



STATEMENT

Gaza's Humanitarian Crisis: A Response to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

The UNESCO Chair calls on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and governments around the world to acknowledge the humanitarian crisis now occurring in the Gaza Strip and to end the illegal siege and collective punishment imposed on the civilian population of Gaza.

On 2 June 2010 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a statement to the citizens of Israel outlining the government's response and justification for the killing of nine activists aboard the Turkish-flagged ship Mavi Marmara bringing humanitarian supplies to Gaza. In the statement the Prime Minister briefly comments on the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, noting that no humanitarian crisis exists. The extent of his remarks on this topic is as follows:

And here's our policy. It's very simple: Humanitarian and other goods can go in and weapons and war material cannot.

And we do let civilian goods into Gaza. There is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Each week, an average of ten thousand tons of goods enter Gaza. There's no shortage of food. There's no shortage of medicine. There's no shortage of other goods.¹

Though the only evidence the Prime Minister supplies for this claim is the weekly average import of ten thousand tons of goods into Gaza, this figure has been repeatedly used by Israel's supporters and by U.S. media outlets as adequate evidence of no humanitarian crisis in Gaza. To bolster this claim the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has created a web page titled, "Behind the Headlines: The Israeli Humanitarian Lifeline to Gaza."² The site provides more detailed data on the number and types of goods and equipment

¹ Benjamin Netanyahu (2 June 2010). Statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu "No Love Boat." <http://www.pmo.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/7BE4DE50-F3AE-4300-9661-5CC104257ED2/0/mashatENG0206010.doc>.



entering Gaza from Israel. But like the Prime Minister's statement, the website simply lists the number of trucks and the amount of tonnage entering Gaza.

The Prime Minister's statement and the MFA's data fail to accurately portray the current Gaza situation. The Prime Minister and the MFA only present the supply side of the equation, they fail to address the need side of the humanitarian crisis. Israel's presentation of the data implies that the large tonnage of imports into Gaza is sufficient to meet the needs of the Gaza population. What is lost in the argument is that 1.5 million individuals reside within the Gaza Strip. The needs of the population to live a healthy life exceed the Israeli supply. The lack of adequate supplies for such items as medicine, fruits, vegetable, and meats has been documented by numerous NGOs.³ The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) notes that in the first five months of 2007, the five months prior to the Hamas takeover, an average of 2807 trucks entered Gaza weekly, compared to the present weekly average of 662 trucks.⁴ Further, little attention is given to the restrictive access to common food items. In a study of what items the Israeli authorities allow into Gaza and which they deny the Israeli human rights organization Gisha found that such items as jam, cumin, chocolate, and fresh meat are prohibited products.⁵ The exact list of acceptable and prohibited items, however, is unknown since the Israeli Defense Ministry refuses to release the list on national security grounds.⁶ Israel does allow "humanitarian" items into Gaza, but a definition of "humanitarian" has never been provided.⁷ In an additional study Gisha notes that,

[T]he military has restricted the amount and type of food that it will permit Gaza residents to receive, including fresh meat, articulating its policy as follows: "The supply to the Strip of food items not of

² Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (25 May 2010). Behind the Headlines: The Israeli Humanitarian Lifeline to Gaza http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/About+the+Ministry/Behind+the+Headlines/Israeli_humanitarian_lifeline_Gaza_25-May-2010.htm .

³ See, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian Territories (25 May 2010). UN Humanitarian Coordinator: Gaza Blockade Suffocating Agricultural Sector, Creating Food Insecurity. http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/gaza_agriculture_25_05_2010_press_release_english.pdf .

⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian Territories (4 June 2010). Protection of Civilians Weekly Report: 26 May – 1 June 2010. http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_protection_of_civilians_2010_06_04_english.pdf . See also, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2010). Occupied Palestinian Territory: 2010 Consolidated Appeal. http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_consolidated_appeal_process_2010_english.pdf .

⁵ Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement (May 2010). Partial List of Items Prohibited/Permitted into the Gaza Strip. <http://gisha.org/UserFiles/File/HiddenMessages/ItemsGazaStrip060510.pdf> .

⁶ Amira Hass (07 May 2010). Why Won't Israel Allow Gazans to Import Coriander? Harretz. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/why-won-t-israel-allow-gazans-to-import-coriander-1.288824> .

⁷ Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement (January 2010). Restrictions on the Transfer of Goods to Gaza: Obstruction and Obfuscation. http://www.gisha.org/UserFiles/File/publications/Restrictions_transfer_goods_Gaza.pdf .



humanitarians character, or [food] items in quantities exceeding the quantities required for humanitarian needs, is not permitted.”⁸

Though Israel states it is only a draft and “has never served as a basis for decision-making” it has created a document titled, “Foodstuffs Consumption in Gaza - Red Lines.”⁹ The document “apparently determines the minimum nutritional needs of Gaza's population, according to caloric intake and grams of food, parsed by age and gender.”¹⁰ Such a document would assist the military in determining at what level food quantities exceed humanitarian need.

Again, Israel’s argument that “no humanitarian crisis exists in Gaza” is predicated largely on example after example of the number of trucks and/or the tonnage of items entering Gaza and not on the actual need of the population.¹¹ For those with little awareness of the crisis these numbers provide a simplified thought process; 1) Large amounts of goods are entering Gaza (the actual amount needed is not questioned); 2) Because large amounts of goods are entering Gaza no starvation exists among the population (the actual average daily caloric intake is assumed to be sufficient); and 3) Because the population is not “starving to death” no humanitarian crisis is present. The thought process goes even a step further and rewards Israel for its “Humanitarian Lifeline” to the Gaza Strip. What is obscured in the narrative is the fact that Israel is the source of the blockade.

The Israeli narrative is in need of contextualization. It is widely recognized by international NGOs that the majority of Gazans suffer from food insecurity. Food insecurity reflects an individual’s lack of access to food or lack of purchasing power to acquire enough food to meet daily dietary needs. The internationally accepted standard for food security is “when all people at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”¹² According to OCHA oPt an

⁸ Gisha: Legal Center for Freedom of Movement (December 2008). Gaza Closure Defined: Collective Punishment. <http://gisha.org/UserFiles/File/publications/GazaClosureDefinedEng.pdf>.

⁹ Amira Hass (07 May 2010). Why Won’t Israel Allow Gazans to Import Coriander? Harretz. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/why-won-t-israel-allow-gazans-to-import-coriander-1.288824>.

¹⁰ Amira Hass (07 May 2010). Why Won’t Israel Allow Gazans to Import Coriander? Harretz. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/why-won-t-israel-allow-gazans-to-import-coriander-1.288824>.

¹¹ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (25 May 2010). “Behind the Headlines: The Israeli Humanitarian Lifeline to Gaza” http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/About+the+Ministry/Behind+the+Headlines/Israeli_humanitarian_lifeline_Gaza_25-May-2010.htm.

¹² Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (2010). Special Program for Food Security. <http://www.fao.org/spfs/spfs-home/en/>.



estimated 60 percent of the Gaza population lack food security.¹³ An estimated 70 percent live on less than \$1 a day.¹⁴ A 2009 report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reports that, “Most families in Gaza are afflicted by unemployment and poverty.”¹⁵ Unemployment has risen to 42 percent (compared to 32 percent in 2006 before the blockade).¹⁶ Tens-of-thousands of jobs have been lost due to the elimination of industrial operations in Gaza.¹⁷ Compounding the problem are the restrictions placed on cash transfers from West Bank financial institutions to the Gaza Strip.¹⁸

All of these factors have combined to significantly lower the income of Gaza residents and make it increasingly difficult for many families to purchase adequate supplies of food. Where available, families are utilizing savings as a coping mechanism, but this too is quickly becoming depleted, resulting in the selling off of personal and household items to raise money for food purchases.¹⁹ Even when food is available, families increasingly lack the necessary purchasing power to buy the required food for a healthy and balanced diet.²⁰

The decline in purchasing power and the resulting rise in food insecurity are taking a devastating toll on the Gaza population, especially children. Chronic malnutrition among children under the age of five has reached 10.2 percent.²¹ UNICEF reports increased rates of stunting, acute malnutrition, and anaemia among children.²² Anaemia has also increased in pregnant women.²³ The likely cause is the lack of “affordable fresh

¹³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian Territories (25 May 2010). UN Humanitarian Coordinator: Gaza Blockade Suffocating Agricultural Sector, Creating Food Insecurity. http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/gaza_agriculture_25_05_2010_press_release_english.pdf.

¹⁴ Haroon Siddique (31 May 2010). Israel’s Gaza Blockade Targets Hamas While Citizens Suffer. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/31/gaza-blockade-israel>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ World Health Organization (13 May 2010). Health Conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem, and in the Occupied Syrian Golan. http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA63/A63_28-en.pdf.

¹⁷ International Committee of the Red Cross (June 2009). Gaza: 1.5 Million People Trapped in Despair. [http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/palestine-report-260609/\\$File/gaza-report-ICRC-eng.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/palestine-report-260609/$File/gaza-report-ICRC-eng.pdf).

¹⁸ World Health Organization (13 May 2010). Health Conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem, and in the Occupied Syrian Golan. http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA63/A63_28-en.pdf.

¹⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross (June 2009). Gaza: 1.5 Million People Trapped in Despair. [http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/palestine-report-260609/\\$File/gaza-report-ICRC-eng.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/palestine-report-260609/$File/gaza-report-ICRC-eng.pdf).

²⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross (22 December 2009). Gaza: One Year After War, Still No Prospect of Decent Life. <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/palestine-gaza-update-211209?opendocument>.

²¹ World Health Organization (13 May 2010). Health Conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem, and in the Occupied Syrian Golan. http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA63/A63_28-en.pdf.

²² United Nations Children’s Fund (21 April 2009). OPT: Signs of Worsening Malnutrition Among Children. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=84018>.

²³ United Nations Children’s Fund (21 April 2009). OPT: Signs of Worsening Malnutrition Among Children. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=84018>.



fruit and protein on the Gaza market.”²⁴ Gaza is further witnessing an increased number of children entering the workforce in an effort to help support the family.²⁵ UNICEF has also documented a decline in educational achievement by students and fewer students enrolled in primary schools.²⁶

The real crisis in Gaza is the inability of people to purchase food and to purchase the kinds of foods necessary to maintain food security. This is the specific issue that Israel fails to address in its argument. It is clear Israel intentionally avoids this issue as a way to divert analysis way from the “humanitarian crisis” question. It is disappointing that Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu choose to overlook the overwhelming documentation exposing the depth of the humanitarian crisis.

Any common sense reading of the numerous reports produced by the numerous international NGOs reveals to the reader that a humanitarian crisis does exist in Gaza.

The UNESCO Chair urges Israel and the international community to:

- Recognize the humanitarian crisis that now exists in the Gaza Strip;
- End the illegal siege and collective punishment imposed on the civilian population of Gaza;
- Work to eliminate the growing food insecurity in Gaza; and
- Allow Gaza to export agricultural and industrial items so as to let the citizens of Gaza earn income to purchase needed basic goods.

UNESCO Chair on Human Rights, Democracy and Peace

6 June 2010, Nablus, Occupied Palestinian Territory

The authors are responsible for the choice and presentation of views contained in this statement and for opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

²⁴ United Nations Children’s Fund (21 April 2009). OPT: Signs of Worsening Malnutrition Among Children.

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=84018>.

²⁵ United Nations Children’s Fund (22 July 2009). Growing Poverty in Gaza Pushing Children to Work. http://www.unicef.org/protection/oPt_50318.html.

²⁶ United Nations Children’s Fund (22 July 2009). Growing Poverty in Gaza Pushing Children to Work. http://www.unicef.org/protection/oPt_50318.html.