

ICRC: Israel Traps Gazans in Deprivation and Despair

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Founded in Geneva, Switzerland in 1863, the International Committee of the Red Cross is an “impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance.” It also tries “to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles.”

It’s legally mandated to do it under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and has had a permanent presence in Gaza since 1968. Currently 109 ICRC staff work there, including 19 expatriates. They remained throughout Operation Cast Lead and witnessed firsthand the carnage and destruction that took place.

Cooperatively with the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS), they evacuated hundreds of people, some severely wounded in the conflict. As able, they also repaired power and water supply lines and provided hospitals with vital medicines and supplies. In addition, ICRC surgeons performed operations in Gaza’s Shifa Hospital working alongside Palestinian doctors.

Post-conflict, ICRC and PRCS collected information on Israeli violations of international humanitarian laws. They also distributed vital items, including plastic sheeting, cooking sets, mattresses, blankets, hygiene kits, and more to over 72,000 Gazans whose homes were partially or totally destroyed.

ICRC is currently providing eight hospitals with medicines, other medical supplies, equipment, spare parts, and is helping with needed repairs. It’s also fitting amputees with artificial limbs and offering needed physiotherapy.

It’s helping to upgrade water and sanitation services to keep Gaza’s water network running as best it can. It’s aiding farmers and others with land rehabilitation, compost production, and “cash-for-work.” It promotes international humanitarian law and calls on all sides to observe it.

In June 2009, it issued a report titled, “Gaza: 1.5 million people trapped in despair” that described the Territory as “look(ing) like the epicentre of a massive earthquake” in the wake of Operation Cast Lead and went on to detail how severely.

No Reconstruction Allowed - Public Health at Risk

Despite billions pledged for reconstruction, practically none of it has come because of Israel’s tight embargo on virtually everything needed. As a result, thousands of displaced

and destitute families live in cramped quarters with relatives or in tents as their only other alternative.

Some emergency repairs were carried out, but “only to the already unsatisfactory level prevailing before December 2008.” Overall, the infrastructure is inadequate, overloaded, and subject to breakdown. Although chlorine is available to disinfect water, sewage and other waste matter seepage remains a major threat to public health. Each day, 69 million liters of partially or untreated effluent are pumped into the Mediterranean for lack of an ability to handle it.

Poor Access to Health Care

Gaza’s health care system is in disrepair and can’t adequately treat patients with serious illnesses. In addition, with the Territory under siege and a strict embargo imposed, most people can’t leave to seek care elsewhere. Those allowed out endure a bureaucratic nightmare and wait months before permission is granted. For some, it’s too late and for others their condition has worsened.

Twenty-six year old Do’aa is typical. She has pancreatic cancer, needs surgery, yet explains her despair. “At first, there was hope that I would be given an operation, but as time went by I stopped hoping. I am in pain and I know all too well that my disease is life threatening.” She’s waited six months for permission, so far not granted.

Reaching Jordan is no easy task. It requires passing through Erez crossing into Israel and doing it is arduous. ICRC describes the process:

“Patients on life-support machines have to be removed from ambulances and placed on stretchers, then carried 60 - 80 metres through the crossing to ambulances waiting on the other side. Patients who can walk unassisted may face extensive questioning before they are allowed through the crossing for medical treatment - or, as sometimes happens, before they are refused entry into Israel and turned back.”

As for treatment in Gaza, everything needed falls short. What’s available comes from the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) Ministry of Health in the West Bank, but the supply chain is unreliable given obstacles that Israel imposes and tensions between Fatah and Hamas.

Getting imports is more complicated still because of embargo restrictions of even the most basic items like painkillers and X-ray film developers. Patients go wanting as a result, a serious problem for the most ill.

For those needing prosthetic appliances as well because getting them is a lengthy, arduous process. Fourteen-year old Gassan lost his older brother and both his legs. He loves football, but doctors told him he’d walk again. Six months later, he’s still waiting for both of his limbs to be fitted.

A Strangled Economy

The combination of siege and Operation Cast Lead devastated Gaza’s already fragile economy. On May 1, the Palestinian Chamber of Commerce reported that unemployment reached 65%, poverty hit 80%, and the longer isolation continues the higher these figures will go. Currently, about 96% of Gaza’s industrial operations are shuttered, and over 80% of

its residents depend on humanitarian aid and supplies from the World Food Program, UNRWA, and what comes in through tunnels from Egypt to survive.

A May 2008 ICRC household survey showed that over 70% of Gazans had personal incomes of \$1 dollar a day excluding whatever humanitarian assistance they received. On average, Territory workers have to support six to seven other immediate family members and several others in their extended family. Cutting household expenses is essential, even at the cost of a healthy balanced diet, no longer affordable for most.

So cheap alternatives substitute for fruits, vegetables, meat and fish. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies result. Children, the elderly and sick are especially impacted. For youths it means stunted bone growth, improper teeth development, and a reduced capacity to learn. It makes everyone infection and illness-prone by lowering their resistance and destroying their overall state of well-being.

Most of the poor “have exhausted their coping mechanisms.” Their savings are gone, and they’ve sold personal belongings, including jewelry, furniture, farm animals, land, fishing boats, cars and other possessions – anything to raise cash. They’ve cut back on food and other essentials as much as possible. Still their situation is grave. Israel is slowly sucking life out of 1.5 million people with no opposition stepping up to stop it.

Farming in the Danger Zone

Farm families comprise over one-fourth of Gaza’s population, and they, too, been badly hit. “Exports of strawberries, cherry tomatoes and cut flowers used to be” important cash crops. No longer as they’ve been virtually halted. Farmers lost half their income and struggle to sell what they can internally at far lower prices than obtainable from exports to Israel or Europe.

Operation Cast Lead destroyed thousands of citrus, olive and palm groves as well as irrigation systems, wells and greenhouses. In addition, many farmers lack fertilizers and many seedling types. They also lost access to around 30% of their land, the portion inside a “no-go” buffer zone straddling Israel and Gaza. It extends up to a kilometer inside an Israeli-erected fence on which farmers risk being shot if they work there. Under these conditions, productive agriculture is severely curtailed and in some places not possible.

Fishermen has been just as hard hit by Israel’s coastal restrictions extending up to six nautical miles offshore. Reduced catches have resulted as bigger fish and sardines, comprising 70% of earlier harvests, are found in deeper waters.

Trapped

ICRC states:

“People in Gaza are trapped. Because Israel has shut the crossing points, Gazans have scant opportunity for contact with relatives abroad or for further education or professional training.” Palestinian staff members of international organizations, including ICRC, are also impacted.

The emotional fallout especially affects families whose relatives are imprisoned inside Israel. In June 2007, Israel stopped ICRC-supported visits of about 900 families and prevented spouses and children from staying close to their loved ones.

Students, professors, teachers, and health professionals also get no exit permission for education, training, seminars, and other skills and expertise-building methods. Ibrahim Abu Sobeih is a 24-year-old Gaza student. Pennsylvania's Clarion University awarded him a scholarship, but he can't attend. In frustration, he said:

"Being stuck here gives me a sombre view of the future. I would like to be educated and to make something of myself. I want to be able to help my family financially. But it is very difficult when I am trapped. I feel very angry and hopeless."

So do 1.5 million other Gazans - trapped in the world's largest open-air prison, under siege for over two years, getting way inadequate outside help, and none whatever from Western powers that support Israel's slow-motion genocide against a civilian population unable to stop it.

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