

Deepening crisis: Famine in Palestine

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*Economic conditions in the West Bank as well as Gaza are deteriorating, leaving many incensed at the masquerade of peace talks, writes **Khaled Amayreh** in Ramallah*

As 1.5 million Gazans are crying out to the world to pressure Israel to lift its scandalously callous blockade of the coastal territory, another 2.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank are struggling to cope with an unprecedented economic crisis that is further impoverishing and exhausting them.

The crisis, the harshest in recent memory, stems from a host of local and global factors, including soaring food and energy prices, sagging currency value, rampant joblessness and draconian Israeli restrictions on the movement of people, goods and services.

Further exacerbating these conditions is a devastating drought, unseen for decades, and which has nearly destroyed this year's grain crops upon which many Palestinian families depend for their livelihood. And the drought is not just affecting farmers. Coupled with a phenomenal rise in temperatures, it is also expected to cause a serious water shortage crisis in most localities, especially in the summer months.

Some Palestinians are already at loss as to how they will be able to cope with the steep rise in basic commodities.

Take flour, for example — a staple for most Palestinian families. Last year, a sack of wheat flour weighing 50 kilogrammes cost 70 Israeli Shekels, or \$20. Today, the same amount costs 210 Israeli Shekels or \$65. Prices of other basic consumer products, such as rice, sugar, cooking oil, meat, including poultry, vegetables and fruits have likewise skyrocketed, making them nearly unaffordable for many Palestinian families. This week, a kilo of medium-quality tomatoes was sold in the Hebron region for 10 Israeli Shekels or \$3.

Further, the price of electricity and cooking gas have become a real burden for the poorer segments of society, with many families unable to pay their accumulating utility bills, some resorting to burning wood for cooking. Added to that is the freefall in the value of the Jordanian Dinar, the main currency of Palestinian savings. The Dinar has lost a fourth of its value against the Israeli Shekel.

The Palestinian Authority (PA), which depends to a large extent on handouts from the West and oil-rich Arab countries, has failed to deal with the evolving crisis.

Last week, the Federation of Palestinian Labour Unions, launched a "warning strike" to protest against the high cost of living as well as the government's refusal to pay the accumulating salaries of thousands of school teachers and other civil servants appointed in 2006 following Hamas's electoral victory.

Initially, the government of Salam Fayyad rattled sabres in the face of the striking civil servants, vowing to prosecute and punish strikers. The government eventually backed down, however, promising to resolve “all issues” in a friendly manner and through dialogue.

With PA-Israeli peace talks going nowhere, and with Israel continuing to expand Jewish settlements in the West Bank, effectively annulling any remaining prospect for a viable Palestinian state, the next few months are predicted to be crucial in terms of how the Palestinians will elect to manage their national ordeal.

Al-Ahram Weekly asked Palestinian economist Hazem Kawasmi how he thought the Palestinian masses would cope with the present economic crunch. Kawasmi said he foresaw an “unprecedented” and “historic deterioration” in the Palestinian economy that would shake the political and economic system in Palestine and the region.

As to the situation in the Gaza Strip, where there is economic meltdown resulting from the hermetic Israeli blockade, Kawasmi predicts an “explosion” in the coming few weeks or months. This explosion, he argued, would again be directed towards the Egyptian border, for the sake of getting food, medicine and all kinds of goods that don’t exist today in the Gaza Strip.

“One cannot expect people to live in hunger and in high rates of poverty and unemployment for a long time. There is no convincing justification why the Palestinian- Egyptian border at Rafah has not opened yet, even on temporary basis, leaving Gazan children, women and elderly people to die slowly and suffer on a daily basis,” he said.

The Palestinian people in Gaza, Kawasmi said, shouldn’t continue to suffer until all political problems in the region are solved, adding that unless there is an immediate economic arrangement on Rafah that will facilitate the movement of goods and people across the border, the Gazan economy will soon collapse entirely.

As to the West Bank, Kawasmi points out that Israel is taking steps to disengage itself economically from the West Bank. As soon as the so-called apartheid wall is completed, Kawasmi argues, “the basis for the new economic relationship will be, from an Israeli view point: ‘We are here, and you are there, and we don’t care.’”

In this context, Palestinians are growing disillusioned with peace talks with Israel. According to a poll conducted in mid-April by the Jerusalem Centre for Information and Communication, the proportion of Palestinians supporting the two-state solution fell from 53 per cent in October 2007 to 47 per cent now. Similarly, those who voiced optimism about the possibility of reaching a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fell substantially from 44.9 per cent last year to 36 per cent now.

According to the poll, Palestinians are voicing a variety of views as to the alternatives available to the current political deadlock, with more than 27 per cent advocating a third Intifada or uprising, and 37 per cent calling for dismantling and dissolving the PA. Nearly 13 per cent favoured a unilateral declaration of independence.

To be sure, Palestinian frustration with the peace process is more than justified since that process has so far yielded no substantive outcome despite numerous talk sessions, highlighted meetings — involving American, Israeli and Palestinian leaders — as well as a number of peace conferences in the US and Europe.

This week, Henry Siegman, director of the US/Middle East Project in New York, underscored the bankruptcy and disingenuousness of the peace process. "What is required of statesmen is not more peace conferences or clever adjustments to previous peace formulations but the moral and political courage to end their collaboration with the massive hoax the peace process has been turned into," he said.

"Of course," he added, "Palestinian violence must be condemned and stopped, particularly when it targets civilians. But is it not utterly disingenuous to pretend that Israel's occupation — maintained by Israel's army- manned checkpoint and barricades, helicopter gun-ships, jet fighters, targeted assassinations, and military incursions, not to speak of the massive theft of Palestinian lands — is not an exercise in continuous and unrelenting violence against more than three million civilians? If Israel were to renounce violence, could the occupation last even one day?"

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