

UA 182/07

Health Concern**ISRAEL/
OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES/
EGYPT****Thousands of Palestinian civilians**

Several thousand Palestinians are currently stranded in northern Egypt, unable to return to their homes in the Gaza Strip. The Rafah Crossing between Gaza and Egypt has been closed by the Israeli authorities since 9 June; on 15 June they announced that it would remain closed until further notice. Hundreds of those stranded are camped out close to the border crossing, afraid to leave the area in case the crossing is opened briefly enabling them to return home, and are unable to afford accommodation. Many have inadequate food, water and shelter although they are in the desert at the hottest time of the year. Their health and safety remain at risk while they continue to be prevented from crossing the border and returning home.

The Rafah Crossing is the only gateway to the outside world for the 1.5 million inhabitants of Gaza. The Israeli authorities closed the crossing when the Islamic resistance movement Hamas took over the de facto running of the Gaza Strip after armed clashes between its supporters and members of the Fatah party led by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Hundreds of the stranded Gaza residents are returning from medical treatment in Egypt and need continuing care. Taghrid Muhammad Abed, a 30-year-old mother-of-five, died on 29 June while waiting at the border to return home after undergoing treatment for cancer in Egypt. Such treatment is not available in the Gaza Strip and many cancer patients therefore travel to Egypt for medical care. As many as 28 other people are also reported to have died, away from their homes, while awaiting the re-opening of the crossing. The majority of these individuals died in Egyptian medical facilities, however, others have died at or near the border crossing itself.

Some of the stranded Palestinians have reportedly been obliged to sell personal belongings to cover the costs of their extended stay in Egypt and some to have run out of medicine, while parents and children have been unable to re-unite with their families in Gaza. At the Egyptian El-Arish airport, where some returning Palestinians are being detained until the border opens, 82 individuals began a hunger strike on 5 July.

The closure of the Rafah Crossing also confines the 1.5 million residents of Gaza within the Strip. This includes those seeking reunification with other family members or educational and employment opportunities abroad. It also includes individuals fearing for their safety in the aftermath of the recent fighting between Hamas and Fatah. Several hundred Gaza residents are also being prevented from seeking urgent medical treatment abroad due to the closure of the Rafah crossing and also the Israeli authorities' closure of the Erez Crossing, the only crossing from the Gaza Strip into Israel.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In November 2005, following the pullout of Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip a few months earlier, an Agreement of Movement and Access (AMA) was signed by the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) mandating a European Union Border Assistance Mission (EU BAM) to control the Rafah Crossing. Israel, however, retained the ability to close the border by preventing the access of EU workers to the Crossing. Since June 2006, Rafah Crossing has opened only on an erratic and sporadic basis. Last summer, an extended closure of the Rafah Crossing resulted in the deaths of four stranded Palestinians.

Following the takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas on 14 June 2007, the Israeli authorities have taken the position that the AMA and other such agreements no longer apply and have indicated that the crossing will remain closed until further notice. On 8 July the head of the EU BAM mission announced a reduction in the number of EU monitors, stating "[we] are not foreseeing a return to normalcy in the near future".

The Israeli authorities have offered to allow the stranded Palestinians to return to Gaza through the Israeli Kerem Shalom army base. This proposal has been accepted by PA President Abbas, who remains in power in the West Bank, but has been rejected by Hamas leaders and others in Gaza, who say that Palestinians would be at greater risk of arrest by Israeli forces if they are required to pass through Israeli territory. Others have expressed concern that this could also provide grounds for further delay in reopening the Rafah Crossing.

Meanwhile, the situation of Gaza's goods crossing also remains precarious. The main goods crossing into the Gaza Strip, the Karni Crossing, is currently open on only a limited basis. The Karni Crossing is the sole crossing with sufficient capacity to meet the needs of the Gaza Strip's economy, and is effectively Gaza's export and import life-line to the outside world. On 9 July the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) announced it had been forced to halt its building projects in Gaza, due to a supply shortage caused by the closure of the Karni Crossing. Such projects include reconstruction work to the homes of 16,000 refugees which have been damaged by the Israeli army in recent years, as well as water and sanitation projects and the construction of

schools and health centres. The United Nations has warned that there could be a humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip if the crossings remain closed.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Hebrew, English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the health and safety of the thousands of civilians waiting at the Rafah Border Crossing, who have little or no access to medical services, adequate food, water, electricity or fuel;
- expressing concern for the residents of Gaza currently in the Strip who are unable to leave;
- noting that those who are trapped include elderly and disabled people, women and children, including some in urgent need of medical care not available to them in the Gaza Strip;
- calling on all concerned parties to spare no effort to facilitate for the passage of persons and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip, prioritising the human rights of the Palestinian residents of Gaza over political gain.

APPEALS TO:

Ehud Olmert

Prime Minister of Israel

Office of the Prime Minister, 3 Kaplan Street, P O Box 187, Kiryat Ben-Gurion, Jerusalem 91919, Israel

Fax: +972 2 566 4838

Email: rohm@pmo.gov.il

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Mahmoud Abbas

President of the Palestinian Authority

Fax: +972 2 296 1370/ 2 298 1370/ 2 296 3179

Salutation: Dear President

Ismail Haniyeh

Hamas leadership in Gaza

Fax: + 970 8 282 2159/ 284 5040/ 286 8971

Salutation: Dear Mr Haniyeh

H.E. Muhammad Hosni Mubarak

President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 'Abedine Palace, Cairo, Egypt

Fax: +20 2 390 1998

Email: webmaster@presidency.gov.eg

Salutation: Dear President

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Israel and the Palestinian Authority accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 22 August 2007. *****