

SUFFOCATING: THE GAZA STRIP UNDER ISRAELI BLOCKADE

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More than 1.4 million Palestinian men, women, and children are trapped in the Gaza Strip. Their daily lives – in an area of land just 40 kilometres long and 9.5 kilometres wide – are marked by power shortages, little or no running water of poor quality and deteriorating health care. Mass unemployment, extreme poverty, and food insecurity both exacerbate and are deepened by the impact of the Israeli blockade.

Since the blockade of Gaza was brought into force in June 2007, the five Israeli-controlled crossings between Gaza and Israel or the West Bank have been kept closed (see map on page 7). The one other land crossing at Rafah, on the border between Gaza and Egypt, is controlled by the Egyptian authorities and kept shut most of the time. The closures prevent the movement of Palestinians into and out of Gaza in all but a handful of exceptional humanitarian cases.

The blockade prohibits exports and restricts the entry of basic goods, including food and fuel. Much of the available food is provided by the UN and other aid agencies, or smuggled in through tunnels running under the Egypt-Gaza border and then sold on at exorbitantly high prices to Gaza's beleaguered residents. The blockade also often prevents people from receiving necessary, urgent medical care, and from pursuing their livelihoods.

From 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009, the inhabitants of Gaza were subjected to a devastating Israeli military offensive – Operation “Cast Lead” – which Israel said it carried out to stop Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups firing indiscriminate rockets into Israel. At least 1,383 Palestinians were killed, including hundreds of civilians, and thousands were injured. Many thousands of homes were destroyed or severely damaged, as were the electricity and water systems. Civilian buildings, including hospitals and schools, were also damaged or destroyed. One year after Operation “Cast Lead”, Gaza remains largely cut off from the outside world. With most construction materials barred by Israel, Gaza's inhabitants are unable to rebuild their shattered lives.

“The people of Gaza share with everyone else the right to dignified lives, free of indiscriminate and prolonged suffering. They should not be subjected to this continuation of collective punishment brought on by the blockade.”

Maxwell Gaylard, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory

The Israeli authorities say the blockade is a response to attacks from Palestinian armed groups, in particular the indiscriminate rockets fired from Gaza into southern Israel. In November 2009, Hamas declared a unilateral cessation of rocket fire, although this has been since been breached on several occasions by members of Palestinian armed groups. Israeli military forces, meanwhile, have conducted regular raids into Gaza and have continued to bomb the tunnels under the border at Rafah used for smuggling between Gaza and Egypt.

In fact, whatever its stated justification, by restricting the food, medical supplies, educational equipment, and building materials allowed into Gaza, the Israeli authorities are collectively punishing the entire population of Gaza, the majority of whom are children, rather than targeting those responsible for carrying out rocket or other attacks. The situation is made all the worse by the Egyptian government's continued general closure of the Rafah crossing and, most recently, by its construction of a steel wall along the border at Rafah to disrupt the cross-border smuggling that has become Gaza's lifeline. However, as the occupying power, it is Israel that bears the foremost responsibility for ensuring the welfare of the inhabitants of Gaza.

Left opposite: The Bader flour mill was hit by an Israeli air attack during Operation “Cast Lead”.

THE GAZA STRIP: INCREASING ISOLATION

1991

Israel opens the first checkpoint for entering or leaving the Gaza Strip. As the decade wears on, more checkpoints are created and a fence is built forcing people to pass through the checkpoints, which open and close intermittently and unpredictably. Palestinians living there are required to obtain special permits to travel to the West Bank.

September 2000

Outbreak of the second *intifada*. Israel limits the granting of permits to enter or leave Gaza to medical, “humanitarian” cases only.

2003

Israel adopts a broad policy of arresting Palestinians with registered addresses in Gaza who are living, working and studying in the West Bank, and deporting them to Gaza.

August 2005

Israel declares its “disengagement” from Gaza and withdraws Israeli settlers, but it retains control of Gaza's airspace, territorial waters and the land border with Israel. The Israeli military are removed from Rafah – Gaza's only crossing point with Egypt – but Israel continues to exercise substantial control over who is allowed to use the crossing.

January 2006

Hamas wins the Palestinian Authority (PA) parliamentary elections; the international community imposes an embargo on the PA and suspends development projects in the West Bank and Gaza.

June 2007

Hamas takes control in Gaza. An Israeli blockade restricting the entry of food, fuel, and other basic goods into Gaza begins. Movement of medical cases in and out of the area is restricted and delayed. Gazan families are not allowed to visit relatives in Israeli jails. Egypt closes the Rafah crossing to daily use, opening it intermittently to allow some occasional movement. By October 2008, only about one third of the trucks of aid and imports that were allowed to enter Gaza in May 2007 are being allowed through.

27 December 2008

Israel launches a major military offensive – Operation “Cast Lead” – in Gaza, and prevents the media and aid agencies from entering the area. In the following three weeks, the Israeli military kills at least 1,383 Palestinians, including 333 children. Thirteen Israelis are killed, including three civilians killed in southern Israel in rocket attacks by Palestinian armed groups.



Left: Halima Mslih and her children Nour, Nancy, Nariman, and Nirmeen outside the temporary structure where the family lives after their home was destroyed by the Israeli military.

Above: Samir al-Nadim, a father of three children, died after his exit from Gaza for a heart operation was delayed by 22 days. By the time the Israeli authorities allowed him to leave on 29 October 2009, Samir was unconscious and on a respirator. On his arrival in a West Bank hospital, he was too ill for surgeons to operate and he died of heart failure on 1 November 2009. The Israeli authorities have denied any responsibility for the delays that caused Samir al-Nadim's death, saying that they followed standard bureaucratic procedures.

FAMILIES WITH NO HOME TO GO TO

One year after Operation "Cast Lead" more than 20,000 people displaced from their homes during the Israeli military offensive continue to live in temporary accommodation. Some families are able to rent flats but many live in tents or other rudimentary housing, or stay with relatives in already overcrowded homes.

THE MSLIH FAMILY

Mohammed and Halima Mslih and their four young children live in the village of Juhor al-Dik, south of Gaza City. The family fled their home there at the beginning of Operation "Cast Lead". While they were away, their home was demolished by Israeli army bulldozers.

"We stayed for the first two days of bombing but when they shelled the house beside ours, we left. We didn't take anything with us... when we returned everything was broken, people were giving us food because we had nothing."

Mohammed Mslih

For the first six months after they returned to Juhor al-Dik, the family lived in a nylon tent, which leaked when it rained. They replaced this with a more robust temporary structure (see picture) and are constructing a simple but permanent home with breeze blocks. The family fear, however, that continuing Israeli military incursions could destroy the little they have left.

"Since July the army has been coming to the area [during incursions]... the soldiers told us 'you haven't seen anything yet; next time we will bring the houses down on your heads'."

Halima Mslih

PATIENTS UNDER SIEGE

Since the military offensive in Gaza ended, the already struggling health sector has faced an uphill battle to get back on its feet. During the ongoing blockade it has been plagued by shortages in equipment and medical supplies. World Health Organization (WHO) trucks of medical equipment bound for Gazan hospitals have repeatedly been turned away, without explanation, by Israeli border officials.

Following the Israeli closure of crossings, people with medical conditions that cannot be treated in Gaza have been required to apply for permits to leave the territory to receive treatment in either foreign hospitals or Palestinian hospitals in the West Bank. The Israeli authorities frequently delay or refuse these permits.



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Furthermore, the permits require extensive supporting documentation that must be obtained both from hospitals in Gaza and from the Ministry of Health in Ramallah, in the West Bank. Because of the poor co-ordination between the opposing Palestinian factions, Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank, obtaining the necessary documents is subject to bureaucratic delays. Delays in granting permits for travel through the Rafah crossing have also occurred on the Egyptian side.

The WHO has pointed out the risks arising from delays to those in urgent need of medical treatment, and has indicated that 28 patients died while waiting for their permits in 2009, 14 of whom were waiting to pass through the Erez crossing into Israel. It is possible that some of these deaths might not have occurred but for delays caused by the blockade.

SCHOOLCHILDREN LEARN HARSH LIFE LESSONS

More than half the population of Gaza is younger than 18 years old. Children's everyday activities, such as going to school, are severely affected by the continuing blockade.

At the start of the 2009-2010 school year, many pupils in Gaza had to study without textbooks or writing supplies, as truckloads of classroom materials were held up by Israel at the Kerem Shalom crossing point (*see map on page 7*).

During the Israeli military operation of 2008-2009, 280 of the 641 schools in Gaza were damaged and 18 destroyed. Repairing the damaged schools has proved extremely difficult because of the blockade and the continuing restrictions on the entry of construction materials. With glass almost unobtainable in the year following Operation "Cast Lead", the broken windows of damaged schools can only be covered with

Children stand outside the Omar Bin Khatab Girls' Primary School. Because of the shortage of glass, the classroom windows cannot be repaired.

plastic sheeting and wood. As they try to learn, children contend with classrooms either open to the elements, or with no natural light. In late December 2009, under pressure from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Israel announced that it would allow glass to be transported into Gaza.



INDUSTRY AND LIVELIHOODS GROUND TO DUST

Operation “Cast Lead” destroyed or severely damaged the buildings, equipment or stock of 700 private enterprises from the industrial, agricultural and business sectors. The blockade, which stifles Palestinian trade by limiting imports and virtually banning exports, makes rebuilding damaged businesses – and lives – almost impossible.

THE BADER FLOUR MILL

The Bader flour mill in Sudania, west of Jabalia, north-west of Gaza City, was repeatedly hit in aerial attacks on 10 January 2009. The mill, run by the Hamada brothers, used to employ about 85 people, and supported a wider circle of the employees’ families in the area.

The core of the mill was hit, destroying three floors and the machinery required to process grain into flour. The storage facilities in the sides of the main building were also damaged, ruining the wheat contained inside. The total cost of the building and equipment lost in the attack, including a computerized purification system, was US\$209,000.

“The nature of the strikes, in particular the precise targeting of crucial machinery, suggests that the intention was to disable the factory in terms of its productive capacity.”

Report of the UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (2009), paragraph 50

Hamdan Hamada stands by his destroyed flour mill in Gaza.

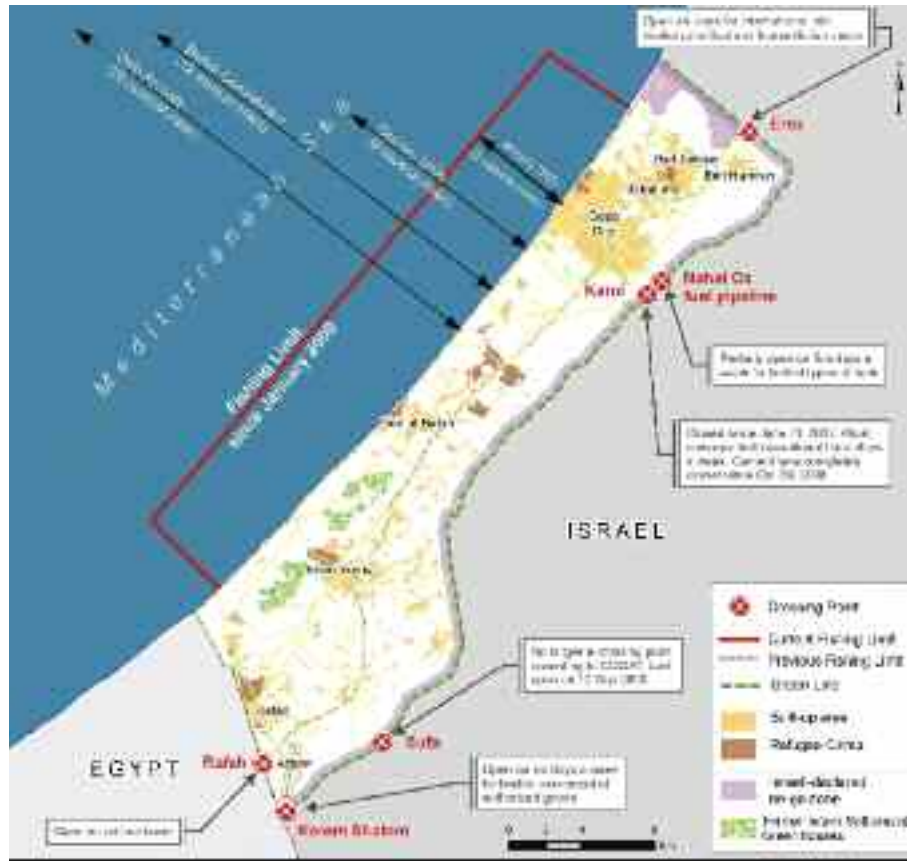
One year after Operation “Cast Lead”, the Hamada family cannot obtain even a fraction of the cement and iron needed to repair the building. The brothers have compiled a list of the specific machinery they need to replace in order to resume production, but the Israeli authorities refuse to allow them to bring the items into Gaza.

Before 2000, the private sector in Gaza employed more than 110,000 people, but the rapid economic demise has led to spiralling job losses. In December 2009, the UN reported an unemployment rate in Gaza of more than 40 per cent.



Above: Ashraf Abu Sulieman (aged 16) was shot by Israeli soldiers on his way to visit a friend, while he was walking on a beach at the northern end of the Gaza Strip near the “buffer zone”. After one month of rehabilitation, his movement was still extremely limited in his right leg and he was unable to move his right arm.

Right: Map of the Gaza Strip showing the new fishing limit and “buffer zone”.



FISHING AND FARMING – DANGEROUS PROFESSIONS

During Operation “Cast Lead”, Israel extended the “buffer zone” it imposes on Palestinian land along the eastern and northern edge of the Gaza Strip. This zone now extends two kilometres into the Gaza Strip in some places, swallowing 30 per cent of Gaza’s agricultural land. Farmers and other Palestinians entering this area risk being shot by the Israeli military. The Israeli military also regularly fires at Palestinian fishermen to enforce its ban on fishing more than three nautical miles off the coast of Gaza – just one indication of Israel’s continuing control over Gaza’s borders and airspace.

Fishing used to be a major industry in Gaza providing much-needed employment and income to local families. Since 2000, when Palestinians were permitted to fish up to 20 nautical miles offshore, the Israeli

authorities have progressively reduced the area in which they allow Palestinian fishermen to work. Following Operation “Cast Lead” the permitted fishing area was decreased further still from up to six to just three nautical miles – even so, some of the fishermen in Gaza port have complained to Amnesty International that they get shot at after just two and half miles. Waters closest to the coast typically have low quantities of small fish. This limited catch, combined with rising fuel prices, mean that taking out the larger boats risks making an overall loss. Gazan fishermen increasingly use small boats for their meagre catches, leaving the larger boats unused and rusting in the harbour.

“In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.”

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 1 (2)

CONCLUSION

As the occupying power, Israel has a duty under international humanitarian law to ensure the welfare of the population of Gaza without discrimination. Israel must uphold the population’s human rights, including the rights to health, to education, to work and to an adequate standard of living, which includes the rights to food and adequate housing.

The blockade constitutes collective punishment under international law. By preventing the entry of desperately needed materials and support for rehabilitation and reconstruction after Operation “Cast Lead”, the Israeli government is continuing to compound the suffering of civilians in Gaza and is violating its binding legal obligations.

TAKE ACTION NOW

CALL ON THE ISRAELI AUTHORITIES TO LIFT THE BLOCKADE ON GAZA

Call on the Israeli government to:

- Immediately lift the blockade and open all crossing points under its control:
 - To allow fuel, food and other necessities into Gaza without restrictions, and permit the free entry of educational and medical equipment, and construction materials necessary for rebuilding and all other materials essential to enabling Gaza's population to enjoy their human rights.
 - To allow the export of goods from Gaza and the import of raw and other materials necessary for Gaza's industrial production.
- Immediately return all arable land inside Gaza currently used as a "buffer zone".
- Agree a fair fishing zone with Palestinian representatives that is equivalent to the distance Israel enjoys from its coast for its fishing industry.
- Ensure that Israeli security forces at Gaza's borders use force only when necessary to counter genuine threats and do not use lethal force except in the circumstances allowed under international law.

Please write to:

Shimon Peres
President of the State of Israel
The Office of the President
3 Hanassi Street
Jerusalem 92188
Israel
Fax: +972 2 561 1033
or +972 2 566 4838
Salutation: Dear President

Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
3 Kaplan Street
PO Box 187
Kiryat Ben-Gurion
Hakiryat
Jerusalem 91950
Israel
Fax: +972 2 566 4838
or +972 2 6496659
Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Also call on the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas de facto administration in Gaza to improve co-ordination and facilitate the transfer of patients requiring medical treatment outside Gaza:

West Bank

Dr Fathi Abu Moghli
Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
PO Box 14
Nablus
Palestinian National Authority, via Israel
Fax: +970 2 2408979
Email: dr.fathiabumoghli@gmail.com
Salutation: Dear Minister

Gaza

Dr Bassem Naeem
Minister of Health
Fax: +970 8 2826295
Email: mdpr2000@gmail.com
Salutation: Dear Dr Naeem

Call on the Hamas de facto administration in Gaza to cease permanently all indiscriminate rocket attacks into Israel:

Isma'il Abd al Salam Ahmad Haniyeh
Prime Minister of the Hamas de facto administration in Gaza
Fax: +972 (or 970) 8 288 4815 or +972 (or 970) 8 288 4493
Online contact link:
www.pmo.gov.ps/index.php?option=com_contact&view=contact&id=1&Itemid=79
Salutation: Dear Mr Haniyeh

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Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

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