

EDITORIAL

Extraordinary times call for new action

From unapproved loans for housing developers to the streets of Portland, the current recession is making life hell for working and homeless folks. Not to mention that there's a quiet panic building in many nonprofits throughout the city.

Oregon's unemployment rate has reached a two-decade high at 9 percent and that is the tip of the iceberg. We could see that rate increase up to 11 or 12 percent by year's end, according to some forecasts. And that's not counting the thousands upon thousands of

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individuals sleeping on city streets and country roads throughout the state that don't qualify for the safety net of unemployment.

Affordable housing development is at a standstill. Federal funding for programs to meet Portland's growing gaps between the rich and the poor continues to lag far behind the need, and to pile on to the nightmare we call poverty — more people are hitting the streets

compounding an already dire environment. Across the country, the National Alliance to End Homelessness expects about 1.5 million more people will become homeless in the next two years. The swells are high and time is short. People's lives are at risk.

With no universal health care, people with disabilities have no safety net as they pursue federal benefits for being hurt on the job or for experiencing a mental trauma that has sent thousands individuals over the edge — like say, homelessness. The Oregon State Legislature must pass a bill to ensure General Assistance for Oregonians. If not, the bottom will continue to fall out and the streets will continue to capture more and more casualties of these unsure times. If our representatives fail us, people will die. It's that simple.

The unrest at City Hall caused by Mayor Sam Adams' web of lies doesn't do anyone on the homelessness and housing front any good. Will the housing bureau move forward? We presume. Will a \$500 million stimulus package unveiled by the mayor and other commissioners continue on? We hope so.

Still, even in a best-case scenario we're still talking Band-aids. Is it the right time to overhaul such a massive system like homelessness and housing locally by creating a new housing bureau by merging the BHCD and PDC? Only time will tell.

The stimulus package is worthwhile, but ultimately falls short in scope for poor folks due to the growing number of market realities that are kicking people to the curb, literally. It's hard for Street Roots to see any new or innovative economic development opportunities trickling down to where relief is needed most. And from where we stand, with the city on shifting sands, it's unclear what exactly Portland's strategy is if things get worse.

After five years, we'll see what dents have been made after the January one-night street and shelter counts give us a snapshot of how many men, women and children continue to survive in the cold and the wet. IT will be followed by the familiar call to action as in years past. But it's growing more desperate by the day. At the federal, state and local level, we expect extraordinary action for these extraordinary times.

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GUEST COLUMN



Palestinian children wounded by an Israeli tank shell rush into Shifa hospital in Gaza January 5, 2009. REUTERS/SUHAIB SALEM (GAZA)

A homeless population in Gaza

BY SAED BANNOURA
GUEST COLUMNIST

Saed Bannoura is a Palestinian journalist and editor-in-chief of the International Middle East Media Center — www.imemc.org — currently living in Portland. He was shot by Israeli special forces in his hometown of Beit Sahour, Palestine, just next to Bethlehem, in 1991, and was paralyzed from the waist down. His work aims to deliver the news to English-speaking audiences around the world about the ongoing violence of the Israeli occupation.

The International Middle East Media Center, IMEMC.org, is a media center developed in collaboration between Palestinian and International journalists to provide independent media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The IMEMC was founded by the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between People in 2003.

Israel has announced that the latest stage of its military assault on Gaza will be the destruction of tunnels on the Gaza-Egypt border. What this has meant in the past, and what it will likely mean now, is the flattening of hundreds of Palestinian homes that are deemed to be "too close" to the border. Israel controls all the borders and areas near the borders of the Gaza Strip (23 percent of the already extremely crowded tiny strip), and Palestinians whose homes are in the so-called "no-man's land" near the border have had their homes bombed or demolished by the Israeli military and have been rendered homeless. In Rafah, in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, at least 2,000 homes have been razed to create a buffer zone in the Gaza-Egypt border area. Israel claimed that Palestinian resistance groups use the houses to build tunnels to smuggle arms and other items into the Gaza Strip. After flattening 2,000 homes, few tunnels were discovered, but 2,000 families had been made homeless.

For most of them, this is the second or even third time they have experienced homelessness due to the demolition of their homes by Israeli forces.

The Gaza Strip is only 40 square kilometers, and contains 1.5 million Palestinians. Most of them are refugees from what is now Israel, displaced in 1948 when Israel was created on their land, and forced to live in crowded refugee camps in the tiny coastal Strip. And since 2006, the Gaza Strip has been completely closed with no way in or out, imports and exports banned, and the economy completely destroyed by the Israeli sanctions.

Clearing space around the border region is not the only reason that Israel gives for demolishing Palestinian homes.

Hundreds if not thousands of Palestinian homes have been demolished as an additional punishment for families of Palestinians who carry out attacks against Israeli civilians or military. Razing the homes in some cases is not enough. Sometimes the brothers are taken prisoner and the parents are detained. In most cases, any Palestinian who attacks Israelis would be executed on the spot. But that death penalty is not enough; Israeli forces have deemed that the family must suffer as well. This indicates that the Israeli government and officials have a

mentality toward retaliation rather than bringing justice.

In April of 2007, a gunman went on a rampage on the Virginia Tech campus in the United States of America. By the time he was done, more than 30 students and faculty members were dead, and then he killed himself. CNN described this attack as the "worst school shooting in America's history." Yet the response of the local authorities in Virginia was not to demolish his family's home.

Many murders happen inside Israel due to crime, however, Israeli officials do not rush to call for the demolition of the homes of these types of killers. Israeli settlers and soldiers kill Palestinians almost every day, and nobody calls for demolishing the homes of these soldiers or settlers. In most cases, Israelis who kill or assault Palestinians are acquitted of the charges. When Baruch Goldstein killed over 25 Palestinians praying at the Abrahimi Mosque (Tomb of Patriarchs) in Hebron in February 1994, a number of the worshippers managed to reach him and kill him. His grave now is a monument in the nearby Israeli colony of Keryat Arba'a. His home was not razed, and there were no Palestinian petitions calling for razing his home.

Palestinians attacking Israelis is not the only justification used by Israel to raze Palestinian homes. The common pretext used in areas under the jurisdiction of the Israeli authorities is building without permits. Building permits are very rarely granted from the local authority in the Jerusalem municipality, and other areas that Israel is attempting to annex. Palestinians in Jerusalem risk losing their residency rights in Jerusalem if they live outside of Jerusalem for seven years, even if they own property. The Jerusalem municipality uses bureaucratic processes for political ends, razing the homes of Palestinians from Jerusalem and forcing them to find another place to live. Most end up in refugee camps in the West Bank or Gaza, or choose to pay high rent rates in order to stay in Jerusalem.

This indicates a systematic home demolition policy which ends in evacuating Palestinians from Jerusalem and other areas slated for Israeli expansion in a way that seems voluntary, while in fact it is compulsory. In this way, the Palestinians have become an entire population of homeless refugees in the West Bank, Gaza and scattered to every part of the globe.