

UN envoy: Destruction in Gaza “truly shocking”

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Robert Serry, the United Nations envoy for the Middle East, has announced an interim and temporary Israeli-Palestinian deal on the imports of construction materials to Gaza.

It is aimed at ensuring the domination of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) over the tiny enclave, and side-lining Hamas, which has controlled the strip since 2007.

Serry described the destruction in Gaza as “truly shocking”, with whole areas flattened and at least 18,000 homes destroyed or severely damaged. It has left 100,000 people homeless, as well as 111 UN buildings, many of them schools and hospitals, destroyed.

Israel’s 50-day war against a defenceless civilian population in one of the most densely populated areas in the world killed at least 2,143 people, of whom 1,489 were civilians and 540 were children, 25 percent of the entire death toll. By contrast, just 66 Israeli soldiers and seven civilians were killed.

Under the deal, the PA will play the lead role in managing the reconstruction effort to be carried out by the private sector—and presumably controlling the purse strings of any aid provided by the Gulf States and the European Union. The UN will monitor the imports to ensure that they cannot be used to rebuild the tunnels.

Israel refused to call off the siege, ensure a sufficient flow of materials or even a date for the opening of the crossings since Serry had to call for the speedy re-opening of crossing points. He stressed the necessity for immediate action on reconstruction, which the PA has estimated will cost \$7.8 billion.

Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon said that Israel would allow just 380 trucks a day through the Kerem Shalom crossing, up from 250. Some minimal concession was essential if more substantive talks between Israel and the Palestinians and an international donor conference to be held in Cairo were to go ahead, although it is unclear

whether the Palestinian delegation will include Hamas.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially had Washington’s backing for Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza, but later came under enormous pressure from the Obama administration to bring it to a rapid conclusion because the war had sparked an international antiwar protest movement. This threatened to cut across Washington’s efforts to build a broad coalition for a military intervention, ostensibly against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), aimed at reasserting US military dominance in Iraq, intensifying the war to overthrow the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and escalating the confrontation with Iran and Russia.

Serry warned that the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire that agreed to the immediate opening of the crossings, the end of Israel’s buffer zone inside Gaza, and the extension of Gaza’s fishing zone from 3 to 6 miles was worryingly “fragile”. Israel has breached the ceasefire at least three times, and has yet to implement its terms. Serry appealed for action to “change fundamentally the dynamics in Gaza,” warning that “if we do not, Gaza could implode—or, yet again, explode—possibly with a new and even more devastating round of violence.”

Underlying his concern is the desperate situation in which the Palestinians are living. More than 500 factories and workshops have been destroyed or damaged, making Gaza more dependent than ever on Israel for essential goods. More than half of Gazans are now without jobs and the World Bank has estimated that Gaza’s economy will shrink by 15 percent this year.

Those made homeless by the war face rent prices that have more than doubled since the war—with an average two-bedroom apartment previously costing \$200 a month now costing \$500—making them unaffordable to the vast majority. Housing has long been in short supply, with one housing expert estimating that at least 70,000 homes were needed before the war, thanks to Israel’s illegal and

inhumane siege of Gaza and its two previous wars in 2008-9 and 2012 on the tiny enclave, which destroyed numerous homes and buildings that were never rebuilt. Such reconstruction that did take place dried up late last year, after the el-Sissi government demolished many of the tunnels linking Gaza and Egypt, thereby preventing the transport of building materials to Gaza.

Gaza faces mounting food insecurity as a result of the destruction of the agricultural and livestock sectors. According to Nabil Abu Shamala, director of planning and policy at the Ministry of Agriculture, losses in the agricultural sector totalled \$550 million, the livestock sector \$70.8 million, the water and soil sector \$68.2 million, the fishing sector \$10 million, and agricultural crops in store \$1.16 million. Many agricultural workers have lost their jobs.

He said, "Israel directly targeted more than half of the agricultural areas in the sector, which are estimated at 140,000 acres [219 square miles], while the remaining areas were more or less damaged as a result of the inability of the farmers to reach their crops, which caused the lands to suffer from drought."

Israeli fighter jets also destroyed the newly built fishermen's sheds containing their tools and boat engines.

On August 14, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned, "Gaza has lost half of its total poultry [chicken for food as well as those kept for eggs].... The locally produced food represents an important source of food."

More than 28,000 people depended on farming for their livelihood. Most of Gaza's 1.8 million inhabitants are now dependent on food aid, with the World Food Program helping about 1.1 million people on a regular basis along with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA).

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, prices of fresh vegetable have doubled, while the price of a kilo of chicken has increased from 10 shekels (\$2.70) to 22 shekels (\$6.03). The acute shortage of crops, poultry and livestock made people dependent on canned food provided by international aid organisations. There have been allegations that aid—much of it coming from the Gulf States—is badly coordinated and organised, and distributed unfairly according to influence and political affiliation, with some of those most in need being unable to access it.

Children have been particularly badly affected. More than 3,000 children were wounded in the war, with many in critical condition or needing amputations. Without jobs or money, it will be impossible to get the children the

prosthetics they need as they grow and need new artificial limbs. With many of the UN's schools destroyed or now providing shelter for the homeless, many have been unable to return to school.

As well as being beholden to both Israel and Egypt, which controls the Rafah crossing, Gaza is also at the mercy of the PA in the West Bank. Gaza's only power plant, damaged by shelling on July 28, has been repaired but is dependent upon PA President Mahmoud Abbas agreeing to provide the fuel to run it. While the PA has agreed to do so, it has refused to exempt Gaza from fuel tax making it prohibitively expensive. As a result, Palestinians are without power much of the day, the water authorities are providing 50 percent less water—and there are fears of contamination. Damaged pipes have left pools of raw sewage in the streets, and the hospitals are dependent upon local generators for their blood banks and intensive care units.

The terms of the August ceasefire gave control over the administration of Gaza to the PA, which Hamas had interpreted to mean that its 40,000 employees in Gaza, including hospital workers, who have not been paid for nine months, would be covered by the PA's budget. The PA has refused to pay their salaries, accusing Hamas of operating a "shadow government," until Hamas commits itself to the unity government agreed in April.

The terrible situation facing the Palestinians in Gaza has led hundreds if not thousands to attempt to flee the enclave, with some of the most desperate having sold the last of their families' possessions to smugglers and human traffickers in Egypt to buy a passage costing \$3,000 to 5,000 to reach Europe, only to drown in a migrant boat rammed deliberately by smugglers.



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