

A UN Special Focus on Gaza Under Siege

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In August 2009, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published a special report titled: “Locked In: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip.” It focuses on import and export restrictions, the travel ban on “livelihoods, food security, education, health, shelter, energy and water, and sanitation.” It explains how violence and human rights abuses increase the suffering of 1.5 million people.

Following Hamas’ January 2006 electoral victory, all outside aid was cut off. Sanctions and an economic embargo were imposed, and the democratically elected government was falsely accused of being a terrorist organization and isolated. Stepped up repression followed as well as IDF attacks, killings, targeted assassinations, property destruction, and more. Gazans have been imprisoned ever since. In silence, the world community sanctions Israeli crimes and shares guilt for their commission.

In June 2007, Israel placed the Territory under siege and imposed an unprecedented blockade on nearly all movement and supplies in and out of the Strip, “triggering a protracted human dignity crisis with negative humanitarian consequences.” At its heart is the “degradation (of) living conditions,” the erosion of livelihoods, the lack of vital services in the areas of health, water, sanitation and education, and the collapse of essential infrastructure in the wake of Operation Cast Lead.

Over the past several months, Israel allowed in only small amounts of vital goods and services, far below quantities essential enough to relieve a grave humanitarian crisis. Despite the urgings of the UN, ICRC, a few nations, and numerous human rights organizations, Israel continues its blockade that includes:

- the closure of border crossings, including Karni, the largest and best equipped commercial one, except for a conveyor belt for the transfer of inadequate amounts of grains;
- tight restrictions on the import of industrial, agricultural, construction, and essential to life products, services, and materials;
- a suspension of nearly all exports;

- restricted amounts of industrial fuel (for Gaza’s sole power plant), benzene, diesel, and cooking gas;
- except for a limited number of humanitarian cases, a ban on Palestinian traffic through Erez, the only passenger crossing to the West Bank;
- other than intermittent openings, the closure of Rafah, the Egyptian-controlled crossing; and
- restricted (to close to shore) fishing and accessibility to farmland.

After over two years of siege:

- Gaza’s economy was wrecked;
- the UN report way underestimates the number of job losses at 120,000 and unemployment at 40%;
- on May 1, the Palestinian Chamber of Commerce reported that unemployment reached 65%, poverty hit 80%, and the longer the siege continues, the higher these figures will go; in addition, 96% of Gaza’s industrial capacity is shuttered, and well over 80% of the population is aid-dependent; yet most get below minimal amounts of everything;
- Gazans have had to shift from a high-nutritional diet to a low-cost cereals, sugar and oil one, “which can lead to micro-nutritional deficiencies, particularly among children and pregnant women;”
- OCHA identified 1,383 (mostly civilian) deaths, including 333 children during Operation Cast Lead;
- Israel’s ban on construction materials prevents the rebuilding of homes and other structures;
- many thousands of Gazans now live with relatives, in tents, or if lucky in rented apartments, much fewer in number post-conflict;
- inadequate fuel supplies cause up to eight-hour-a-day blackouts for 90% of the population; the other 10% have no power;
- many thousands have no running water and none of it meets WHO sanitary standards because of high pollution levels; more on that below;

- 80 million liters of raw and partially-treated sewage are discharged daily, thus causing serious sea and underground aquifer pollution, detrimental to human health;
- medical facilities are severely strapped by shortages of everything plus a lack of essential equipment, drugs, and capacity to handle a growing population; few patients needing specialized treatment are permitted to leave Gaza to get it;
- education is undermined by over-crowding, a lack of materials for rebuilding and repairs, and shortages of virtually all teaching materials; and
- post Operation Cast Lead and after over two years under siege, a state of humanitarian crisis exists for most Gazans with continued deterioration daily.

The Systematic Destruction of Livelihoods

The combination of unemployment, poverty, and vast areas of Gaza destroyed, damaged, or in disrepair has left most people struggling to survive.

“The private sector has been devastated by the blockade” and conflict. Replacing it are improvised coping mechanisms by Hamas authorities and the growth of the “tunnel economy” discussed below. A May 2008 ICRC survey found 70% of Gazans live on less than \$1 dollar a day per person, and around 40% of families at half that amount, excluding whatever humanitarian aid is accessible.

For over two years under siege, average truckloads of goods entering Gaza delivered less than one-fifth the tonnage than in the first five months of 2007. About 70% of it consists of food products because most industrial, construction and other materials are banned or greatly restricted. Currently, 1,700 containers of goods are in Israel or the West Bank, prohibited from entering the Strip. Exports have been totally prohibited except for small amounts of cut flowers and strawberries.

Industry is 96% shut down, and agriculture also has been heavily impacted. What provides the livelihood for 40,000 farmers, herders, fishermen, and farm laborers is severely hurt by a lack of seedlings, livestock, fuel, spare parts, and pesticides for those who use them.



Operation Cast Lead exacerbated already intolerable conditions, according to a Gaza Private Sector Council survey. It reported:

- 268 establishments totally destroyed and another 432 damaged, resulting in millions of dollars in losses;
- 40% of those affected are small and medium-sized industrial companies involved mainly in producing food, textiles, garments, and furniture while the other 60% were commerce, contracting and fuel establishments;
- 20 out of 29 ready-mix concrete factories and 39 other construction-related businesses were destroyed or damaged; and
- extensive losses of productive agricultural assets were sustained.

Farmers and herders now working close to the Israeli border face extreme restrictions and dangers. After Israel's summer 2005 "disengagement," a 150 meter-wide buffer zone was created where Palestinian access is prohibited. Warning shots are fired at farmers working anywhere near it. Then on May 23, 2009, the zone was expanded to 300 meters and at times to 1000 meters on an ad hoc basis.

Since the siege began in June 2007, 33 Palestinian civilians were killed, including 11 children, in border-related incidents. Another 61 were injured, including 13 children. That's besides many others by incursions and targeted assassinations.

Fishermen have also been greatly impacted by being prohibited from fishing beyond three nautical miles from shore - severely undermining their catch because deep waters are most productive, so exclusion caused some to abandon fishing altogether. As a result, monthly tonnage now is around one-fourth as much as pre-siege, and prices are much higher making fish less available and unaffordable for most.

Restrictions on cash entering Gaza were also imposed. The Palestinian Monetary Authority (PMA) estimates that 43 bank branches need about 200 million New Israeli Shekels (NIS) monthly for regular needs, while international agencies require additional amounts for theirs. Severe cash shortages put added pressure on Gaza's economy. Salaries can't be paid regularly, and daily affairs can't be conducted normally.

At times of duress, innovative solutions are employed. Gaza's tunnel economy is one - over 1,000 into Egypt for vital goods, including food, fuel, medicines, livestock, construction materials, generators, other basic necessities, and even cash. This constitutes around 90% of economic activity and employs thousands of Gazans digging, smuggling, and transporting essential items. Tunnels are about three-tenths of a mile long, as deep as 50 feet, require several months of hard labor, and cost from \$50,000 - \$90,000 to build. As long as the siege persists, they provide a lifeline for essential goods that are still way short of what's needed. When Israel bombs and destroys some, Gazans rebuild - to survive and keep resisting an intolerable situation.

Food Insecurity

OCHA reports that over 80% of Gazans are food-insecure (other estimates say 96%), up from about 50% in 2006 after Hamas was democratically elected. "Food insecurity exists when people lack sustainable physical or economic access to safe, nutritious and socially acceptable food to maintain a healthy and productive life." It's the daily ordeal for Gazans because of the siege and destruction of agricultural land, crops and assets during Operation Cast Lead. Higher food prices have also hurt badly as well as restrictions on what Israel lets in and their amounts.

On March 22, 2009, Israel nominally lifted food entry restrictions, but its decision remains unimplemented. Many items are still prohibited and most in short supply even though more staple items are permitted. Still, over 80% of Gazans remain aid-dependent, mainly from the World Food Program and UNWRA, and most have sub-nutritional diets.

Pervasive Insecurity and Lack of Civilian Protection

Under occupation, Gazans have experienced it for over 40 years, but especially under siege with its regular cycles of violence and constant threats to their well-being. Post-imposition in June 2007, over 2,000 Palestinians were killed and another 6,700 wounded. Three weeks of Operation Cast Lead took the greatest toll in lives lost, numbers wounded, and property of all kinds destroyed or damaged.

Israeli attacks continue intermittently, and Gazans remain at risk from numerous conflict-related factors, including unexploded ordnance (UXO) and other hazardous residues from legal and illegal munitions. In addition, large rubble amounts contain asbestos and dangerous substances that pose a serious threat to human health.

Reconstruction of Homes Prevented - Thousands of Families Still Displaced

Israel prohibits construction material imports, including cement, gravel, wood, pipes, glass, steel bars, and more compared to an average of 7,400 monthly truckloads pre-siege. Israel calls them “dual use” items that Hamas can use for military purposes. Their ban, in fact, is to harass, hold 1.5 million Gazans hostage, break their will to resist, hope many will give up and leave, and for those who stay destroy them by slow-motion genocide.

Besides essential food and medical care, Gazans’ most urgent need is for construction materials to repair and rebuild homes and other structures now in ruin. A joint UNWRA – UNDP survey showed that 3,540 homes were totally destroyed, 6,400 heavily damaged, and another 52,900 less so. As of July 2009, many thousands are still displaced, their lives severely disrupted, especially for those living in tents.

“Anecdotal evidence suggests that children are among the worst affected by displacement, including many who were relocated to alternative schools closer to their place of alternative accommodation.”

Besides homes, many thousands of other structures need to be rebuilt or repaired, including many with major damage. But without construction materials, it’s impossible except for rudimentary, make-do ingenuity such as efforts getting the most out of whatever materials are available.

In other ways, humanitarian agencies help out by supplying blankets, tents, mattresses, clothing kits, kitchen sets, and other items Israel lets in. Some families also get small cash assistance through UNWRA for refugees and UNDP for others, but serving the needs of 1.5 million people means precious little gets done overall.

Despite the obstacles and Israel’s hostility, a number of organizations, including UN agencies, are actively seeking ways to help, including initiating vitally needed reconstruction. The UN Special Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory asked Israel’s Defense Minister to open border crossings and let in construction materials to begin work on housing, health and education facilities, suspended for over two years. Thus far, no response was received, but not enough pressure is put on for it, nor does any come from nations mattering most like America.

A Protracted Energy Crisis

After Gaza was declared a “hostile entity” in September 2007, Israel cut the amount and types of fuel let in, including benzene, diesel, cooking gas, and industrial fuel. A protracted crisis followed affecting key services gravely and Gazans’ ability to run their households.



Electricity is the main problem because Gaza's sole power plant can't supply enough of it. Production levels were previously cut after Israel destroyed six electric transformers in June 2006 during Operation Summer Rain in Gaza and Operation Change of Direction against Hezbollah in Lebanon during which vast amounts of carnage were inflicted and many hundreds of lives lost in both conflicts combined.

At full capacity, Gaza's power plant supplies less than one-third of the Strip's needs. Lacking enough fuel, it's operating at three-fourths capacity at best. When available, the rest is bought mainly from Israel plus smaller amounts from Egypt. As a result, public institutions rely heavily on backup generators and other devices that are extremely dependent on a spotty availability of spare parts, so are very vulnerable to breakdowns.

A Challenged Health System

Gaza's ability to deliver proper health care is severely compromised by a lack of virtually everything, including building materials to expand for a growing population. Power shortages force suspension or postponement of vital surgeries because of the risk to patients. Proper medical equipment is in short supply, and what's available is hampered by a lack of spare parts and the ability to get them. Inadequate amounts of pharmaceuticals and other supplies are a constant problem. As of July 2009, 77 essential drugs and 140 disposable items were out of stock with no easy way to replace them due to blockage restrictions.

In addition, few patients can leave Gaza for vital treatment elsewhere. Getting approval is time consuming, arduous and uncertain, thus compounding a dire situation, even for the severely ill who without access to a full-functioning facility have little chance to survive. Some give up after trying. Others die awaiting approval that doesn't come. The Gaza Ministry of Interior estimates that hundreds of patients can't travel due to the lack of a passport alone and no simple way to get one.

During and in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead, Gazan medical teams were severely challenged to work around the clock under dangerous conditions to provide care for the hundreds of patients in need, many with very severe injuries. They performed courageously and tirelessly treating an estimated 5,300 injured, many with multiple and complex wounds. They also treated hundreds with chronic illnesses, but not optimally given the lack of vital resources.

Psychological trauma also proved challenging, especially for children given the lack of safe havens and almost constant bombardments and ground attacks. As a result, people lost "the most basic sense of security, which is one of the foundations of overall psychological well-being." WHO estimates that from 20,000 - 50,000 will suffer long-term consequences, and for some it will be permanent.

Problems, especially for children, are sleeping disorders, loss of appetite, difficulty

concentrating, inability to conduct normal activities like dressing, washing, household chores, and for about one-fourth of them repeated bed-wetting.

Operation Cast Lead's Effect on Women

Very negatively given the vast amount of destruction, loss of life, and disabling injuries to loved ones. "The inability of women to carry out their normal (caretaker) roles significantly contributed to their psychological suffering." A UN survey showed they feared disability and dependency more than death, and pregnant women were especially affected. Miscarriages, neonatal deaths, and premature births rose sharply, and obstetric complications necessitated a greater number of Caesareans. Also, women giving birth during the conflict were discharged within 30 minutes to free beds for the critically injured. The increased trauma to mothers and newborns caused further complications.



Water and Sanitation Infrastructure: A Health and Environmental Hazard

Inadequate resources prevent water and sanitation maintenance, creating a significant public health and environmental problem. As mentioned above, around 80 million liters of untreated and partially-treated sewage pollutes sea water and underground aquifers. In addition, the Gaza wastewater treatment plant with a daily 32 million liter capacity now handles about 50 million liters. As a result, discharged effluent contains twice the amount of biological pollution and suspended solids, and a project to upgrade the plant's capacity to 70 million daily liters remains in its early planning stage because of siege-related restrictions.

Contaminated seawater along coastal areas poses a severe health hazard for all Gazans through potentially contaminated sea food as well to people using beaches for recreation. Aquifer contamination is just as worrisome as it's Gaza's sole fresh water resource. Over time, it's become increasingly salinized and polluted, now exacerbated by higher levels. "Currently, only 5 - 10 percent of the extracted water is considered drinkable," according to WHO standards, and the Khan Younis governate is one of the worst affected areas.

Detected water well nitrate levels were over three times the safe WHO level making the water unfit to drink. Consumption with concentrations this high compromises the transmission of oxygen in the blood, potentially causing lethal "blue-baby syndrome" in infants. Poor sanitation is also responsible for greater levels of watery diarrheal disease (WDD) among children aged 9 - 12 months. In Khan Younis, 88% of them are affected and in north Gaza 77%.

Education Undermined

The siege and Operation Cast Lead have severely affected education in Gaza. At least 280

schools were damaged, including 18 totally destroyed. Construction materials aren't available for rebuilding or repairs. At the end of the last academic year, 88% of UNRWA schools and 82% of government ones operated on shifts to accommodate growing numbers of children. Students in north Gaza may have no school to attend because of conflict-caused destruction.

Power outages and lack of essential educational items are hugely disruptive, even though some amounts of previously banned items now get in.

The pre-conflict effects on students were evident in their academic performance as only 20% of 16,000 sixth graders passed standardized math, English, science, and Arabic tests.

Higher education is also impacted. Gaza has five universities offering a limited undergraduate curriculum and even fewer post-graduate choices. Yet Israel prohibits students from exiting Gaza to pursue their studies. Even seven Fulbright recipients were denied until a public outcry loosened restrictions to let a limited number of students go abroad on condition they have a scholarship from a recognized university and a diplomat from the host country accompanies them through the Erez Crossing, across Israel and the West Bank until entering Jordan.

From July - September 2008, Israel let 70 students leave Gaza through Israel. Hundreds of others not awarded scholarships or unable to get diplomatic escorts were denied, even though a few exited through Rafah to Egypt from where they continued to planned destinations.

In Summary

For over two years under siege, including months post-conflict, Gaza has endured "a protracted (humanitarian) crisis that is reflected in almost every aspect of daily life:" their livelihoods, income, enough food, too little of the nutritious kinds, medical care for the seriously ill, enough electricity and fuel, no homes for many thousands, the ability to rebuild, and other collective punishments.

Pre-siege, over 4,000 products, commodities, medicines, materials, and other items entered freely. Now it's around three to four dozen in limited quantities, gradually being increased to include small amounts of others. Yet most basics are denied - most food items, medicines called "dual use," light bulbs, fabrics, needles, candles, matches, mattresses, blankets and sheets, cutlery, books, coffee and tea, cigarettes, clothing and shoes, and much more, things posing no threat to Israel or planned for "dual use."

As a result, most Gazans "report a growing sense of being trapped: physically, intellectually and emotionally." Their ability to cope and survive is severely challenged. Efforts by humanitarian organizations are no match for Israel's malicious intransigency. The UN's most senior humanitarian official, John Holmes, expressed frustration saying:

“Protection, food, water, healthcare, and shelter are basic human needs, not bargaining chips. This fact must be recognized by all parties responsible for the immense suffering in Gaza.”

Many others express similar sentiments to marshal support for global action, hold Israel accountable under international law, free Gazans now entrapped, and end an illegal occupation so Palestinians can live freely on their own land without fear.

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