

Gaza today



The Gaza Strip is now entering its sixth year under siege. Its largely refugee population of 1.6



million Palestinians, half of whom are under 18, are confined to an area about the size of the Isle of Wight.

Life under siege

Israel has complete control over Gaza by land, sea and air, effectively sealing it off from the outside world.

Representatives of the UN and numerous charities and NGOs, who see the reality of life in Gaza on a daily basis, assert that there is a major economic and health crisis.

Chris Gunness, local head of UNRWA, said: "There is 80% aid dependency and 44% unemployment... deep poverty has gone up three times." (In 2000 only 20% of the population were aid dependent.)

Many foodstuffs, building materials, fuel and medical supplies are subject to the blockade, so that the inhabitants have to bring in basic necessities via tunnels between Gaza and Egypt.

80% of businesses have had to shut down due to lack of fuel, raw materials and access to external markets.



Incubators are threatened by power cuts

Frequent power cuts are also disastrous for hospitals (see, for example, <http://tinyurl.com/dxlawm>, which shows the effects on young patients), and 90% of the water in Gaza is undrinkable.

Patients used to be able to leave Gaza to seek medical treatment elsewhere, but Israel delays or denies permits to many patients and dozens have died, according to Physicians for Human Rights – Israel (www.phri.org).

A PHRI report detailed how Palestinian patients needing medical treatment abroad have 'become an accessible and important target for the Shin Bet [the Israeli security service] for the purposes of recruiting and gathering information' – a clear violation of international law.

Many students – even if they have scholarships to universities abroad – have been unable to leave Gaza.

Gaza fishermen are restricted to fishing within three kilometres of land, where the water is polluted by waste from the Strip, since Israel destroyed Gaza's sewage system. Boats working beyond – and sometimes even within – these limits are often shot at or confiscated by the Israeli navy, and the fishermen abducted.

The Strip is used by Israel as a dumping ground for released prisoners. For instance, prisoners on hunger strike in 2012, protesting against being held without charge or trial, were 'released' to Gaza, although their homes and families were in the West Bank.

'Operation Cast Lead'

From 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009 Israeli forces shelled and bombed Gaza, killing over 1,400 Palestinians, including 313 children. Large areas of Gaza were razed to the ground and much of the urban infrastructure destroyed.

More than three years later, many families are still camped out amid the ruins.

Israel continues to block the importation of building materials and fuel, essential to the reconstruction of homes, schools, hospitals and the basic infrastructure of the Gaza Strip.

Children picking over the rubble for material to rebuild their homes have been shot dead by Israeli snipers.

War crimes

There has been widespread condemnation of Israel's actions during Operation Cast Lead by dozens of international organisations and also by Israeli human rights groups.

After an extensive investigation **Amnesty International** published a detailed report, *Israel/Gaza: Operation 'Cast Lead': 22 days of death and destruction*, in July 2009 (see www.amnesty.org). The report is highly critical of Israel's actions, noting that the F16 bombers "targeted and destroyed civilian homes without warning, killing and injuring scores of their inhabitants, often while they slept.

"Children playing on the roofs of their homes or in the street and other civilians going about their daily business, as well as medical staff attending the wounded were killed in broad daylight by Hellfire and other highly accurate missiles launched from helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, and by precision projectiles fired from tanks."

The report speaks of "reckless conduct, disregard for civilian lives and property and a consistent failure to distinguish between military targets and civilians and civilian objects".

Al also says: "Israeli forces... prevented ambulances and medical staff from attending to the wounded and transporting them to hospital and in several cases targeted ambulance and rescue crews and others who were trying to evacuate the wounded", and that "Israeli soldiers also used civilians, including children, as "human shields", endangering their lives by forcing them to remain in or near houses which they took over and used as military positions. Some were forced to carry out dangerous tasks such as inspecting properties or objects suspected of being booby-trapped."



White phosphorus used against a civilian population.

Two months later the **Goldstone Report**, resulting from the four-person UN Fact-Finding Mission on Gaza, also found that "the killing of civilians appears to have been the direct objective of the Israeli military" and that "the operation was in furtherance of an overall policy aimed at punishing the Gaza population for its resilience and for its apparent support for Hamas" (see www2.ohchr.org/English for the full text).

The report cited war crimes and potential crimes against humanity carried out by the Israeli army, and called on international governments to take action to bring those responsible to justice, including through the International Criminal Court.

It also found that Israel "imposed a blockade amounting to collective punishment and carried out a systematic policy of

progressive isolation and deprivation of the Gaza Strip".

Collective punishment is a war crime under international law.

Despite intense lobbying by pro-Zionist organisations, and the shameful failure of the British government to support the Report, it was endorsed by the UN General Assembly.

Piracy and murder

In May 2010 an international convoy of seven boats loaded with school and medical supplies attempted to break the siege of Gaza. Activists included well-known campaigners such as Holocaust survivor Hedy Epstein, Swedish writer Henning Mankell, Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead McGuire and Israeli Member of the Knesset Haneen Zoabi, as well as lawyers, parliamentarians and dozens of journalists.



The 'Mavi Marmara'.

The largest vessel, the Turkish cruise ship the *Mavi Marmara*, was raided at night by a team of Israeli commandos while still in international waters. Nine activists were shot dead at close range and the rest of the crew and passengers were abducted and taken to Israel.

Israel blocked transmission of satellite broadcasts from the boat prior to the attack and then confiscated all phones and cameras on board. Hence the Israeli PR machine was

'Universal jurisdiction', by which people suspected of war crimes outside the UK can be apprehended here, has deterred a number of Israeli generals and Tzipi Livni, Israeli Foreign Minister during Operation Cast Lead, from visiting Britain. Under pressure from Israel, the British government has brought in changes to the law to make their arrest and prosecution more difficult – whatever their suspected crimes.

able to go into action unhindered by any footage which would undermine their version of events.

The International Court of Justice has ruled that **“vessels on the high seas are subject to no authority except that of the state whose flag they fly... No state may exercise any kind of jurisdiction over foreign vessels upon them.”**

As a result of international pressure, Israel was obliged to ease the blockade slightly.

Democracy under occupation

In the 2006 general elections, deemed free and democratic by international observers, although they had to be organised under military occupation, Hamas won a majority of seats. (Hamas is a nationalist organisation which came to the fore in the 1980s, largely based in Gaza but with support throughout the Occupied Territories.)

A unity government was set up, with cabinet posts being given to members of Fatah, Hamas and other parties. Israel responded by abducting and imprisoning 35 Hamas MPs. Most were not charged with any offence and some are still in jail.

The US and other Western powers demanded Hamas recognise Israel (borders unspecified), renounce all violence and stand by treaties already signed with Israel. No such demands were made on Israel.

Next the US and Israel stepped in and encouraged Fatah to stage a coup in Gaza to unseat Hamas and again become the dominant force, with whom Israel said it preferred to negotiate.

Hamas staged a pre-emptive coup in Gaza and for six years both Fatah and Hamas have targeted the opposing side's supporters.

In the wake of the 'Arab Spring' the young people especially, throughout the Occupied Territories, have been demanding reconciliation and unity between the Palestinian parties and free and fair elections.

Israel says...

• **Israel claims that it no longer occupies the Gaza Strip since it withdrew in 2005.**

Although the 7000 settlers (illegally occupying 20% of the Strip) were removed – and largely resettled in the occupied West Bank – Israel has since tightened the siege on Gaza by land, sea and air. The UN clearly states that Gaza, like the West Bank and East Jerusalem, is still occupied territory and that Israel therefore has a duty of care for its inhabitants, according to the 4th Geneva Convention.

• **Israel says it is 'at war' with Hamas and is entitled to use any means to defend itself.**

Armed resistance against military targets while under military occupation is legal under international law. But Israel has made it clear it will suppress any form of resistance – armed or non-violent. It has an extremely powerful army, navy and

air force which it has used to kill both militants and large numbers of civilians. Hamas and other groups have retaliated with rockets that are relatively ineffective.

From June 2004 to the end of January 2009, 21 people were killed in Israel by rockets fired from the Gaza Strip. In the same period, over 3000 Gazans, nearly a third of them children, have been killed by the Israeli army and air force¹.

• **Israel accused Hamas of breaking the ceasefire prior to Operation Cast Lead.**

After six months of ceasefire, Israeli forces entered Gaza and killed 14 Palestinians, provoking rocket fire into southern Israel that killed no-one.

• **Israel quotes the aggressive rhetoric used by Hamas in the 1980s, while ignoring the change in their approach since they became part of the political process in 2006.**

In July 2009 Khaled Meshal, chief of Hamas' political bureau, said the organisation was willing to adopt "a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict which included a Palestinian state based on 1967 borders". This is in line with UN Resolution 242.

• **Following the Palestinian reconciliation, Israel said it will not deal with Hamas in any form, and immediately withheld about \$100m of taxes due to the Palestinian Authority.**

The UN, the EU and the US administration insisted that the taxes should be handed over.

Gaza and Egypt

Mubarak's regime cooperated fully with the US and Israel by keeping its border with the Gaza Strip hermetically sealed and hindering any attempts to take in aid. It arrested and imprisoned Palestinians on Israel's behalf. Popular demonstrations in support of the Palestinians were brutally suppressed.

Dozens of 'normalisation agreements' were signed by the two countries, usually to Israel's economic and strategic

Chris Patten, elder statesman, former President of the charity Medical Aid for Palestinians and now Chairman of the BBC, has called the blockade 'medieval', and pointed out that it is harmful to Israel's own interests, as it intensifies its political isolation and undermines its pretensions to being a potential member of the European Community.



Tunnels from Egypt to Gaza: transporting livestock.

advantage. For decades the US gave the Egyptian regime about £2 billion a year, largely in military aid.

After the Egyptian revolution of January 2011 the new interim government at once announced it would lift the siege on Gaza and review treaties with Israel. It was also instrumental in bringing together the opposing Palestinian factions.

However, the Egyptian military elite remains a dominant force, and access in and out of Gaza is still very restricted. US aid to the Egyptian army continues.

Shameful complicity

As a signatory to the Fourth Geneva Convention, the British government has a responsibility to act on violations of that convention. But it continues to supply Israel with arms, to buy arms from Israel and to back the preferential trading arrangements between Israel and the EU. It also refuses to oppose Israel's blockade of Gaza and the ongoing detention of democratically elected members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

“My message to the international community is that our silence and complicity, especially on the situation in Gaza, shames us all.”

– Archbishop Desmond Tutu



Despite the humanitarian crisis, Palestinians living in Gaza are determined to rebuild their lives. Schools operate in double shifts and hospitals treat patients in spite of the lack of essential medicines and equipment. The people of Gaza have a very clear message for the international community: Please act to end the siege NOW, to allow us to live our lives with dignity.

What you can do

- **Boycott Israeli goods and institutions, until Israel agrees to abide by international law**
- **Lobby your local MP and MEP on these issues**
- **Call for the release of the Palestinian MPs whom Israel has abducted and imprisoned**
- **Support the suspension of the EU/Israel trade agreement until Israel ends its occupation**
- **Join the Palestine Solidarity Campaign**

1 The Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem provides facts and figures about the Occupied Palestinian Territories: www.btselem.org. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also monitors the situation and produces regular detailed reports and maps: www.ochaopt.org. Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights (www.lphr.org.uk) monitors and responds to Israeli violations of international law.

Get involved! Join the PSC now

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