

# What Humanitarian Crisis?

## Livni's Big Lie

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“There is no humanitarian crisis in the [Gaza] Strip.” – Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, 1 January 2009.

In 1925, Adolf Hitler, writing in *Mein Kampf*, defined ‘The Big Lie’. He called it a lie so enormous that people “...would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.”

By now it should be obvious that Livni and other Israeli officials have decided to do just that; utilizing the same technique in service of their public relations campaign to justify the atrocities taking place in Gaza, they simultaneously claim they do not exist.

Indeed, it is yet another astonishing example of how practices from such an ignominious period of history have become incorporated into the military and propaganda armamentarium of the Israeli government and the behavior of the settler community, without even the batting of an eye to reflect its historical irony.

Take, for example, the recent riots by Israeli settlers in the Palestinian city of Al-Khalil, also known as Hebron. It is home to 200,000 Palestinians and 500 extremist settlers, protected day and night by Israeli soldiers. In early December and under the order of Israel’s High Court, they were evicted from a disputed building (quite gently of course) by those soldiers. During the confrontation between the two, a group of settlers went marauding through Hebron, shooting indiscriminately at Palestinian civilians while attempting to lynch others, setting cars on fire and burning down houses. A few weeks earlier, mosques in Hebron had been spray painted and desecrated with virulent anti-Islamic, anti-Arab slogans and houses had Stars of David painted on them. The reports and images of their December rampage were so disturbing that even Prime Minister Ehud Olmert could find no words to describe it other than calling it a “pogrom”.

In the case of the current Gaza onslaught, Livni’s remark in Paris that there was no humanitarian crisis in Gaza and everything is “completely as it should be” is an excellent example of The Big Lie. Its propagation has no doubt been aided by the Israeli government prohibiting journalists from entering Gaza (despite a High Court ruling ordering them to lift the ban).

But facts always run contrary to The Big Lie. According to the agencies of the United Nations and multiple international relief organizations:

- Eighty percent of Gazans were dependent on humanitarian assistance during the crippling 18-month siege of Gaza but before the outbreak of hostilities.
- Nearly all food shops have closed and there is currently a severe shortage of flour, rice, milk and canned goods.
- One quarter to one half of Gaza's 1.5 million people are without water. Seventy-five percent have been without electricity for over a week. Fuel is in short supply and with winter at hand, this has caused terrible hardship to the majority who live in unlit, unheated homes (and who are also forced to keep their windows open to prevent shattering glass from nearby explosions).
- Cooking gas is extremely scarce since the tunnels into Egypt—the lifeline that kept Gaza barely afloat during the siege—were bombed.
- Supplies of regular diesel—the only means hospitals have for running backup generators and which they now exclusively run on—are very low. According to the United Nations, these generators are “close to collapse.” Diesel is also needed to run water and sewage pumps; absolute necessities in providing adequate sanitation and preventing the outbreak of disease.
- Even before the military campaign commenced, 75 percent of Gaza's children were malnourished, 46 percent anemic and 30 percent suffered from stunted growth.
- The United Nations Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur for the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories, Dr. Richard Falk, said that Israel was “... allowing only barely enough food and fuel to enter to stave off mass famine and disease.”

A hallmark of The Big Lie is its repetition.

“ Hamas is trying to create the appearance of a humanitarian crisis, but together with the international organizations, we are preventing this from happening.”

– Colonel Moshe Levi, Commander of the Israeli army's Gaza Coordination and Liaison Administration, 1 January 2009.

The reality:

John Ging, head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the organization responsible for feeding half of Gaza's 1.5 million residents:

“We have a catastrophe unfolding in Gaza for the civilian population. The people of Gaza City and the north now have no water. That comes on top of having no electricity. They're trapped, they're traumatized, they're terrorized by this situation ... The inhumanity of this situation, the lack of action to bring this to an end, is bewildering to them” (*Daily Telegraph*, 5 Jan 2009).

“Gaza was already bad enough but what I saw today was utter devastation. It’s just horrible to see this, horrible to see civilians caught up in this. Gaza went through ‘crisis’ a long time ago and what I saw today was a catastrophe in the making” (*The Guardian*, 5 Jan 2009).

Chris Gunness, spokesman for the UNRWA:

“When you look at the Israeli assertions about the humanitarian situation it is very hard to square this with the extraordinarily dire situation on the ground in Gaza. Any claims about human need at this stage need to be grounded in reality” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 Jan 2009).

Maxwell Gaylard, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Palestinian Territories:

“By any definition this is a humanitarian crisis and more” (AFP, 3 Jan 2009).

“The WFP [World Food Programme] stopped sending food in there because their warehouses are full to the top.”

- Major Avital Leibovitz, military spokesman, 4 January 2009.

Christine Van Nieuwenhuysse, WFP representative in Gaza (reported to be “furious” at the above comment):

“The current situation in Gaza is appalling, and many basic food items are no longer available on the market” (Press TV, 2 Jan 2009).

Maxwell Gaylard, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Palestinian Territories:

“Conditions for parents and children in Gaza are dangerous and frightening. It is absolutely crucial that there is an end to the fighting. Without it, more civilians will continue to be killed. Without the violence stopping, it is extremely difficult to get food to people who need it” (*The Scotsman*, 3 Jan 2009).

“Electricity and communications are down over much of the strip both on account of lack of fuel and damage to critical infrastructure. Over a million people are currently without power, and over a quarter million without running water, some for up to six days” (*Washington Post*, 6 Jan. 2009).

The Associated Press, 4 Jan 2009:

And in the central Gaza refugee camp of Nusseirat, Munir Najjar said he only had another day’s worth of flour to feed his family of seven, but ventured out to find streets deserted and shops closed.

“There’s not a loaf of bread to be found,” said Najjar, 43.

“There is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza.”

- Israeli Cabinet Secretary Oved Yehezkel, 4 January 2009.

*The New York Times*, 5 Jan 2009:

Many here would dispute that [Yehezkel's statement]. With power lines down, much of Gaza has no electricity. There is a dire shortage of cooking gas.

Dr. Mads Gilbert, a Norwegian who was allowed into Gaza last week to give emergency medical aid, and who has worked in many conflict zones, said the situation was the worst he had seen.

The hospital lacked everything, he said: monitors, anesthesia, surgical equipment, heaters and spare parts. Israeli bombing nearby blew out windows, and like the rest of Gaza, here the severely limited fuel supplies were running low.

Dominic Nutt, spokesman for Save the Children:

"We need to deliver more food and blankets to ensure that children do not die of hunger and cold" (Daily Telegraph, 5 Jan 2009).

Sadi Ali, project manager for the Palestinian Water Authority:

"There is a risk of the spread of all sorts of water borne diseases such as dysentery and cholera" (Daily Telegraph, 4 Jan 2009).

Pierre Krähenbühl, Director of Operations of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC):

"There is no doubt in my mind that we are dealing with a full blown and major crisis in humanitarian terms. The situation for the people in Gaza is extreme and traumatic as a result of ten days of uninterrupted fighting. In that sense, their situation has clearly become intolerable" (ICRC.org, 6 Jan 2009).

The truth, as always, runs in stark contrast to the utterances of those peddling the latest of Israel's Big Lies. Just as in 1948 when the 'people without a land for a land without a people' myth was used as cover to expel 700,000 indigenous inhabitants from historical Palestine, The Big Lie is once again being employed to obfuscate the reality of the crimes being committed in Gaza.

Let us hope this time, they do not get away with it.

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