

BBC refuses to show emergency relief appeal for Gaza

Niall Green**28 January 2009**

There has been broad condemnation of the decision by the British public service broadcaster the BBC to refuse to show an appeal for humanitarian aid for the people of Gaza organised by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) of aid charities. The corporation is the only terrestrial broadcaster in the United Kingdom to refuse to air the appeal, which aims to raise funds to provide emergency relief to the thousands of Palestinians facing a humanitarian catastrophe in the war-torn Gaza Strip.

The DEC is a blanket organisation representing many aid charities, including the Red Cross, Christian Aid, Islamic Relief, Oxfam and Save the Children. Their appeal requested support from the British public to buy food, medicine and blankets for the tens of thousands of Gazans left hungry and homeless by the Israeli assault on territory.

BBC Director General Mark Thompson claimed that airing the DEC appeal would put the corporation's impartiality at risk by giving the impression the BBC was "backing one side" over the other.

"The public wants us to be very strict about our impartiality, and it is my job to protect that impartiality," said Thompson, who denied claims that the decision had been made to appease pro-Israel lobbyists. The director general also offered the unsubstantiated suggestion that the BBC could not guarantee that aid would reach the victims.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, Brendan Gormley, the DEC's chief executive, had informed the BBC that the appeal would raise money "for all those affected by the recent conflict," indicating that they would provide aid to people in southern Israel if needed.

Veteran Labour MP Gerald Kaufman claimed the BBC had responded to "nasty pressure" from "very active and not very pleasant Israeli diplomatic representation in Britain."

Over 11,000 viewers have contacted the BBC to complain about its refusal to air the appeal. The other main television broadcasters ITV, Channel 4 and Five aired the DEC message Monday evening.

The decision is widely opposed within the BBC itself. Former BBC journalist and independent MP Martin Bell wrote in the *Guardian*: "The refusal to transmit the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal has left it isolated and exposed. Its senior journalists feel betrayed, but dare not speak out because of their terms of service."

One unnamed BBC news sources stated: "Feelings are running extremely high and there is widespread disgust at the BBC's top management. There is widespread anger and frustration at the BBC's refusal to allow people to speak out about it."

In a joint statement journalists' union the NUJ and the broadcaster's union BECTU said the BBC's choice was "cowardly and in danger of being seen as politically motivated." Several artists and broadcasters have criticised the BBC, including actress Samantha Morton, who claimed she would never work for the corporation again due to its "horrific" and "disgusting" decision.

Mohammed Shafiq, head of the Ramadhan Foundation, a British Muslim youth organisation, condemned the BBC. "Whatever our positions or views on the Gaza crisis the innocent victims in Gaza need our help and support and the BBC has a public duty to broadcast this appeal," Shafiq said.

The Sky News channel, part of the media empire of the staunchly pro-Zionist billionaire Rupert Murdoch, has also refused to show the DEC message, insisting that it would be "incompatible" with its objectivity. Sky News announced its decision a few hours before the appeal was due to be broadcast on the other main channels.

Despite the BBC's claim that it is only interested in

defending its "impartiality," the corporation has broadcast DEC appeals for aid in other war zones. For example, it showed DEC films requesting aid for the victims of the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Darfur region of Sudan. Last year the BBC showed an appeal for victims of the cyclone that hit Burma, despite the politicisation of aid by the Western powers and widespread criticism of the Burmese junta's commitment to distributing supplies.

The BBC has form when it comes to refusing to air public appeals on the grounds of "impartiality." The BBC used this justification regarding an appeal for aid to Lebanon in 2006 following the Israeli war against Hezbollah and its supporters, in which hundreds of civilians died and much of the country's infrastructure was targeted for destruction.

When it comes to charitable appeals, the BBC are quite prepared to show them if the plight of the victims can readily be attributed to regimes such as those of Sudan or Burma, which are subject to the threats of London and Washington. But when the victims are civilians slaughtered and made destitute by a key ally of British imperialism such as Israel it seems that Broadcasting House cannot seek to raise the flag of impartiality quickly enough.

In fact, the claims of "objectivity" and "impartiality" that Thompson and the BBC are using to justify their decision not to show the charity appeal stand in contrast to the actual content of their news reportage on the Gaza conflict. Despite the overwhelming devastation that was rained down on the almost completely defenceless and impoverished population of Gaza, BBC news reports insisted on giving roughly equal coverage to the few homemade rockets being fired by Hamas militants into southern Israel. At the end of Israel's assault on Gaza the Palestinian death toll stood at over a thousand, the majority civilians, including hundreds of women and children. Israel suffered 13 fatalities, ten of them soldiers.

Throughout the conflict, the corporation treated Israel's claim that it was acting in self-defence as good coin. It provided Israeli military spokespeople with ample opportunity to state their case, usually with few or no probing follow-up questions from journalists. Opposing statements by Hamas or Palestinian Authority representatives were rarely shown.

Nor did the BBC seriously take up the Israeli government's refusal to allow international journalists into Gaza in an effort to cover-up the scale of IDF atrocities.

Around 120 Members of Parliament have backed a parliamentary motion criticising the BBC and Sky for not showing the appeal. Cabinet ministers Douglas Alexander and Hazel Blears weighed in. Alexander, the International Development Secretary, called on the BBC to consider that "People are suffering right now; many hundreds of thousands of people are without the basic necessities of life." The prime minister's website posts a link to the DEC appeal.

All this is sheer hypocrisy. Alexander, like the rest of the Labour government of Gordon Brown, has refused to condemn Israel's war crimes in Gaza or its blockade of the territory since Hamas came to power in 2006. The British government fully endorsed the Israeli claims that it acted in "self-defence" against "terrorist" Hamas, despite Israel's bombardment of civilian targets including United Nations run schools and hospitals.

The government's criticism of the BBC effectively sealed the corporation's decision regarding the DEC appeal. BBC Trust Chairman Sir Michael Lyons warned that such comments from government ministers came "close to constituting undue interference in the editorial independence of the BBC." Thus, Thompson could not reverse his decision, even if he wanted to, as it would appear he had bowed to political demands.

The publicly-owned broadcaster is an anathema to a substantial section of the British bourgeoisie, who resent it as a limitation on its ability to make profit and for its supposedly "pinto liberal" editorial views. While issuing crocodile tears for the civilians in Gaza, most of the British press has used the issue as a stick to beat the BBC with.

Melanie Phillips, commentator for the right-wing tabloid the *Daily Mail* supported Thompson's refusal to show the appeal but said this was nonetheless an indicator of how the BBC had "lost its way." Attacking the BBC news for being pro-Hamas and directed by "left-wing" executives, Phillips insisted that "licence-fee payers are increasingly questioning its very existence as a publicly financed broadcaster."



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