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Trapped - collective punishment in Gaza

"The Israeli siege has turned Gaza into a big prison. We cannot leave, not even for medical care or to study abroad, and most of what we need is not available in Gaza. We are not living really; we are barely surviving and the outlook for the future is bleak." – Fathi, a Gaza resident.

With Gaza locked down and cut off from the outside world by a stifling Israeli blockade, 46 peace activists from the world over set sail for Gaza on 22 August to, in their words, "break the siege that Israel has imposed on the civilian population of Gaza..., to express our solidarity with the suffering people of Gaza, and to create a free and regular channel between Gaza and the outside world".

An Israeli peace activist on board the Free Gaza boats, Professor Jeff Halper, said: "The mission is to break the Israeli siege, an absolutely illegal siege which has plunged a million and a half Palestinians into wretched conditions: imprisoned in their own homes, exposed to extreme military violence, deprived of the basic necessities of life, stripped of their most fundamental human rights and dignity. The siege violates the most fundamental principle of international law: the inadmissibility of harming civilian populations... I cannot stand idly aside... To do so would violate my commitment to human rights".

The blockade imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip over a year ago has left the entire population of 1.5 million Palestinians trapped with dwindling resources and an economy in ruins. Some 80 per cent of the population now depend on the trickle of international aid that the Israeli army allows in. This humanitarian crisis is man-made and entirely avoidable.

Even patients in dire need of medical treatment not available in Gaza are often prevented from leaving and scores of them have died. Students who have scholarships in universities abroad are likewise trapped in Gaza, denied the opportunity to build a future.

The Israeli authorities argue that the blockade on Gaza is in response to Palestinian attacks, especially the indiscriminate rockets fired from Gaza at the nearby Israeli town of Sderot. These and other Palestinian attacks killed 25 Israelis in the first half of this year; in the same period Israeli forces killed 400 Palestinians.

However, the Israeli blockade does not target the Palestinian armed groups responsible for attacks – it collectively punishes the entire population of Gaza.

In April 2008, Robert Serry, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the UN Secretary General, called on Israel to restore fuel supplies to Gaza and allow the passage of humanitarian assistance and commercial supplies.

"The collective punishment of the population of Gaza, which has been instituted for months now, has failed," he said.

Though a ceasefire between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups has held in Gaza since 19 June 2008, the Israeli blockade remains in place.

Economic collapse and poverty

Israel has banned exports from Gaza altogether and has reduced entry of fuel and goods to a trickle – mostly humanitarian aid, foodstuff and medical supplies. Basic necessities are in short supply or not available at all in Gaza. The shortages have pushed up food prices at a time when people can least afford to pay more. A growing number of Gazans have been pushed into extreme poverty and suffer from malnutrition.

Some 80 per cent of the population now depends on international aid, compared to 10 per cent a decade ago. The restrictions imposed by Israel have resulted in higher operational costs for UN aid agencies and humanitarian organizations. Food assistance costs the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) US\$20 per person per day compared to less than US\$8 in 2004.

Gaza's fragile economy, already battered by years of restrictions and destruction, has collapsed. Unable to import raw materials and to export produce and without fuel to operate machinery and electricity generators, some 90 per cent of industry has shut down.

Essential services jeopardized

The fuel shortage has affected every aspect of life in Gaza. Patients' hospital attendance has dropped because of lack of transport and universities were forced to shut down before the end of the school year as students and teachers could not continue to travel to them. Fuel-powered pumps for wells and water distribution networks are often not working.

Medical facilities in Gaza lack the specialized staff and equipment to treat a range of conditions, such as cancer and cardiovascular disease. In addition, hospitals are now under ever greater pressure, as they face shortages of equipment, spare parts and other necessary supplies as a result of the blockade.

With the ceasefire holding, the suffering in Gaza has fallen off the international news agenda. However, Amnesty International members continue to campaign, calling:

- on the Israeli authorities to immediately lift the blockade, allow unhindered passage into Gaza of sufficient quantities of fuel, electricity and other necessities; and allow those who want to leave Gaza to do so, notably patients in need of medical treatment not available in Gaza and students enrolled in universities abroad, and also to allow them later to return;
- on Palestinian armed groups not to resume rocket and other attacks on Israeli civilians.

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[Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: Gaza blockade - collective punishment \(Briefing, 4 July 2008\)](#)

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