

**FACTSHEET: SIEGE OF GAZA,
PERVASIVE AND DEVASTATING
Update: May, 2008**



Few Canadians are aware of the humanitarian catastrophe taking place in Gaza - it is largely outside of the mainstream news in Canada. But the civilian population in Gaza survives on a daily basis under increasingly inhumane conditions, due on one part to the persistent violence and insecurity in the form of military incursions and internecine conflict, and on the other to severe restrictions of all entry and exit points in Gaza imposed by Israel. In desperation, facing shortages of food, medicine and other basic supplies, on January 23, 2008 tens of thousands of Palestinians broke through the border crossing with Egypt. While this provided a brief suspension of their misery, the current situation prompted John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) to state:

“The severe restrictions on freedom of movement for the people to enter and leave Gaza has created an acute sense of imprisonment which has had a pervasive and devastating effect on the psychology of the population. The pain, anguish and despair for the families affected cannot be adequately conveyed in words.”¹

What is happening in Gaza: Humanitarian update, May, 2008?

The humanitarian situation in Gaza has been deteriorating since 2000, when Israel imposed strict closures in response to the second *Intifadah*². The crisis has intensified since 2006, following the election of Hamas, which resulted in international sanctions, further restrictions in the movement and access of people and goods, and an increase in military attacks by Israel³.

Since June 2007, when Hamas took full control of Gaza, the crossings into the Gaza Strip have been closed and only a limited amount of basic humanitarian goods have been allowed in.

In a report released in March 2008, a coalition of UK-based aid organizations stated that Gaza is facing its worst humanitarian crisis since Israel occupied it in 1967. The report demonstrates that Israel’s extreme restrictions on movement and access in and out of Gaza are leading to a lack of basic infrastructure services, rising poverty, high unemployment, deteriorating health services and increased dependency on aid⁴. A major factor has been restrictions on fuel - no diesel or petrol has entered Gaza since the 10th of April 2008⁵. Ordinary Palestinians, as the following statistics show, are the ones being punished by these measures:

- **Sanitation:** Gaza’s water authority has had to dump 60 million litres of raw and partially treated sewage, which they have not been able to treat due to the shortages of fuel and electricity, into the Mediterranean Sea⁶.
- **Water:** Between 25-30% of the population of the Gaza Strip does not receive running water at home because they lack electricity for pumping⁷.
- **Health care:** Hospitals experience power cuts for 8-12 hours a day and depend on generators to run basic facilities. In December 2007 only 64% of applicants requiring services not available in Gaza were given permits to leave the strip by Israel, leading to dozens of patient deaths⁸.
- **Food:** Food prices have been rising while basic goods such as wheat flour, baby milk, and rice are increasingly scarce⁹.

- Economy: The agricultural sector and fishing industry have both been affected by the fuel shortage. Without no fuel for the harvest and for irrigation, crops are in danger of rotting in the fields.¹⁰ In addition, 3,500 factories out of 3,900 have closed, causing 75,000 private sector job losses.¹¹
- Aid: More than 80% of Palestinians in Gaza are dependent upon humanitarian assistance, with UN food aid going to about 1.1 million people - three quarters of the population¹². The humanitarian organizations themselves are also affected by the crisis: UNRWA ran out of fuel on 24 April, forcing it to stop distributing food¹³.
- Transport: The few vehicles moving are those who have made a dangerous conversion to run on cooking gas¹⁴ while in Gaza City, donkeys have become the usual means of transportation¹⁵.

What are the obligations of Israel as an occupying power?

Aid agencies have emphasized that the current situation in Gaza is “man-made, completely avoidable and, with the necessary political will, can also be reversed.”¹⁶

- Protecting Civilians: According to Amnesty International, "Israel has a legal obligation to protect the civilian population of Gaza." While condemning both Israeli and Palestinian violence, Israel's attacks “are disproportionate and go beyond lawful measures which Israeli forces may take in response to rocket attacks by Palestinian armed groups.”¹⁷
- Restoring Movement and Access: UNRWA points out that “the solution to reverse the current trend of human misery and violence in Gaza is access. This is the carefully judged assessment of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, whose authors were Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt, assisted by the USA.”¹⁸

¹ The humanitarian emergency in Gaza "A shocking and shameful situation". Presentation by John Ging, Director UNRWA Operations Gaza to the International Development Committee, House of Commons (UK). April 30 2008.

² “Country Brief: The West Bank and Gaza”. The World Bank Group, April 2008.

³ See CJPME Fact Sheet No. 32, “Humanitarian Disaster in Gaza, 2006-2007”, January 2008.

⁴ “The Gaza Strip: A Humanitarian Implosion”. Amnesty International, along with CARE International UK, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Medecins du Monde UK, Oxfam, Save the Children UK and Trocaire. March 2008

⁵ Ging, op cit.

⁶ “Gaza Humanitarian Situation Report : Impact of Fuel Shortages on Gaza Sanitation – Polluting the Sea”. Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). 29 April 2008

⁷ Amnesty International et al, op cit. p10.

⁸ Amnesty International et al, op cit. p10-11

⁹ Ibid p 4.

¹⁰ “Gaza is Running out of Fuel”. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). April 29, 2008

¹¹ Amnesty International et al, op cit. p8

¹² Ibid. p4

¹³ ICRC, op cit.

¹⁴ Ging, op cit.

¹⁵ ICRC, op cit.

¹⁶ Amnesty International et al, op cit. p4.

¹⁷ Malcolm Smart, Director of Middle East and North Africa Program, Amnesty International as cited in “Children and Civilian Bystanders in Gaza Death Toll”, Amnesty International, March 3 2008.

¹⁸ Ging, op cit.