

Red Cross issues harrowing report on situation in Gaza

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A report from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), “Gaza: 1.5 million people trapped in despair,” paints a harrowing picture of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Israel’s military offensive against Gaza killed more than 1,300 people, wounded many more, made tens of thousands of people homeless, and destroyed much of Gaza’s infrastructure. Six months later, the report says, its inhabitants have been unable to rebuild their lives due to Israel’s blockade:

“Most people struggle to make ends meet. Seriously ill patients face great difficulty obtaining the treatment they need. Many children suffer from deep psychological problems. Civilians whose homes and belongings were destroyed during the conflict are unable to recover. The quantities of goods now entering Gaza fall well short of what is required to meet the population’s needs.”

Israel has tightened the noose round Gaza. In May 2009, the Israeli authorities allowed only 2,662 truckloads of goods—less than 90 a day—to enter Gaza from Israel, less than one quarter of the 11,392 truckloads allowed in during April 2008. At least 250 truckloads a day are needed just to provide the most basic humanitarian items.

Gaza only survives due to the goods smuggled in via the tunnels under the border with Egypt, which were one of the main targets of Israel’s aerial bombardment last January and which have been rapidly repaired. Smuggling through the tunnels is highly dangerous. Last year, 40 were killed in cave-ins.

Israel has allowed no reconstruction materials in since the end of its military operation in January. Not one penny of the \$1.33 billion pledged for reconstruction last March at an international donors’ conference in Egypt—far short of the \$2.4 billion that the UN estimated was needed—has reached Gaza. Repair work has yet to begin.

As the ICRC says, the neighbourhoods particularly affected by Israel’s bombardment “will continue to look like the epicentre of a massive earthquake unless vast quantities of cement, steel and other building materials are allowed into the territory for reconstruction.”

Many who lost their homes are living in cramped conditions

with relatives, while thousands who have nowhere else to go are living in tents.

The military offensive destroyed electricity, water and sanitation services. There have been no supplies of new water pipes, electrical spare parts, pumps and transformers allowed into Gaza. While some emergency repairs have been carried out, the overall level is totally unsatisfactory. The infrastructure is overloaded and subject to constant breakdowns. Ninety percent of people suffer from power cuts while 10 percent have no power at all. Thirty-two thousand have no running water and more than 100,000 get water only once every two or three days.

Every single day, 69 million litres of partially treated or completely untreated sewage—equal to 28 Olympic size swimming pools—have to be pumped straight into the Mediterranean because there are no facilities to treat it. Even though chlorine is used to disinfect the water, there is a danger that sewage will seep into the water supply.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which looks after Palestinian refugees, says the rate of infectious diseases, including diarrhoea and viral hepatitis, which result from bad water and sanitation, has risen.

Gazans have little access to healthcare. The hospitals are run down, short of electricity, medication and prosthetics, and their equipment is unreliable. Some 100 to 150 people who lost limbs in the recent offensive are still waiting to be fitted with artificial limbs.

Few seriously ill patients are given permits to leave Gaza and receive treatment elsewhere. Even when they do, transferring through the Erez crossing into Israel is a nightmare. Patients on life support machines have to be removed from ambulances and carried 60-80 metres on stretchers to ambulances waiting on the other side. Those who can walk are subject to extensive questioning before they are allowed to leave and are often refused permission to leave.

The blockade has strangled Gaza’s economy. Unemployment has soared to 44 percent. The restrictions on Gaza’s imports and exports have closed 96 percent of industrial production, with the loss of 70,000 jobs.

An ICRC survey in May 2008 showed that even then, over 70 percent of the population were living in poverty, with families of seven to nine members living on less than US\$250 a month.

Up to 40 percent of families are very poor, with an income of under \$120 a month. Every person who works or runs their own business has to support six or seven people, plus members of their extended family.

Families are down to one meal a day. They have had to forego meat, chicken and eggs. Supermarket shelves are empty, apart from staples provided by UN agencies and European Union donations. This has resulted in tens of thousands of children suffering deficiencies of iron, vitamin A and D, leading to stunted growth, of bones and teeth, difficulty in fighting off infection, tiredness and a lower capacity to learn.

Many food items are simply not available, while even the most basic foodstuffs are selling at vastly inflated prices.

In a particularly poignant passage, the report says, "Most of the very poor have exhausted their coping mechanisms." They have sold absolutely everything they have, including their productive assets such as livestock and fishing boats. They cannot reduce spending on food any more. The worst affected are the children who make up half of Gaza's population.

Farming families, who make up one quarter of the population, have been badly hit. Unable to export their produce to Europe via Israel because of the closures, they cannot sell their produce in Gaza or only at a fraction of the export price. They cannot get access to fertilisers, fodder for their livestock, spare parts for their machinery, and many varieties of seedlings.

During the three-week offensive earlier this year the Israeli army uprooted thousands of citrus, olive and palm groves, destroyed irrigation systems, wells and greenhouses. Israel has imposed "no go" zones up to one kilometre in length on the Gaza side of the border with Israel, preventing farmers from accessing their land. At least 30 percent of Gaza's arable land is affected. Should farmers enter their own land, they risk being shot at by Israeli troops.

Israel has curtailed fishing by cutting the area within which Gazans may fish from six, well below the international limit, to three nautical miles from Gaza's coastline. Most of the bigger fish and sardines, which constituted 70 percent of the catch two years ago, are outside the new limit.

People cannot leave to see their families or to get education or training. Gazans awarded Fulbright scholarships to go to universities in the United States were refused exit visas. Restrictions on travel also include the Palestinian staff of the various aid agencies. The Rafah border point with Egypt is no better.

Last week, Israel refused entry to the UN human rights enquiry led by the South African Judge Richard Goldstone into last January's military operation. Palestinian witnesses gave testimonies to the enquiry that were broadcast live from a UN office in Gaza City.

On June 29, Israel intercepted and boarded a boat, chartered by the Free Gaza Movement, which was in international waters off the coast of Gaza, because it was bringing humanitarian aid

into Gaza. The ICRC and 40 international aid agencies and non-governmental organisations have issued a statement condemning Israel's blockade and calling for the two-year-long siege to be lifted.

That the 1.5 million Palestinians who live in Gaza are trapped, as the ICRC says, "in an unending cycle of deprivation and despair" is entirely due to the deliberate and criminal actions taken by the Israeli government, with the support of Washington and the major European powers.

The present blockade began when the Palestinian Intifada broke out in September 2000 following Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount/Haram El Sharif in the Old City of Jerusalem aimed at torpedoing any peaceful resolution of the long running conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel closed its borders with the West Bank and Gaza.

In January 2006, Israel tightened the blockade after the election of Hamas, which Israel and the US designate as a terrorist organisation. Tel Aviv began to withhold the taxes and revenues collected by Israel due to the Gaza authorities. It got support from the European powers for economic sanctions against the Hamas government.

The blockade became an all-out siege in June 2007, after Hamas routed its rival, Fatah, which had received money, arms and training from Israel and the US and support from Egypt to overthrow the Hamas government and recapture power in a military shoot out. Since then, Israel only allowed in a tiny amount of essential "humanitarian aid," food, fuel and medical supplies.

The ICRC report confirms that Gazans are living in what can only be described as a vast prison.



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