

October 24, 2007

Breaking the Siege on Gaza

A United Front for Peace

December 2007- May 2008

We, the National Committee to Break the Siege of Gaza (hereafter the National Committee), have adopted the initiative of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme to launch an international campaign for breaking the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip since June 2007.

The aim of this humanitarian, non-political campaign is to pressure the Israeli government to lift the devastating siege imposed on the population of Gaza. By raising the awareness of the international community on the deteriorating life conditions resulting from the siege, we aim at other governments to stop the boycott of Gaza. We are pleased to note here that the European Parliament has recently adopted a resolution calling on the Israeli government to end the siege.

It is important to declare that this campaign is not affiliated or endorsed by any political party. The National Committee is composed of representatives of the civil society, business community, intellectuals and advocates for human rights and peace from the West Bank and Gaza. We are all guided by our commitment to peace and our respect to human dignity.

We believe that it is a moral and ethical duty to rescue the lives of human souls living under bitter circumstances that sabotage their right to exist. People in Gaza are deprived of the simplest requirements for a decent life. We are determined to move hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder with all people who believe in freedom, human dignity and peace.

The National Committee needs the support of all people, who believe in humanity all over the world, and in particular Arab people and governments, to contribute to the success of this campaign. We also call upon all Palestinians, whether in Gaza, the West Bank or anywhere else to support our efforts and join our activities. It is a genuine call to rescue people not governments or political parties. It is time to put aside any partisan conflicts and unite people in the pursuit of freedom, justice, and peace. We particularly call upon Jews whose history of trauma, discrimination and suffering should guide them to stand up today against the suffering of others.

The Impacts of the Siege of Gaza:

The Gaza Strip has two main crossings that connect it to the whole world, i.e. Rafah in the south and Erez in the north. There are three other crossings that are used to exchange goods and bring in food to the Gaza Strip. Today all are closed partially or completely.

No sooner had Hamas won a majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006, than the Israeli government, with the support of the US administration, clamped down on the Palestinian occupied Territories, declared its boycott of the new Palestinian

government, arrested many members of the Legislative Council and refused to transfer customs revenues to the Palestinian government. After taking these measures, several donor countries, including major donor nations in Europe, sharply reduced or terminated the development assistance they offered to the Palestinian people. The result was a swift deterioration of life in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). The Palestinian people were being subjected to collective punishment because of the way they voted in a democratic election.

Following Hamas' military take-over of Gaza Strip in June 2007, the siege imposed by Israel was tightened to an unprecedented level. Citing the continuing rocket attacks from inside Gaza, the Israeli government has recently declared Gaza to be a hostile entity and has threatened to cut off its electrical power, its fuel supply and to substantially decrease the number of people allowed to enter and leave the Gaza Strip. It has also severely restricted the entry of goods and food supplies, and money needed for the daily life of people of Gaza.

The Israeli policy of unlawful collective punishment has always had its serious impact on the lives of the Palestinian civilians. Collective punishment is expressly forbidden under international humanitarian law which bars persons from being punished for offenses that they have not personally committed. In its authoritative commentary on Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, the International Committee of the Red Cross states that the prohibition on collective punishment does not just refer to criminal penalties, 'but penalties of any kind inflicted on persons or entire groups of persons, in defiance of the most elementary principles of humanity, for acts that these persons have not committed.'

The siege that was imposed on the Gaza Strip has created excessive loss and damage in all spheres of Palestinian life. The Gaza Strip has been turned into a huge prison with no access to the outside world.

The health sector has been dramatically affected by the siege. According to the latest Humanitarian Situation Report of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) released on October 9th, 2007, fewer than five patients crossed into Israel/West Bank each day for medical treatment compared to an average of 40 patients per day in July 2007. The World Health Organization has indicated that an average of 1000 patients used to leave Gaza for treatment each month prior to the mid-June closures.

As a result of the continuous closures, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has reported significant increases in the costs of some food items. The price of 1 KG of fresh meat has increased from NIS 32 to NIS 40 (20%) while the price of chicken rose from NIS 8 to NIS 12 (33%). According to OCHA's report of October 9th, during the month of September 2007, a total of 1508 truckloads of goods crossed into Gaza. This compares to 2468 truckloads in the month of August and 3190 in July. There are no food stocks left in Gaza, which contributes to the rise in prices.

The educational system in Gaza has also been affected by the siege. With the start of the new school year, there has been a serious lack of books and a shortage of the raw materials needed for printing. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), one third of the students started the school year without the needed text books. The closures also deprived thousands of students from reaching their universities outside the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Civil Affairs Department has declared that more than 5000 people, half of which are students, have applied to leave Gaza via Israel and have not yet been able to leave.

On the industrial level, Israel's refusal to allow essential raw materials to be imported, and

finished goods to be exported, has led to the closure of many manufacturing industries and other businesses. According to Paltrade's assessment on 12 September 2007, over 75,000 private sector employees have been laid off in the last three months.

The agricultural sector is also at risk. According to ACHA's report, the export season for Gaza's cash crops (strawberries, carnation flowers and cherry tomatoes) is expected to begin in mid-November. This year, 2,500 dunums of strawberries have been planted with an expected production of approximately 6,250 tons of strawberries including 2,500 destined for European markets. Some 490 tons of cherry tomatoes are also expected to be produced. If exports are not allowed by this time, farmers will be exposed to tremendous losses in terms of production cost and potential sales.

The WFP reported that poverty now affects 80 percent of the Gaza population. Since human beings are the products of the environment in which they live, the Palestinian environment today is a combination of deprivation, poverty, anger, feelings of powerlessness and despair. Such feelings will inevitably lead to simmering anger which will eventually brew into more violence and defiance.

Palestinians have gone through repeated traumas of destruction of their homes, lives, livelihoods and hopes for the future over the past few decades. The current siege adds a new trauma to previous ones people have experienced, bringing to the surface a host of negative feelings.

It is only to be expected that in such an environment extremist ideologies will flourish. This will have an adverse impact on Palestinian society internally and the political environment in the whole region, undermining any possibility of building peace and security.

Putting all in a nutshell, with this immoral siege, the Gaza Strip is meant to be choked into final submission. It is being transformed into an island of death where everything is destroyed. It is our duty to rescue life.

Planned activities of the campaign:

The campaign is planned to take place from December 2007-May 2008. It is proposed that the National Committee will start the campaign with a press conference, announcing the launching of the campaign and asking friends at the local and international level for their contributions and participation in the activities of the campaign.

An international petition to break the siege on Gaza will be disseminated worldwide.

The first major event of the campaign will be organizing an international symposium entitled 'Breaking the Siege on Gaza: Together We Can Build a United Front for Peace'.

The campaign will include a variety of activities including inviting international visitors from around the world for a series of individual or group visits to Gaza. The visitors will be hosted in Palestinian homes. They will gain first hand information about the living conditions and hardships faced by the Palestinian people in order to disseminate it in their own countries. The activities in Gaza will be well documented and media coverage encouraged.

We will rely on our Israeli friends to host and help our friends from abroad who, if they are not allowed to enter Gaza, will help expose Israeli policies and siege conditions through the media and public speaking in their home countries.

We will arrange for a peaceful march to Erez checkpoint from both the Israeli and

Palestinian sides of the borders. It will include peace activists from all over the world.

As part of the campaign, solidarity meetings, cultural activities, and discussion with various layers of Palestinian society will take place.

Internationally, we seek to mobilize people for the campaign in all parts of the world, particularly in the US, Europe and Israel using printed and media materials documenting the effects of the siege.

The campaign will be concluded in May by a major event, which is the arrival of 120 human rights activists including Noble Prize winners to Gaza via the sea from Cyprus. This event will be titled 'Free Gaza Movement Day' and is planned by a solidarity group in USA.

The campaign will have special posters as well as a website where all relevant materials will be published. The site will give special opportunities for people to exchange information, ask questions, and comment on the planned activities.

Throughout the campaign, close contact with the media will be maintained with the regular feeding of information, news and visuals.