed a member of Islamic Jihad while he was riding in a car. The missile also claimed the lives of a mother and child who were riding in a donkey cart next to the car.

And on Friday, an Israeli warplane attacked an unoccupied building that had formerly served as the Gaza Strip's interior ministry. The Hamas-led government had abandoned it after a July 2006 air strike had severely damaged the structure.

The raid claimed victims in apartment buildings flanking the building, which is in a residential neighborhood of Gaza City. One woman attending a wedding party next door was killed by shrapnel. And 46 civilians were wounded, some of them seriously. A number of the victims were children playing football in the street outside.

The chief United Nations official on human rights in the Palestinian territories, John Dugard, denounced the attack, saying that those Israeli officials responsible for "such cowardly action" are "guilty of serious war crimes and should be prosecuted and punished for their crimes."

Standing in stark contrast to this condemnation was the response of the US government. Speaking in Washington on the same day as this attack and as Israel began its total lockdown on the Gaza Strip, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack declared, "The fact of the matter is that Israel is acting in self-defense." Dismissing the civilian casualties caused by Israeli attacks, he added, "Nobody can bring back those innocent victims, who might—may have been lost in these actions."

In relation to the blockade of the border crossings, McCormack said that Israel had informed Washington that "they do not want to, in any way, degrade the—an already very difficult situation in Gaza. And we take them at their word."

As a "final point" on the subject, the State Department spokesman added, "you do have to remember that the unfortunate people of Gaza have found themselves in this situation because of the mismanagement and the decision making of Hamas." The statement amounted to an unconditional US green light for the Israeli regime to continue massacring and starving the people of Gaza.

Coming in the immediate wake of George Bush's visit to Israel and Ramallah earlier this month, the brutal actions taken by the Olmert government with the full backing of the US State Department serve to expose the real meaning of the US president's support for the so-called "peace process" and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

This "process" consists of a military and political offensive conducted by Israel with the aid of the US and Europe—as well as the collaboration of Washington's willing accomplices in the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas—aimed at forcing the Palestinian people by means of intimidation and terror to accept conditions of grinding poverty, political subjugation and colonial-style domination.

Meanwhile, the Israeli brutality against the people of Gaza, as well as the active support of the US government and the tacit backing of Europe and the bourgeois Arab regimes, sparked angry demonstrations in the Middle East.

In Egypt, over 29 members of the opposition Muslim Brotherhood were rounded up by the regime of President Hosni Mubarak after protests in Cairo and the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria. The protesters demanded that the Egyptian government open its own sealed border crossing with Gaza to allow in humanitarian aid, extend gas and electricity supplies to the besieged territory and "halt all dealings and relations with the Zionists."

"If it hadn't been for the collaboration, impotence and paralysis of the Arab and Islamic regimes, there would have been no siege or suffering, and the Zionist enemy wouldn't have been able to commit all these savage massacres against the Palestinian people," read a statement issued by a front of Egyptian opposition parties.

In response to the crisis triggered by the Israeli blockade, the Mubarak regime has rushed hundreds of extra riot police to the Gaza border in order to tighten control and confront several hundred Palestinians who gathered there to demand that those needing emergency medical attention be allowed into Egypt.

Meanwhile, in Amman, thousands of Jordanians demonstrated for the second day in a row on Monday, demanding that the Jordanian monarchy break relations with Israel. Demonstrators marched on the Jordanian parliament, denouncing the Israeli actions as well as what they called "the Arab silence."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site