

Aid report details social devastation in Gaza

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Israel's illegal blockade of Gaza exceeds in length the sieges during World War II of Leningrad, Stalingrad and the Warsaw Ghetto, and there is no end in sight to this humanitarian crime.

The report published by 16 aid agencies, *Failing Gaza: no rebuilding, no recovery, no more excuses*, paints a harrowing picture of the escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Israel's two-and-a-half-year-long blockade and its 22-day military assault in 2008-09 have taken a terrible toll.

Coming on top of 60 years of oppression since the forced displacement from Mandate Palestine in 1948 and the closures and restrictions imposed after the second Intifada in September 2000, the situation is nothing short of catastrophic for Gaza's 1.5 million people. Only basic foodstuffs and medicines are allowed in, and the volume of this is one third of what it used to be. Israel regularly allows in only 35 categories of items, compared to the 4,000 items imported before the blockade. With no published list of permitted items, what is allowed in is constantly changing. Few goods, and even fewer people, are allowed to leave Gaza. Israel's actions have wrecked Gaza's exports and its economy.

The bombardment destroyed or seriously damaged more than 700 private businesses, at a cost of \$139 million. Coming on top of the collapse of 98 percent of industrial operations following the blockade, this has increased the official jobless rate to more than 40 percent and pushed ever more families into poverty. Even in May 2008, 70 percent of families were living on less than a dollar a day.

Israel's tanks and armoured vehicles destroyed 17 percent of Gaza's cultivated land. Orchards, fields, greenhouses and irrigation works were pulverised. Gaza has the capacity to create 400,000 tonnes of produce a day, a third of which are horticultural products for export to Europe, and to supply a quarter of its own food needs. Now both of these sources of income have gone, making

Gaza ever more dependent upon food supplies from Israel. Whereas food supplies accounted for 17 percent of Israeli imports before the blockade started in 2007, they now constitute 74 percent.

Last May, in an action that has not been widely reported, Israel put an estimated 46 percent of agricultural land out of production. Israeli planes dropped leaflets stating that Israel was imposing a security "buffer zone" inside Gaza's borders: 300 metres would now be a no-go area. In reality, this buffer zone extends anywhere between one to two kilometres into Gaza. This was despite the fact that rockets fired from Gaza into Israel's southern towns and villages have all but stopped. This unilateral measure has put an area equal to between one quarter and one third of Gaza's agricultural land out of action, and many farmers have lost their livelihood.

Israel has refused to allow in bulldozers and building materials and equipment, making it impossible to repair damage estimated at between US\$660 and \$892 million or even remove the 600,000 tonnes of rubble. Just clearing this would take 200,000 days of work. Cement, gravel, wood, pipes, glass, steel, aluminium and tar, as well as spare parts for the limited building equipment and earthmovers that do exist, are badly needed. But only 41 truckloads of building materials have entered Gaza this year.

To the extent that goods are coming in at all, they are being smuggled in through the network of tunnels between Egypt and Gaza's southern border, at a horrendous cost in both financial and human terms, giving rise to racketeering and semi-criminal gangs who control the tunnels.

Prevented by Israel from rebuilding their lives, the situation is now far worse than it was a year ago. Israel's assault on Gaza destroyed over 15,000 homes, displacing 100,000 Palestinians. As of July 2009, 20,000 people remained displaced, living with relatives or in some cases still in tents. The UN aid agency for Palestinian refugees has been forced to train workers to make mud bricks to build huts—a throwback to the situation that prevailed for

decades after the 1948 war that led to the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians.

Israel caused extensive damage to Gaza's power supply, which was already on the point of collapse. Transformers, pylons, cabling and stores were bombed. The main power plant was forced to close for 10 days due to the lack of diesel supplies from Israel and the destruction of most of the power lines bringing in electricity from Israel and Egypt—leading to a massive 75 percent shortfall in supply. More than half of Gaza's residents, one million people, had no power for the duration of the assault, half a million people had no running water and raw sewage ran in the streets.

One year later, 10 percent of the people have no electricity, and 90 percent have shut-offs for between four and eight hours a day. Even today, there is insufficient power to treat sewage. Israel's blockade prevents the delivery of desperately needed spare parts and limits diesel supplies to 2.2 million litres a week, rather than the 3.5 million litres needed. Furthermore, the constant switching on and off of the power plant, designed to keep running continuously, is wearing the plant out.

Gaza's fishermen are not allowed to sail more than three nautical miles from the shore, restricting their catch, causing further impoverishment and malnutrition, while the 80 million litres of raw and partially treated sewage pumped out into the sea every day is polluting the waters and poisoning the fish stock.

Israel's bombs and shells also destroyed the water supply network: key concrete water storage tanks and 30 kilometres of water networks were damaged or destroyed, although 21 kilometres have since been repaired, along with eleven water wells, more than 6,000 roof top water tanks and 840 household connections. Since no rebuilding has been possible, and the power supply to distribute water is so intermittent, 8,000 people are still without access to any piped water, 90-95 percent of the water fails to meet WHO standards, and the high nitrate levels is putting thousands of new born babies at risk of poisoning. The poor water quality is leading to increasing health problems. Diarrhoea, an easily preventable disease, is responsible for 12 percent of young deaths in Gaza.

The lack of water pressure in the pipes means that polluted water from the surrounding ground can enter the pipes and is then sent straight to consumers when the water supply restarts. The aid agencies warn that with water abstractions from the aquifer increasing at a faster rate than the natural recharging rates, seawater is intruding and causing salination. Hundreds of thousands

are forced to rely on bottled water trucked in privately—and at high cost—and tens of thousands of people rely for clean water on the aid agencies.

Health is further impeded by the destruction of or damage to nearly half of Gaza's health facilities: its hospitals, primary care centres and ambulances. Even where they have been repaired, the intermittent power supplies impose intolerable constraints, leading to greater dependency on medical treatment outside Gaza. Bedwetting and nightmares are endemic among children.

Israel continues to deny even seriously ill patients the right to leave Gaza for treatment in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel or Jordan. In the first six months after the military assault, only 51 percent of patients applying for access to medical care outside Gaza were permitted to leave through the Erez Crossings. Over a third of requests were delayed and 73 percent of these were delayed for more than seven days. Many have died waiting.

The blockade and the military assault destroyed 18 schools and damaged at least 288. As a result, 82 percent of public schools and 88 percent of UN schools operate two shifts a day. Some schools are believed to be operating three shifts a day. Just 640 schools serve more than 440,000 students and 105 new schools are urgently needed.

With half of Gaza's population under 18, the impact on children's education has been disastrous. During the 2008-09 academic year 14,000 children (6.76 percent) in all UNRWA schools in Gaza failed all subjects in the standardised tests. Yet the Palestinians were once the best educated people in the Middle East. A comprehensive health assessment showed that many of those who failed were suffering from malnutrition and anaemia.



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