



# GAZA: ANOTHER WINTER OF DEATHS

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## GAZA: ANOTHER WINTER OF DEATHS

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The people of Gaza have been suffering for more than two years now under an illegal siege put in place by Israel. This siege has been aided and abetted by the international community. Poverty, hunger, and disease have taken hold of the Gaza Strip and thousands of people are homeless as a result of the war. As winter approaches the situation will become worse. The people of Gaza – young people in particular – face a very bleak future.

Over 5,000 students graduate from the Gaza Strip's universities every year. Very few are able to get jobs. Last June, UNRWA set up a programme to provide temporary unskilled employment, lasting only for the duration of the summer, to these graduates. However, when 27,000 university graduates applied, UNRWA was only able to provide 7,000 of them with even this short-term work which does not provide them with enough income to sustain themselves and their families and does not allow them to utilize their skills.

## THE TUNNEL ECONOMY

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The siege of Gaza ensures that there are no job opportunities in the territory. University graduates have been forced to work, as a result, in the smuggling tunnels under the Egyptian border, where they face death and injury. Tunnels have frequently collapsed of their own accord and Israeli aircraft regularly bomb them, resulting in more collapses and deaths. The Israeli army has even developed a robot snake which can carry explosives. It is believed that this "*snake*" will be deployed in the tunnels.



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These tunnels provide Gaza's only lifeline to the outside world. When Western journalists talk about them, they usually depict them as being used to smuggle arms to Palestinian militants. In fact, they are used to import everything Gazans need, from gasoline and electrical household goods to food, medicine, and even live animals.

John Ging, head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in Gaza says, ***“There is only one economy, there's a tunnel economy. You have zero exports and zero commercial imports through the crossing points. All that is allowed in is humanitarian aid and supplies. In terms of economic activity, there is no economic activity other than the tunnel economy.”***

The “humanitarian aid” which Ging speaks of is deliberately kept by Israel at a level insufficient to satisfy even the most basic needs of the Palestinian people. Israel directly controls all the crossing points into Gaza, except for the Rafah crossing, on the border between Egypt and Gaza. It has been restricting the entry of goods into Gaza since 1991. Since then Israel has increased its stranglehold every time there is a major political development, such as the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, or the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections of 2006.

When Israel halted commercial shipments of food into Gaza in that year, Dov Weisglass, a senior advisor to the Israeli government, said that ***“the idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger”***. After Hamas took





control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Israel has intensified its use of the hunger weapon. The United Nations considers over half the population of the Gaza Strip to be food insecure. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has been forced to stop distribution of its rations (which do not meet minimum dietary needs anyway) on several occasions. **75% of Gazans are now consuming less food than they were in 2005, and nearly all have cut down on the consumption of fruit, vegetables, and meat to save money. Thousands of children are now malnourished.**

## REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMPLICITY

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Israel's blockade of Gaza requires the cooperation of other countries. On the western border of the Gaza Strip, the Egyptian government has proven itself to be a faithful partner in the Israeli siege. However, the United States and the European Union are also supporting it. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillai, has published a report stating that the blockade of Gaza is a violation of the Geneva Conventions, because it constitutes collective punishment of a civilian population.



In June 2008, the EU decided to upgrade its relations with Israel, allowing Israel increased access to European markets and participation in some EU agencies and programmes. Far from reproaching Israel for its violation of international law, the EU was going to in effect reward it. To its credit the EU decided to call off this upgrade after the war on Gaza. However, there are many other ways in which the EU has supported the blockade.





The Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA), signed after Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, regulates the operation of the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza. When it was signed it was touted as a step forward on the road to a Palestinian state, allowing the

Palestinians to control an international border crossing without Israeli interference. In actual fact, it has allowed Israel to continue to control this crossing – and continue its blockade of Gaza – without having any military presence there.

The agreement allows Israeli cameras to constantly observe the crossing and stipulates that the crossing cannot be opened unless European Union monitors are present. These monitors were based in Israel and required Israeli approval in order to take up their posts at the Rafah Crossing. After Hamas captured the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006, Israel refused to allow the monitors to take up their posts, at the crossing, closing it down. Following the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007, the European Union withdrew its monitors and they have not returned since. In Israel, the Dor Alon petroleum company has played a key role in the suffering of the people of Gaza. It is responsible for providing the Gaza Strip with industrial diesel for its power plant. However over the course of 2008, under orders from the Israeli government, it gradually reduced its shipments to Gaza until there was not enough diesel to operate the power plant. Gaza suffered prolonged blackouts as a result. The European Union has given this company 97 million euros (US\$124 million) in direct aid on the grounds that it is supplying fuel to Gaza. The EU has deliberately ignored the fact that this company is actually withholding fuel from the people of Gaza and is a major participant in an illegal blockade. The EU's actions in this regard amount to subsidizing the blockade.



The United States has been providing direct assistance in maintaining the blockade. It has been training the Egyptian army to locate and destroy the tunnels which provide Gaza with the supplies it needs, providing the Egyptians with advanced equipment for this purpose shortly after the Gaza war. **Congress has previously threatened Egypt with a withdrawal of military aid unless it did more to stop smuggling through the tunnels.**

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The Obama administration has maintained silence over the blockade, refusing to pressure Israel to lift it or ease it and it remains Israel's main supplier of military and economic aid. In addition it gives Israel the diplomatic cover it needs to maintain the illegal blockade.

After Israel's assault on Gaza in December 2008, the situation has become even more unbearable for the Palestinians. During and immediately after the war, aid agencies from around the world sent food supplies to Egypt, expecting them to be transported to Gaza from



there. As a matter of fact, most of this aid rotted away on the Egyptian border, thanks to the Egyptian government's refusal to open the crossing.

The Egyptian government has been a close collaborator with Israel in its siege of Gaza – without the help of the Egyptians, Israel's siege of the territory would be ineffective. Food aid

from Egypt to Gaza has to go through the Kerem Shalom or Auja crossings – both under Israeli control. Egypt only allows the Rafah crossing to be opened occasionally for the movement of people and medical supplies, always with Israeli consent. No food aid is allowed through.



Israel uses its control of the crossings into Gaza to implement the most draconian measures against the Palestinians. Among the supplies waiting to cross the Egyptian border were 2000 “family boxes” of basic food supplies contributed by the Italian charity, Music for Peace. These were refused entry by Israel on the grounds that they each contained a small pot of honey – which the Israelis deemed a nonessential item. **The classification of what is essential and non-essential is completely arbitrary and subject to change. Foods such as pasta, lentils, chickpeas, and fruit juice have also been refused entry by Israel, as have items like nappies, paper, and water purifying tablets.**

## THE HOUSING CRISIS

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**In Rafah, some Palestinians have rebuilt houses from mud because of the lack of construction materials.**

4,000 houses were destroyed in the war and another 40,000 were damaged. Gazans whose homes were destroyed remain homeless today. They are forced to live in tents and other makeshift accommodation, exposed to the elements. **In Rafah, some Palestinians have rebuilt houses from mud because of**

**the lack of construction materials.** Israel refuses to allow the entry of cement, wood, steel, and other materials, despite the pleas of UN agencies in Gaza, on the grounds that they could be used to build military installations and rockets by Hamas. Paradoxically, the Israeli government’s siege of the Gaza Strip allows it to make well publicized gestures of “goodwill” to improve its image globally. Such was the case when it allowed a small quantity of cement and steel into the Gaza Strip last August, to be used for UN sponsored reconstruction projects such as the rebuilding of a flour mill.





These gestures do not do anything to ease the plight of the people of Gaza, and as a matter of fact the material supplied was not enough for these projects.

The United Nations humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinians, Maxwell Gaylard, has reaffirmed this. Speaking to reporters after a tour of Gaza on November 9<sup>th</sup>, he said, **“For the people of Gaza, life is miserable. It's not getting any better, winter is coming, rains are coming... We know that there are hundreds of families still living in tents. We know that there are more than that living in the ruins of their own homes and we know that there are even**



**more than that who are with relatives and friends. They need materials to repair their houses. They need fuel to be able to keep warm during the winter. They need good water and sanitation systems.”** He said that the winter will be particularly difficult for children, who are already suffering because their basic needs are not being met. Damage done to schools in Gaza during the war has been left unrepaired and many lack electricity and heating. Gaylard called on Israel to open the crossings and allow reconstruction material in before the winter cold sets in. However, there is practically no chance of that happening. Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor has ruled out any *“uncontrolled flow”* of cement and iron into Gaza and said that these items would not be allowed in at all unless Israel could ensure that they would not be put to military use (Israel has already been given assurances in this regard).

Israel currently does not even allow the entry of clothing into Gaza – a fact that will make the winter even harsher on the people of Gaza. The Egyptian government has also done its bit to make sure that the homeless people of Gaza suffer this winter. In October, it closed three tunnels underneath the border and seized timber, paint, and ten tons of cement destined for the Gaza Strip - along with 600 sacks of sweets.





THE THREAT OF EPIDEMIC

**Sewage-contaminated seawater and agricultural waste has flowed into the aquifer as a result and now only 5-10% of the water is fit for human consumption.**

The ban on the entry of construction materials has resulted in a catastrophic new development. Gaza's water supply system is close to collapse. Gaza has one aquifer and this is its only source of water. It is not enough to meet the needs of the population -water is available for only six to eight hours a day, for between one and four days a week - and the aquifer has been overused. **Sewage-contaminated seawater and agricultural waste has flowed into the aquifer as a result and now only 5-10% of the water is fit for human consumption.**

There has been an outbreak of kidney diseases and diarrhea, babies have been born with a blue tinge, and UN agencies have warned that a hepatitis A epidemic is on the way. Thanks to the blockade, there is a lack of spare parts and fuel and it has not been possible to remedy this situation.



An Israeli bulldozer destroys water fountain

The water supply infrastructure was heavily damaged during Israel's assault on Gaza and even before that there was an urgent need for cement, pipes, and pumps, all materials prohibited under the blockade. The water supply system is now in a degraded condition. The United Nations Environment Programme has warned that *"unless the*

*degradation trend is reversed now, damage could take centuries to reverse."*

The siege of Gaza is a crime against humanity which not only Israel but its allies in Egypt, Europe, and the United States are responsible for. By withholding food, shelter, medicine, and clean water, Israel and its allies are inflicting an unprecedented catastrophe on an innocent, defenseless population and history will hold them accountable for the Gazans who suffer and dies as a result.

