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First thousand days of prison

For 1.5 million Gazans, the war between Palestine and Israel produces daily battles for survival

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In the largest prison on Earth – Gaza – spanning over 360 sq. kilometres that the military machine of a UN member state created some 1,000 days ago, more than 1.5 million human beings lead their usual non-life: No water. No food. No medicines. No fuel. No electricity for homes, schools and hospitals. No hopes either – all that amidst the wreckage and debris of an atrocious war.

U.S. Senators, European national legislators, Euro-parliamentarians, UN secretary general, human rights defenders, TV cameras and reporters from everywhere, have been talking and writing and showing images of children dying in hospitals, helpless starving elderly, and hundreds of entire families without shelter, without food.

Tons of ink has been poured into UN and non-UN reports, thousand of words have been spelled out to express condemnation, and desperate calls for ending the Gaza siege have led nowhere. The Egyptian regime has further contributed to the siege with a steel wall along its borders with Gaza.

"The situation in the Gaza Strip is becoming increasingly dire as the Israeli blockade approaches its 1000th day, allowing an illegal economy to flourish," the head of the UN agency tasked with assisting millions of Palestinian refugees said on March 10.

Filippo Grandi, the commissioner general of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), explained that the problems faced by Gaza "are not just humanitarian", but "encompass every aspect of society."

One year ago, nations gathered in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh and pledged nearly \$5 billion to help rebuild Gaza. However, those funds cannot be disbursed, Grandi said. "Virtually no materials or equipment destined for reconstruction by the UN and by the private sector can be transported from Israel because we don't have permission to do so."

The Sin of Being Elected

The siege of Gaza started in June 2007 when Israel imposed a ferrous military blockade with the support of the governments of Egypt and the U.S., among

others.

The blockade is part of the economic sanctions imposed as a consequence of the 2006 election of Hamas to the Palestinian government. The elections were fair, clean and transparent, as certified by international in situ observers led by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter.

The siege consists of a land blockade along Gaza's borders with Egypt and Israel and a sea blockade maintained by the Israeli navy from three nautical miles offshore, with the later participation of U.S. and European warships.

A September 2009 UN fact-finding mission established that the blockade of Gaza "amounted to collective punishment," was likely a "war crime" and a "crime against humanity," and recommended that the matter be referred to the International Criminal Court.

Cast Lead on Civilians

Grandi welcomed the announcement the day before that UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon will visit the region in the coming weeks. Ban, he recalled, was the first international leader who visited Gaza following the end of Operation Cast Lead, the three-week Israeli military offensive starting at the end of 2008.

The Israeli attacks with forbidden weapons and munitions such as white phosphor bombs, "left more than 1,400 people dead, injured 5,000 others and reduced homes, schools, hospitals and marketplaces to rubble".

Most of the victims were unarmed civilians, with a majority of children, women and elderly people. A total of 13 Israelis died in this war.

Grandi, who served as deputy commissioner general for nearly five years before assuming the top UNRWA post in January, voiced hope that the secretary general's impending visit "will also mark the beginning of a new and more positive phase for the people in Gaza and hopefully for the

people in the occupied Palestinian territory as a whole."

Five Million Refugees

The commissioner also expressed concern over UNRWA's precarious financial situation.

The agency provides assistance, protection and advocacy for some 4.7 million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the occupied Palestinian territory, including in the areas of

education, health care, community support and emergency response in times of armed conflict.

UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from UN member states. It requires \$600 million (U.S.) a year to carry out its

work, including in the education sector, where UNRWA employs 20,000 teachers.

But its funding falls short by 20 percent of the amount required.

Grandi expressed hopes to roll out new schemes shortly, including helping young refugees in Gaza, where a large proportion of the population is under the age of 20. "They're the ones who are most fragile, most exposed to all sorts of risks."

Radical Changes

Few days earlier, John Holmes, UN under-secretary general for Humanitarian Affairs, called for "radical" changes in Israeli policies towards the occupied Palestinian territory to allow people to carry out normal and dignified lives.

"For this to happen, marginal improvements here and there are not enough," he emphasised in Jerusalem while on a visit to the region.

"I have a lot of admiration for the resilience and ingenuity of Gaza residents in trying to cope with the present circumstances," said Holmes, while stressing that it is "disturbing" that one year after the fighting ended, "no meaningful reconstruction has yet started".

"In Gaza, border crossings must be re-opened, while in the West Bank, illegal demolitions and evictions should stop," he said. "In the so-called Area C, which covers 60 percent of the West Bank and remains largely off limits to Palestinians, he called for the allowing of natural development".

In Shu'fat refugee camp in East Jerusalem, Holmes saw first-hand the impact of the barrier – which Israel says it is building to keep out suicide bombers and other attackers – on the Palestinian community. It has curtailed access to health, education and other basic services, while also limiting livelihood opportunities.

Demolitions, Evictions

He also witnessed the effects of continued demolitions and forced evictions in the Arab neighbourhoods of Al Bustan and Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem, where many families have been forced from their homes and many more are at risk of displacement.

"I was moved by what I saw and heard today during the discussions I had with Palestinian families forced out of their homes," Holmes, who also serves as UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, said.

In Area C, the UN under secretary general visited a school in the Al Jahalin Bedouin community, which has been in the area for generations. "It has come under pressure recently due to a nearby settlement and restrictions on building permits and access to the area."

The school, built with the help of the UN and its partners, has been marked for demolition, which Holmes said cannot be justified. "The case of this school shows how difficult it has become for herding communities to continue living in Area C and for humanitarian agencies to assist them."

Meanwhile, human rights activists have been circulating by e-mail a series of pictures comparing images of atrocious crimes committed by the Nazi regime against millions of innocent Jewish civilians, with nearly identical images of Palestinians civilians who are victims of the Israeli military.