

GAZA BLOCKADE – COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

“Every item necessary for a normal healthy life is absent or in short supply in Gaza... Some 450,000 Gazans – 30 per cent of the population – are unable to access clean water.”

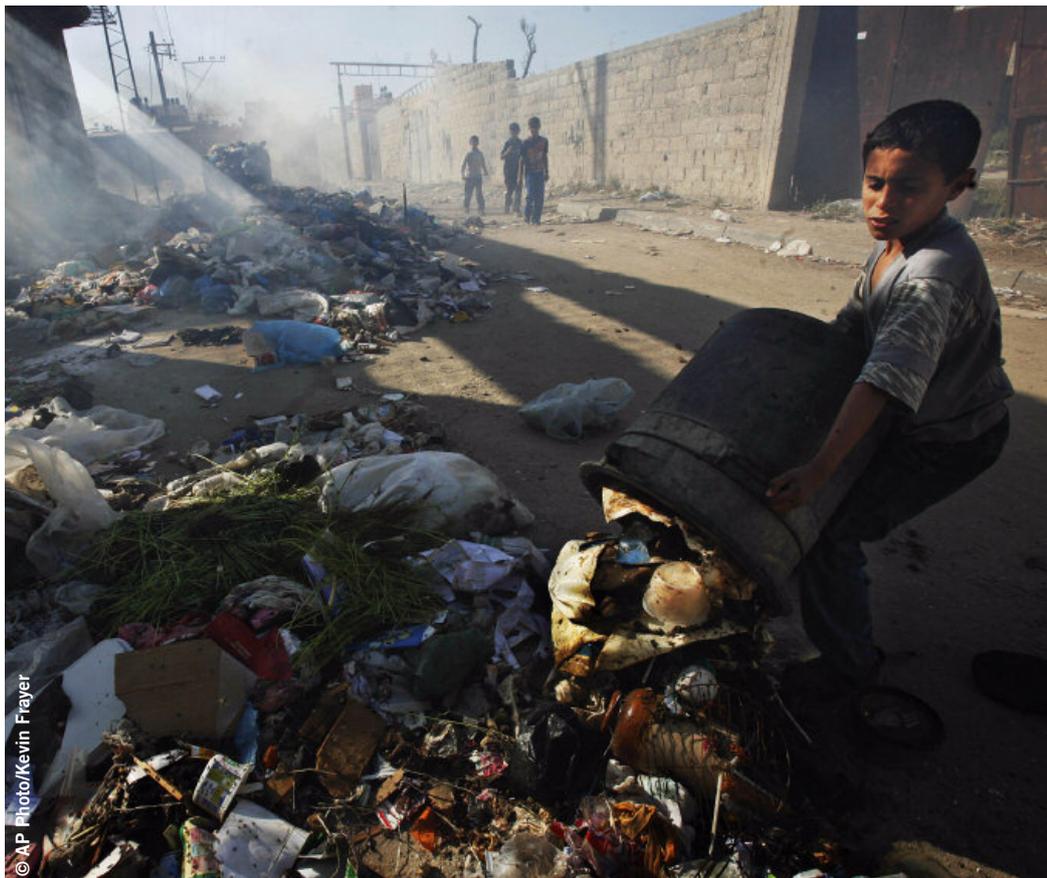
KAREN ABUZAYD, COMMISSIONER-GENERAL OF THE UN RELIEF AND WORK AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST (UNRWA), 6 MAY 2008

A humanitarian crisis is engulfing Gaza – not the result of a natural disaster but entirely man-made and avoidable. The tightening of the Israeli blockade since June 2007 has left the population, 1.5 million Palestinians, trapped and with few resources. They are surviving, but only just. Some 80 per cent depend on the trickle of international aid that the Israeli government allows in. Even patients in dire need of medical treatment not available in Gaza are often prevented from leaving; more than 50 of these have died.

PATIENTS PUNISHED

Medical facilities in Gaza lack the specialized staff and equipment to treat a range of conditions, such as cancer and cardiovascular disease. Hospitals are facing severe shortages of equipment, spare parts and other supplies as a result of the blockade.

During April 2008, for example, 1,077 patients applied for permits
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A Palestinian boy dumps garbage in a residential street in Gaza City, April 2008. Fuel shortages caused by the Israeli blockade of Gaza have paralysed transport and other services, including garbage collection.



“The denial and delay of permits released by the Israeli authorities for patients who have to leave Gaza for health reasons increased during 2007 causing further problems, in addition to the usual access difficulties that have been affecting the Palestinian population, particularly during the last eight years. In fact the right to health – availability, accessibility and quality of health facilities, services and goods – appears to be optional for the Palestinian population.”

World Health Organization (WHO), April 2008



BACKGROUND

This briefing highlights one aspect of the human rights situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), where Palestinian and Israeli civilians continue to pay the price of the ongoing confrontations between the Israeli army and Palestinian armed groups. In the first five months of 2008 some **380 Palestinians**, more than a third of them unarmed civilians and including more than **60 children**, were killed by the Israeli army, almost all of them in the Gaza Strip. In the same period **25 Israelis**, 16 of them civilians, were killed by Palestinian armed groups. This was a sharp rise in the number of victims on both sides as compared to 2007.

A ceasefire between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups came into force on 19 June and at the time of writing it looked uncertain. Israeli officials however, insisted that Gaza's border remains sealed so long as Hamas does not release the Israeli soldier they are holding.

Some 8,500 Palestinians are detained in Israeli jails. Of these, 900 are from the Gaza Strip, all of whom have been denied visits by their families since June 2007. Palestinian armed groups in Gaza continue to hold an Israeli soldier, who was captured in June 2006, and to deny him access to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

MAHMOUD ABU TAHA

Mahmoud Abu Taha, aged 21, had cancer of the small intestine. He died on 29 October 2007 after many unsuccessful

attempts to leave Gaza to receive specialist treatment. He had lost a third of his body weight. Five days before he died his family told Amnesty International that he could not eat and the vitamin solution he needed had been cut to just one feed a day because the product was in short supply. At first Mahmoud Abu Taha was given a permit by the Israeli army to leave Gaza, but on 18 October, after a long wait at the Erez crossing (between Gaza and Israel), the Israeli army refused to let him pass. He was eventually allowed to cross into Israel on 28 October but died the following day.

Mahmoud Abu Taha, days before his death, October 2007.

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to leave Gaza through the Israeli checkpoint at Erez for treatment in specialized medical facilities in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Israel, Egypt and Jordan. Of these, 709 were granted permits by Israeli authorities, 54 were refused passage and 314 received no response that month.

KARIMA ABU DALAL

Karima Abu Dalal, a 34-year-old mother of five who suffers from Hodgkin's lymphoma, a form of cancer, was denied the medical treatment she desperately needed for several months because the Israeli authorities repeatedly refused her permission to leave Gaza. She had previously received a bone marrow transplant and had undergone chemotherapy and radiotherapy in Egypt and in the West Bank. The treatment was successful, but she needs more specialist care if she is to have any chance of survival.

In November 2007 the Israeli military authorities refused her permission to leave Gaza for more chemotherapy for unspecified "security reasons". In January 2008 the Israeli High Court of Justice stated that it saw "no grounds to intervene" to lift the travel ban. Karima Abu Dalal was eventually able to leave Gaza in mid-May 2008 when some patients were exceptionally allowed passage out of Gaza via the border with Egypt. The damage to her health caused by the delay is not yet known.

As the occupying power, Israel has a duty under international human rights and humanitarian law to ensure the right to health of the population of Gaza without discrimination; to ensure protection and respect for people who are ill and infirm, and for expectant mothers; and to ensure provision, to the fullest extent of the means available to it, of medical supplies to the population of Gaza.

In June 2007 the Israeli government told the High Court that the risk of losing a limb is an issue of "quality of life" for patients but not a danger to their life, and as such it does not necessarily warrant a permit for patients to leave Gaza for medical treatment elsewhere. The Israeli High Court accepted the government's position and rejected the appeal by the Israeli organization Physicians for Human Rights for patients to be granted passage out of Gaza.

The Israeli authorities justify their refusal to allow patients to leave Gaza on security grounds, citing cases of Palestinians who in previous years planned or attempted to carry out attacks against Israelis by pretending to be patients. However, they have provided no evidence that the hundreds of patients who have been denied passage out of Gaza in the past year alone were involved in such actions – only general allegations that the patients are considered a "security risk". Denying passage to patients in desperate need of medical care serves no legitimate security purpose. Patients, as with all those leaving Gaza, undergo strict security checks at the crossing, including with metal detectors and X-ray screeners.



Alaa' Odeh, aged 25, sustained serious orthopaedic and vascular injuries in both legs in June 2007. The Israeli army refused him a permit to leave Gaza for specialized medical treatment and doctors were forced to amputate his right leg. Shortly after this photograph was taken his left leg deteriorated, but he was again denied a permit to leave Gaza and his leg had to be amputated. June 2007.

“We need to make them lose weight, but not to die.”

Dov Weissglas, an adviser to Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, outlining a new policy towards the Palestinians, February 2006

STUDENTS DENIED STUDY

Many fields of study are not available at Gaza’s universities, especially at post-graduate level. This is notably the case for science, as Gazan universities lack the resources for advanced research and Israel restricts the import of necessary equipment and material.

Even the very few students who have been able to obtain places and scholarships to pursue post-graduate studies abroad are being refused permits to leave Gaza for the second year. This violates their

right to education and to personal and professional development, and ultimately also denies the community the benefit of their future contribution.

Article 13.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) states:

“The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms...”

THE ATFALUNA SOCIETY



© The Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children

The Atfaluna Society School for Deaf Children, October 2007. Some 80 per cent of the children no longer have a functioning hearing aid.

The Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children is the only school for deaf people in the Gaza Strip. It caters for 275 pupils aged 4-17, most of them from very poor families. It also teaches sign language

to the children’s parents and runs an advanced studies programme for 88 older students who struggled in mainstream education. The children receive one hot meal a day at the school. Suad Lubbad, Atfaluna’s administrative director, told Amnesty International:

“We provide hearing aids and batteries for the pupils but for more than six months have not been able to get batteries; the last consignment was prevented from getting into Gaza. This is very hard on the children as they depend on the hearing aids. We are not able to receive the materials for our art and craft centre – the clay for the pottery, the thread for the embroidery and other material. And since the middle of April we have been forced to close the school because there is no fuel for the buses which bring the children from all over the Gaza Strip.”

WISSAM ABU'AJWA

Wissam Abu'ajwa, 31, has been anxiously waiting in Gaza since mid-2007 to begin his environmental science degree at a university in the UK for which he won a scholarship. He fears that if he cannot travel in time to begin the course in September 2008 he will lose his place and scholarship, both of which have already been deferred for a year. He told Amnesty International:

"Since I graduated from Gaza University in 1998, I have worked very hard to fulfil

my dream to study environmental science at post-graduate level – which I can only do outside Gaza as there is no such programme at Gaza's universities – and to return to Gaza with the necessary expertise to establish an environmental research and study institute, with a view to contribute to controlling pollution, increasing public awareness about environmental issues, improving the quality of drinking water and the treatment of sewage."



The deserted Rafah Crossing between Gaza and Egypt, May 2008. The Crossing – Gaza's gateway to the rest of the world – has been kept closed since June 2007.

COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

The Israeli authorities argue that the restrictions on goods entering Gaza are in response to Palestinian attacks, especially the launch of crude and indiscriminate rockets fired from Gaza at the nearby Israeli town of Sderot and surrounding villages. Amnesty International condemns and has repeatedly called for an end to these attacks against Israeli civilians. However, the Israeli blockade does not target the Palestinian armed groups responsible for these attacks, but rather collectively punishes the entire population of Gaza.

The Israeli government also maintains that since it removed its settlements and military bases from Gaza in 2005 it no longer has any responsibilities towards the population of Gaza. However, Israel maintains sole control of Gaza's airspace and territorial waters and does not allow any movement of people or goods in or out of Gaza via air or sea. Israel also continues



to exercise a degree of control over Gaza's border with Egypt and Israeli officials have repeatedly made it clear that this border can only be reopened within the framework of a joint agreement.

A Palestinian pharmacist serves a customer during a power cut in Gaza City, October 2007.

“This seemingly calibrated movement of goods into Gaza ensured that a total humanitarian catastrophe was averted, although the heavy sanctions caused Gaza’s economy – and private sector activity in particular – to grind almost to a halt.”

International Labour Office, International Labour Organization (ILO),
May 2008



© AP Photo/Kevin Frayer

Palestinians wait at a depot in central Gaza, hoping to find cooking gas to refill their canisters, April 2008.

In June 2007, after Hamas forcibly took control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces' positions and administration in Gaza, Israel tightened the restrictions it had imposed on Gaza after the Hamas election victory in early 2006. In September 2007, Israel declared the Gaza Strip a “hostile entity” and imposed further restrictions.

As a result, exports from Gaza are banned altogether and the entry of goods has been reduced to a trickle – mostly humanitarian aid, foodstuff and medical supplies. Most other goods and many basic necessities are in short supply or not available at all. A growing number of people are suffering from malnutrition.

The sharp decrease in goods allowed into Gaza and the reduction in local agricultural production due to the fuel shortage 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. Some 80 per cent of the population now depends on international aid, compared to 10 per cent a decade ago. At the same time, the restrictions imposed by Israel have resulted in higher operational costs for UN aid agencies and humanitarian organizations. Food assistance costs UNRWA US\$20 per person per day compared to less than US\$8 in 2004.

FUEL SHORTAGES

The Israeli government decided on 19 September 2007 to impose additional sanctions on Hamas by restricting the entry into Gaza of fuel, electricity and other goods. The cut was agreed by the Israeli High Court. Israel does not supply Gaza with fuel or any other commodities. The fuel is paid for by the European Union (EU) as part of its aid package and the electricity is paid for by the PA.

The fuel shortage has affected every aspect of life for Palestinians. Many patients and staff cannot reach hospitals, and universities had to close in mid-April as students and lecturers could no longer reach them.

In April, UNRWA had to suspend food distribution to 650,000 people for four days because of lack of fuel, and the WHO reported a 29 per cent drop in the number of visitors to outpatient departments because of lack of transport.

The same month a World Food Programme (WFP) survey found that 11 out of 16 institutions that care for the sick and disabled had no cooking gas or only one week's supply, and four had stopped providing hot meals. It also found that five hospitals had between half and all of their ambulances immobilized because of fuel shortages, and four day-care centres could not transport people to the centres.

The fuel shortage is also having a serious impact on public health, sanitation and the environment. Water supplies, sewage treatment and solid waste disposal all require fuel to operate pumps, back-up electricity generators and vehicles.

According to Gaza's Coastal Municipalities Water Utility, 30 per cent of Gazans have access to running water for only four to eight hours once a week, 40 per cent once every four days and 30 per cent once every two days. Since mid-April, 15 wells that use diesel generators to pump water have been closed. As a result, 150,000 people do not have regular access to drinking water in Gaza City and the central Gaza Strip.

The functioning of Gaza's sewage treatment plant has been further hampered and some 50 to 80 million litres of untreated sewage are dumped into the Mediterranean Sea every day. At times, sewage overflows into residential streets and orchards. Most rubbish collection vehicles are grounded and the animal carts that are used instead cannot reach the more distant landfill sites, leaving waste to accumulate closer to population centres.

Since April, when fuel and cooking gas supplies were further cut, and following a Palestinian attack on a fuel depot at the Gaza-Israeli crossing of Nahal Oz, public transport has been mostly unavailable and the cost of journeys in the rare shared taxis has increased tenfold. Some people power their vehicles with cooking oil, which produces toxic fumes and causes nausea and breathing difficulties for passers-by.



GAZA'S POULTRY FARMERS

In April and May, Gaza's poultry farmers were forced to kill more than 150,000 chicks as there was no gas to keep them warm. On 2 May, Raed Abu Ajwah told the BBC that he had been forced to kill tens of thousands of his hatchlings, destroying his livelihood:

"There was no other option, believe me, I just don't have the gas to keep the chicks warm, it isn't available in Gaza right now. Thousands of them have been dying because they are cold at night. I am trying to feed them, but I know they will die in a few days anyway... Today we tied 50,000 chicks in plastic bags and suffocated them. I am screaming and screaming in pain and nobody is listening."

UN agency distributing food aid in Gaza, October 2007.



Top: Israeli and international peace activists protest against the Israeli blockade of Gaza on the Israeli side of the fence which encircles Gaza, January 2008.
Below: Palestinian girls protest against the blockade in Gaza, November 2007.

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ECONOMIC MELTDOWN

Gaza's fragile economy, already battered by years of restrictions and destruction, has collapsed. Unable to import raw materials and export produce, and without fuel to operate machinery, some 90 per cent of industry has shut down. The few factories that remain open are operating at a fraction of their capacity.

The restrictions on cement imports have paralysed the construction industry and forced the closure of factories that produce tiles, bricks and related materials.

Much-needed crops are being lost because farmers have no fuel to pump

water from agricultural wells to irrigate their fields; more than 70 per cent of agricultural wells in Gaza rely on diesel to power water pumps. Farmers had already suffered heavy losses from the 2007 harvest as tons of flowers and strawberries – previously a key Gaza export – were wasted because of the Israeli ban on exports.

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. He noted: "The collective punishment of the population of Gaza, which has been instituted for months now, has failed."

ACTION NEEDED NOW

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON:

the Israeli government to:

- lift the blockade and allow the passage into Gaza of aid, fuel, electricity and other necessities to resume unhindered; and allow all patients in need of medical treatment not available in Gaza to leave and guarantee that they will be allowed to return after their treatment;

the Hamas de facto administration in Gaza to:

- put an immediate end to rocket and any other attacks on Israeli civilians;

Israel, Egypt, the PA and Hamas to:

- work urgently to secure an agreement which will allow the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt to reopen;

the international community, notably the Quartet (the USA, EU, Russia and the UN) to:

- hold all the concerned parties accountable to the same principles of international law.