

The World's Largest Prison Camp

A report on access to Gaza



Britain Palestine
All Party Parliamentary Group

November 2010

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About the delegation

A delegation from the Britain Palestine All Party Parliamentary Group visited the Gaza Strip from 8th – 11th October 2010. The trip was organised by the Council for Arab British Understanding (CAABU) and the group travelled via Cairo and entered Gaza through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt. The delegates were Lord Norman Warner (Labour), Richard Graham MP (Conservative), Dr Julian Huppert MP (Liberal Democrat), David Ward MP (Liberal Democrat), Graham Bambrough (Parliamentary Officer at CAABU) and Ed Parsons (Education Officer at CAABU).

The group was hosted by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The programme included a visit to some of the tunnels that are used to smuggle fuel and construction materials under the border with Egypt. The delegation also visited stalled UNRWA housing projects, which despite pledges of funding from many European countries have been suspended due to a lack of construction materials. Meetings were held with the Gaza Community Mental Health Project, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights and the Palestinian Federation of Industries, as well as a number of UK NGOs working on health in the OPT, such as Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) and International Medical Corps (IMC). The delegates visited two United Nations schools, Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City and areas which were destroyed during Operation Cast Lead, such as the town of Izbet Abed Rabbo in the north of Gaza. The delegation toured a UN food distribution centre in Jabalya, one of eleven such centres that feed 700,000 people in the territory.

The parliamentarians also met with Director of UNRWA in Gaza, John Ging, as well as Deputy Director Aidan O'Leary.

The delegates held a number of political meetings with senior figures within Gaza to discuss peace talks with Israel and the prospect of unity between the Palestinian political factions.

The trip represented the third visit of the Britain Palestine APPG to Gaza since Operation Cast Lead. Links to copies of previous reports can be found below:



Fact Finding Mission to Gaza and the West Bank

<http://www.caabu.org/pdf/BPAPG.pdf>
Spring 2009



One Year on from War:

A Report on the Humanitarian and Political Situation in Gaza*

<http://www.caabu.org/one-year-on-from-war-report.pdf>
Spring 2010

*Includes a detailed assessment of the reliance of the population of Gaza upon food aid and the impact of the siege upon education, women and the children of the territory, subjects not covered in this report

Report photographs by Ed Parsons, Caabu

Executive summary

Following the attack upon the Mavi Marmara and the international aid flotilla in May 2010, Israel announced it was easing the blockade of Gaza. Whilst most food items are now permitted to enter the territory (the majority of which were previously banned), the quantity of imports remains deficient. During the visit of the delegation the total number of truckloads entering Gaza represented just 32% of the weekly pre-blockade levels. Construction materials and fuel remain barred for private use and exports are still prohibited.

Only since June 2010, 18 months after Operation Cast Lead, have the UN and internationally funded projects been permitted to import very limited amounts of concrete, steel and glass. On 14th September UNRWA received approval to bring in materials for 13 projects, representing just 1.7% of UNRWA's overall reconstruction programme. These projects include 4 schools, 16 classrooms, 2 health centers, 21 housing units, 1 kindergarten and one office. On 3rd October UNRWA requested the entry of 404 trucks of aggregate through the Karni crossing, of which only 70 had been delivered by 6th November.

The construction sector has a large role to play in the restarting of the economy. Prior to the blockade the Palestinian Business Association reports that 35,000 people were working in construction, in Gaza. This number has now fallen to just over 6,000. Reconstruction projects are central to countering the high unemployment level in Gaza.

At present around 20% of the Ministry of Health budget goes on paying the bills of Palestinians treated abroad. In 2009, the MoH paid around 91 million Shekels (16m GBP) to cover the cost of 10,839 referrals from Gaza. Of this 11.9% went to Israeli hospitals. Since June 2007, on average 17% of patients with referrals were refused exit permits for treatment in Israel, East Jerusalem or overseas. Between January 2008 and June 2009 the situation was even worse, with 40% of the applications for permits to leave Gaza rejected or delayed. In addition doctors told the of a significant "de-development" of the health care system in Gaza, due to restrictions on drugs, equipment and the training of medical personnel abroad.

The Erez border crossing, the only transit point for personnel wishing to cross directly to Israel and the West Bank, remains closed to traffic. On average only 25 people per day are able to pass through the facility that can process 50,000 people daily. A future Palestinian state must be based upon the territorial entities of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and travel between both areas must be possible and feasible.

In discussions with the delegation both Fatah and Hamas reported that agreement had been reached between the parties on the voting system for new elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Agreement is still to be reached however on reform of the security forces and transitional arrangements prior to elections. There is a clear acceptance by both sides, and also across the elements of Hamas, that the current division is undermining the Palestinian cause. A unity agreement remains some way off, but is more feasible now than at any point since the inter-factional violence of 2007.

Context of the visit

At the end of 2008 Israel launched a wide scale military campaign in the Gaza Strip, named Operation Cast Lead. The 22-day long invasion which began on 27th December relied upon the use of overwhelming air power, before a ground invasion was launched on 3rd January. Israel claimed that the targets were Hamas' military installations, but the conflict was characterised by widespread attacks upon the civilian infrastructure of the territory. Hospitals, schools, mosques, civilian homes and a United Nations compound were severely damaged or destroyed. Operation Cast Lead represented the most brutal and sustained attack upon Gaza since the start of the Israeli occupation in 1967. By its conclusion over 1,300 Palestinians had been killed, the majority of them civilians, and 352 of them children¹. Over 5,000 more were wounded.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) reports that 3,540 housing units were destroyed during the conflict, whilst a further 2,866 sustained major damage and 52,900 minor damage. The town of Rafah in southern Gaza was hit particularly hard due to the location of smuggling tunnels under the Philadelphia Line with Egypt, whilst areas near to the border with Israel were also particularly badly affected. A number of schools were also hit during the conflict, with the American International School in northern Gaza completely destroyed. Two United Nations schools in Beit Lahyia and Gaza City were also partially destroyed, whilst the Department of Agriculture at Gaza University was completely devastated in a bombing raid.



Delegation (L to R): David Ward MP, Lord Norman Warner, Richard Graham MP, John Ging (Rirector of UNRWA) and Dr Julian Huppert MP

The UN report into the conflict subsequently concluded that both Israel and Palestinian groups had indeed committed war crimes during the fighting. The investigation, headed by the former chief prosecutor for war-crime tribunals on Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, Richard Goldstone, declared that Israel had used both "disproportionate force" and "collective punishment" against the population of Gaza. The report stated that Operation Cast Lead "was directed at the people of Gaza as a whole, in furtherance of an overall and continuing policy aimed at punishing the Gaza population, and in a deliberate policy of disproportionate force aimed at the civilian population... The destruction of food supply installations, water sanitation systems, concrete factories and residential houses was the result of a deliberate and systematic policy which has made the daily process of living, and dignified living, more difficult for the civilian population."ⁱⁱⁱ

Almost two years on from the conflict reconstruction of the Gaza Strip is prevented by Israel's blockade of the territory. Since the summer of 2007 and Hamas' consolidation of power in the Gaza Strip the Israeli government has viewed the territory as a "hostile entity" and has imposed a crippling blockade. At the start of the closure the borders of Gaza were

sealed shut and all but the most basic of humanitarian products were prevented from entering. The economy of the territory has imploded, public health has been severely damaged and attempts at reconstruction in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead nullified. Gaza, in the words of Prime Minister David Cameron, has become “a prison camp”.

Israel rejects the claim it is still in occupation of Gaza and contends that it is no longer responsible to secure the rights of the people under to the laws of occupation. Israel emphasises that it does not have a regular and permanent military presence in the Gaza Strip and thus it does not possess the ‘effective control’ over Gaza that triggers the application of the laws of occupation.

However, it can be clearly argued that the accumulated effect of Israel’s control over many aspects of the public life of Gaza – including its control over the land crossings, the airspace and the sea, the movement of people and goods, together with the control of important resources and carrying out sporadic, but on-going, military attacks in Gaza – amounts to ‘effective control’, even in the absence of regular military presence in the Gaza Strip. In the current circumstances, this notion supports the application of the laws of occupation in full to Israel’s actions and demands that Israel fulfil its obligation under this branch of law.

Access restrictions

Entry of goods and personnel had been restricted by the Israeli authorities from as early as 2000, but in June 2007 Israel raised a total blockade upon the Gaza Strip. The Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA) stipulates that 500 trucks per day (around 15,500 per month) are required to supply the people of Gaza. The closest that Israel has ever come to allowing this access was before the blockade in May 2007 when 475 trucks entered Gaza on a daily basis. In November 2008 only 137 trucks were permitted to enter during the entire month.



Ruins of the Jazeera Hotel, Gaza City

Following the attack upon the Mavi Marmara in May 2010, sailing as part of an international flotilla attempting to deliver aid to Gaza, Israel announced it was easing the closures and would shift from a system where a limited number of “white list” goods were allowed into Gaza, to instead operating a “black list” of prohibited items. Despite this however, only 32% of the pre-blockade traffic entered Gaza during the dates of the delegation visit.ⁱⁱⁱ

The delegation was told at a briefing with Aidan O’Leary, Deputy Director of UNRWA in Gaza, that there are still major problems regarding entry issues. The UN are unable to import anywhere near the level of construction materials required for its projects, whilst the situation is even worse for Palestinian businessmen and private individuals. The Karni

crossing point is currently open only two days out of seven to container shipments and gravel, whilst Sofa, which should be used for construction supplies, has remained closed since August 2008. Nahal Oz, the primary crossing point designed for the import of fuel, last functioned in January 2010. Karem Shalom is currently open, but only in daylight hours. The coming of the longer nights will restrict its daily operating time. All materials brought in through Karem Shalom must be packed into pallets measuring 1.2m x 1.2m x 1.6m. If the items do not fit these dimensions, they cannot be brought in.^{iv}

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that whilst access to Gaza has improved since May, "major private reconstruction and the revival of the private sector continue to be limited by Israeli restrictions on both construction materials and exports."^v

On 14th June the International Committee of the Red Cross, an organisation that fiercely guards its political neutrality by rarely issuing public criticism of governments, declared the siege to be illegal under international humanitarian law^{vi}. In a statement the organisation said that Palestinians in Gaza continue to suffer from unemployment, poverty and warfare, while the quality of Gaza's health care system has reached an all-time low as a result of the siege.

The organisation reports that the whole of Gaza's civilian population is being punished for acts for which they bear no responsibility. "The closure therefore constitutes a collective punishment imposed in clear violation of Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law...Israel's right to deal with its legitimate security concerns must be balanced against the Palestinians' right to live normal, dignified lives."

During Operation Cast Lead UN Security Council Resolution 1860 called for "the unimpeded provision and distribution throughout Gaza of humanitarian assistance, including of food, fuel and medical treatment". The resolution's demands remain unfulfilled.



Movement of people

Since the year 2000 Israel has placed severe restrictions on the freedom of movement of Palestinians wishing to enter or exit the Gaza Strip. While the motivation for the Israeli policy is to weaken Hamas, it inflicts an unlawful collective punishment on the Palestinian population as a whole.

The Erez border crossing, the only transit point for personnel wishing to cross directly to Israel and the West Bank, remains closed to traffic. On average only 25 people per day are able to pass through the facility that can process up to 50,000 people daily. These are

generally international aid workers, UN staff, journalists and a small number of lucky Palestinians granted permission to receive medical treatment in Israel. The remaining 1.5million inhabitants of Gaza remain banned from travel.

This process is taking place despite the fact that the West Bank and Gaza are designated to form a future Palestinian state and that under the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement of 1995 were considered a single territorial unit. Erez must function in order for Palestinians in both parts of the future state to be able to travel freely between each component. In addition, the right to family life enjoys special protection in International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law.^{vii} Entry permits to Israel for residents of the Gaza Strip for the purpose of family visits have been almost completely discontinued since 2000, the beginning of the Second Intifada. Most of the applications submitted by Israeli citizens to enter Gaza for family reasons have been rejected, usually without any grounds being cited, and permits were given only in exceptional cases. The permit regime leads to the complete separation of many Palestinians from their families and in some cases even forces spouses to live apart.

At present, 800,000 people in Gaza are under the age of 18. It is estimated that over half of these have never left the Gaza Strip. The sense of confinement only adds to Gaza's tag as the world's largest prison camp.

Construction materials and lack of reconstruction

In the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead, a conflict that according to the UN destroyed or damaged around 50,000 Palestinian homes; 80 government buildings; 3 hospitals; and 280 schools^{viii}, Israel prevented any concrete, steel or glass from being imported into Gaza.

Only since June 2010, 18 months after the conflict, were the UN able to import limited amounts of concrete, steel and glass. On 14th September UNRWA received approval to bring in materials for 13 projects, representing just 1.7% of UNRWA's overall reconstruction programme. These projects include 4 schools, 16 classrooms, 2 health centers, 21 housing units, 1 kindergarten and one office. In addition, since 3rd October UNRWA has requested the entry of 404 trucks of aggregate through the Karni crossing, of which only 70 had been delivered by 6th November.

Palestinians looking to import these materials to rebuild their homes are still prevented from doing so.

The delegation saw at first hand the impact of the closures on UNRWA's work. The construction of 2,600 housing units, worth \$120m, is currently suspended due a lack of materials. These would provide accommodation for over 20,000 Palestinians, currently living in temporary shelter. The delegation visited a housing project in Khan Younis, southern Gaza, where work on the construction of housing has been largely



been on hold since June 2007. Khan Younis is typical example where only 15% of the planned projects have been completed. The construction of seven new UN schools is similarly suspended.

UNRWA's Head of Construction, Munir Elias Manneh, informed the delegation of the laborious procedure that he must go through in order to bring in supplies. All plans must be submitted to the Israeli authorities, along with budgets and details of the international donors. The materials that are then imported must be photographed and logged coming into Gaza, photographed at the construction site and photographed whilst in use. At all times reports must be submitted to the Israeli authorities on the use of the materials.

In a meeting with John Ging, Director of UNRWA in Gaza, the delegation was informed that, Israel's concerns that Hamas could use construction materials for weapons were ill founded. He claimed that Hamas has access to as much concrete and steel as it requires due to the tunnels. Ging expressed frustration that the EU was funding UNRWA's projects, but was not doing enough to put pressure on Israel to allow the necessary materials into Gaza.

The construction sector has a large role to play in the restarting of the economy. The Palestinian Business Association reported to the delegation that prior to the blockade, 35,000 people were working in construction in Gaza. This number has now fallen to just over 6,000. The delegation was told how one bag of cement typically supports up to 60 different professions either directly or indirectly, so with unemployment standing at over 40% of the workforce, the restarting of large scale building projects is crucial to the long term redevelopment of the private and public sector.

Construction of "mud" homes in Gaza



UNRWA's CEB Shelters

The delegation visited the site Izbit Abed Rabbo, one kilometre from the border with Israel. Not a single building in the town of five thousand inhabitants was left standing by Operation Cast Lead, when the area came under continued aerial bombardment, before homes were dynamited and bulldozed by ground forces. Little reconstruction work has taken place on the site and UNRWA have resorted to moving the displaced families into homes built from a mixture of mud and sand. The Compressed Earth Block (CEB) Shelters are designed by the UN to utilise materials already available in Gaza. Using a

compressed mixture of sand and soil engineers have been able to fashion building bricks that will last for up to 25 years. Nine units have been completed to date, with a further 42 under construction, at a cost of around \$15,000 per unit. Whilst this demonstrates the

ingenuity of UNRWA's engineers, it cannot be viewed as a long term solution to Gaza's chronic housing shortage.

On 13th October 2010 Rt Hon Alan Duncan MP, Minister of State at the Department for International Development, told the House of Commons that significant obstacles prevented the delivery of construction materials to Gaza:

"There are still very severe restrictions in the movement of goods, and we are doing our utmost to urge the Israelis to make more and simpler access possible, especially for products that are necessary for the long overdue reconstruction... Schools must be rebuilt, and we certainly urge the Israelis to ensure that any materials that can be used for the essential reconstruction of schools and the like can be allowed through."^{riX}

Restriction of medical supplies and the transfer of patients

The delegation visited al-Shifa Hospital, the largest in Gaza, to meet with health officials. Director Hassan al-Shour reported the 500 bed capacity of the hospital was nowhere near sufficient, whilst key medical installations and products were lacking. The hospital lacked key operating facilities, whilst the hospital's MRI scanner was broken. Israel has to date prevented the importation of spare parts.

Hospital supplies are also running low. Items that could be used in explosives or weaponry are banned, such as metal gauze which is crucial for its use in surgical procedures.

Doctors told the delegation that there has been a significant "de-development" of the health care system in Gaza, since June 2007.

Dr Mahmoud Daher from World Health Organisation reported a decline in the general standard of health care in Gaza, attributable to the blockade. Whilst some medicines are lacking and hygiene standards are suffering due to a lack of supplies, doctors are also unable to upgrade their skills by being denied access to training outside of the territory. Hospital staff also informed the delegation that they are seeing an increased number of admissions related to the use of faulty electricity generators, such as burns and fatalities caused by explosions. The intermittent electricity supply has forced many Palestinians to turn to home generators, which are often in a bad state of repair.

Just as UNRWA faces a laborious task to import small amounts of concrete, the hospital faces a complicated process to bring in medical supplies. In general it takes around two months to coordinate the entry of medicines to Gaza, via Israel. Whilst reliable figures are hard to come by, hospital staff claimed that each day a number of people were dying in Gaza as a direct result of the siege. Either they are unable to receive the necessary treatment due to a lack of drugs, hospital capacity or local skills, or they were denied a permit to travel abroad for treatment. Those that do go to Israel or Egypt for treatment prove costly for the Ministry of Health in Gaza. At present, around 20% of the medical budget goes on paying the bills of those treated abroad. In 2009, the MoH paid around 91 million Shekels (16m GBP) to cover the cost of 10,839 referrals from Gaza. Of this 11.9% went to Israeli hospitals.^x Israel does not provide free of charge health services to the Palestinians, on the contrary, it collects this cost from the tax revenues that should go to the Palestinian Authority.

According to the laws of occupation, the Occupying Power is required to ensure, to the fullest extent of the means available to it, the food and medical supplies of the population, and to bring in the necessary articles when the resources of the occupied territory are inadequate.^{xi} These legal obligations and entitlements translate to Israel's duty to provide necessary medical services that are not available in the Gaza and to enable the exit of patients from the Gaza Strip for this purpose. Since June 2007, on average 17% of patients with referrals were refused exit permits for treatment in Israel, East Jerusalem or overseas. Between January 2008 and June 2009 the situation was even worse, with 40% of the applications for permits to leave Gaza rejected or delayed.^{xii}

Smuggling



Following the start of the siege in the summer of 2007 smuggling became one of the few growth industries in the Gaza Strip. As private enterprises were driven out of business, a vast network of tunnels emerged under the Egyptian border, through which came food, fuel and even livestock. In March 2010 over 1,200 tunnels were in operation, varying in size from small man holes to vast caverns. The operation of the tunnels was firmly under the control of a mafia-like elite, with the Palestinian economist Omar Shaban placing the value of the trade at \$30-40million per month.

Since the easing of the blockade however the number of tunnels in operation has fallen to around 200. Where Israel has allowed imports, the tunnels smuggling the corresponding items have closed. The parliamentarians saw at first hand some of those that continue to

function. Those that remain in operation are generally only bringing in items that Israel continues to deny entry to, namely construction materials and fuel.

Wages for tunnel workers have also fallen dramatically since the easing of the blockade. At the start of 2010 workers could earn over 300 Israeli Shekels per day (65GBP), but now can expect to earn just 50 INS (10GBP) per day.

Smuggling operations still remain a significant source of funding for Hamas however, who charge tunnel owners for a permit that gives them permission to operate. A 20% levy is also applied on all fuel that is brought in through the tunnels. Hamas also receives funding from Islamist movements across the region. These remittances have led Hamas to invest money in property, both in Gaza and across the Middle East, providing a solid financial base for the organisation.



Exports

Exports have been barred since June 2007, with a few limited and sporadic exceptions. Shipments of strawberries and carnations have been periodically allowed – the last on 18th April 2010.^{xiii} Without exports there is no hope of the Gaza economy starting to re-function.

The Palestinian Business Association reminded the delegation that Gaza was the only area of the Mediterranean not have a functioning sea port. This is currently prevented by Israel’s naval blockade of the Gaza coast.

High unemployment has characterised Gaza’s economy for some time and at present the number without job currently stands at around 40% of the workforce. In addition to the aforementioned construction industry, which has a crucial role to play in the creation of jobs, exports must be allowed to resume in order to revive the moribund economy.



Food distribution centre, Jabalya

Unity talks

The delegation met with senior political figures in Gaza. Issues discussed included peace negotiations with Israel and the prospects for a reconciliation agreement between the Palestinian factions.

Both sides reported that agreement had been reached on the voting system for new elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), which would be part proportional representation and part simple majority. Agreement is still to be reached however on reform of the security forces and transitional arrangements prior to elections. Discussions will resume in the coming weeks after recent talks in Damascus proved fruitful. There is a clear acceptance on both sides that the current division is undermining the Palestinian cause. However, recriminations still remain over the cause of the split.

Moderate elements within Hamas accept that President Abbas should negotiate on behalf of the Palestinian people in Washington. Any peace settlement though would have to be voted on and approved by the PLC.

However, there remains a feeling within Hamas that previous negotiations have brought the Palestinians little benefit. It was emphasised to the delegation that whilst Hamas supported talks, previous discussions between the PA and Israel had led only to further settlement construction and a tightening of the siege of Gaza. At times criticism of Fatah was as prominent as that of Israel.

A senior Hamas politician, prominent also within the military wing, emphasised that the organisation would accept a two-state solution based upon 1967 borders.

External influence on unity talks was also highlighted throughout the visit however. Iyad Saraj, director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Project, told the delegation that there was too much external meddling in Palestinian affairs. He criticised Egypt, Syria, Iran, the US and Israel for seeking to influence unity talks, claiming that the US was particularly opposed to an agreement that would see Hamas brought into a national government. The delegation were informed during a separate meeting that since President Obama took office, Hamas have sent five letters to Washington offering negotiations, but have never received a response.



Former government building, Gaza City

Radicalisation and the potential for renewed conflict

As the misery and suffering brought about by the siege continues the possibility of a renewed large scale conflict remains. Palestinian groups have launched a number of rockets against towns in Israel. Radical organisations are also growing in Gaza. Two UNRWA summer camps were attacked and damaged by unknown groups, seeking to disrupt the UN's work. As the siege continues and unemployment remains at over 40%, radical groups are able to find ample recruits amongst Gaza's disaffected and large youth population. Whilst at present Hamas is able to maintain control over Gaza, for example crushing an uprising by the Jund Ansar Allah in Rafah in 2009, this predominance is not guaranteed to continue. Organisations such as Jund Ansar Allah,^{xiv} which draw their ideology from the Salafist school of thinking, remain small but their influence in Gaza is growing. Hamas have moved to counter accusations that it has become too moderate by issuing conservative dictates, such as a recent one barring women from smoking water pipes in public.

Whilst Hamas is presently committed, and indeed largely able to prevent rockets being fired at Israel, the internal balance of power within Gaza does not mean that this will always be the case. As radical groups gather influence Hamas' ability to keep control will continue to be tested, whilst the organisation's military wing may lose its appetite for the relative lull.

Israel meanwhile continues to attack Gaza regularly. Airstrikes against the tunnels around Rafah are a weekly occurrence, whilst other targets across Gaza are struck on a regular basis. Incursions also remain a consistent characteristic of Israel's policy towards the Strip. Since 1st January 2010, 41 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza by Israeli forces, and a further 177 injured. Three Israeli soldiers have died during this period. A further large scale offensive against Gaza by the Israeli military cannot be ruled out.

Recommendations of the Britain-Palestine APPG

1. Construction materials must be allowed into Gaza immediately

UNRWA is been unable to import anywhere near the level of construction materials it requires to carry out numerous crucial projects. UN building schemes – such as plans for the housing units in Khan Younis that the delegation visited, or for seven new schools in southern Gaza - are unable to proceed because of a lack of materials. In addition, private Palestinian residents of Gaza cannot bring any construction materials into the territory and must rely upon expensive smuggled supplies.

Israel's claims that Hamas would use any materials for military purposes are false. Hamas has access to as much concrete and steel as it requires, thanks to the tunnels. The result of the ban on materials is that the infrastructure of Gaza, obliterated during Operation Cast Lead, cannot be rebuilt. In addition, UNRWA is greatly undermined when Hamas are able to launch building projects using smuggled materials, and the internationally funded projects of the UN stand idle.

International donors have provided tens of millions of dollars to UNRWA to carry out construction projects. It now must apply genuine and concerted pressure on Israel to allow in the materials to complete these developments.

2. The borders of Gaza must be opened

Whilst the overall situation in Gaza is not as severe since Israel relaxed access for food items, movement to and from Gaza for both people and certain goods remains restricted. For example the delegation was unable to pass through the Erez crossing with Israel and restrictions upon fuel remain acute. At al-Shifa Hospital the delegates were also informed that medical supplies are routinely denied entry to Gaza. Doctors reported that patients are dying on a weekly basis due to Israel's policy of barring numerous medicines and essential medical equipment.

The counterproductive nature of the Israeli policy was demonstrated by the visit to the smuggling tunnels. When a delegation from the BPAPPG visited in March 2010, 1,200 tunnels were in operation. Since the relaxation of the siege, only around 200 tunnels remain. These are smuggling the items that remain barred by Israel, such as construction materials and fuel. This reason for this dramatic drop in the level of smuggling is simple; when Israel allows items to enter Gaza through the legitimate crossing points, tunnels go out of business and close down. Where Israel continues to bar the entry of items, tunnels flourish.

The siege is not the result of smuggling, but rather smuggling is the result of the siege.

The policy not only represents the collective punishment of the Palestinian people but it is also counterproductive to Israel's own security. Israel must accept that the closure of Gaza's borders has failed to weaken Hamas and instead has strengthened the organisation. Where Hamas does receive challenges to its authority it is from even more radical groups that have arisen from the conditions brought about by the closures. The siege must end.

Similarly, the Egyptian authorities must play a more constructive role in alleviating the suffering of the people of Gaza. Whilst the AMA stipulates that the Rafah crossing point is for personnel and not for goods, the Egyptian government must allow Palestinians to travel freely into and from Gaza.

3. Exports must be allowed to resume

Exports must be allowed to resume if the economy of Gaza, which imploded following the beginning of the siege, is able to start functioning in an orthodox manner. The international community must continue to press for the full lifting of the blockade of Gaza and exports must be allowed to resume.

4. Fatah and Hamas must reach a unity agreement

The prospect of a unity agreement between the two parties, leading to fresh PLC and Presidential elections, looks greater now than at any stage since the inter-factional violence of 2007. However, an agreement still remains some way off with reform of the security services now the remaining sticking point. There seems to be a genuine realisation on both sides that the current split within the OPT is not in the interest of the wider Palestinian cause. The BPAPPG urges the Fatah and Hamas to come together and settle their differences in the interests of the Palestinian people.

5. Engagement with all Palestinian factions must begin

Hamas won elections to PLC that were deemed free and fair by international observers. It is incorrect to believe that any peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians could function without Hamas' support. As an organisation Hamas is a broad movement, encompassing a military wing and a political faction that contains wide ranging views. It is irrational that governments, including the UK's, engage with Israeli leaders irrespective of their actions or policies, and yet refuse to speak publicly with members of Hamas. Such engagement need not imply recognition of the Hamas administration over the Government appointed by President Abbas, neither need it suggest that the Quartet has abandoned its contention that a lasting settlement must include an end to violence, recognition of the right of two states both Israel and Palestine to exist, and an acceptance of previous agreements.

Our experience suggests that dialogue could achieve more than isolation. Should a unity government be formed in the coming months this would provide a convenient opportunity for dialogue to begin.

6. Senior politicians must visit Gaza

Only three Foreign Ministers - from Ireland, Germany and Sweden - have visited Gaza since the start of the siege. No member of the US State Department has set foot in the territory since 2004. The delegation urges senior politicians from across the European Union and the United States to visit Gaza as a matter of urgency. Israel should not be allowed to obstruct such visits and if necessary Ministers should enter the territory using the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, whilst pointing out that the Erez crossing with Israel remains the primary and necessary link between Gaza and the West Bank. The Britain Palestine APPG also urges as many parliamentarians as possible to visit Gaza. Only by visiting the area and seeing the reality of the situation at first hand can people hope to form an accurate understanding of the problems.

Thanks



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ⁱⁱⁱ Statistic supplied by Oxfam's Gaza Update Bulletin, 3-9 October 2010

^{iv} Information the result of a meeting with Aidan O'Leary, Deputy Director of UNRWA in Gaza

^v http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_protection_of_civilians_2010_09_03_english.pdf

^{vi} <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/palestine-update-140610>

^{vii} Article 23 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognizes that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State. Article 17 establishes a prohibition on arbitrary or unlawful interference with the family. See also International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Art. 10; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16(3).

^{viii} http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/un_ngo_fact_sheet_blockade_figures_2009_07_28_english.pdf

^{ix} <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101013/debtext/101013-0001.htm#10101328000025>

^x Statistics supplied by the World Health Organisation

^{xi} The Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 55; ICRC Study on Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rules 55-56.

^{xii} http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/Ocha_opt_Gaza_impact_of_two_years_of_blockade_August_2009_english.pdf

^{xiii} Statistic supplied by Oxfam's Gaza Update Bulletin, 3-9 October 2010

^{xiv} <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8203239.stm>