

AI Index: PRE 01/286/2008
14 November 2008

Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories: Israeli blockade causes worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza

Amnesty International urges the Israeli authorities to allow the immediate passage of humanitarian aid, medical supplies and fuel to the Gaza Strip, where the situation is nothing short of a disaster.

“Israel’s latest tightening of its blockade has made an already dire humanitarian situation markedly worse. This is nothing short of collective punishment on Gaza’s civilian population and it must stop immediately,” said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

Even the trickle of humanitarian aid previously allowed into Gaza, on which 80 per cent of the population depends, has now been stopped for nine days by the Israeli army. The delivery of medical supplies and the industrial fuel donated by the European Union and needed to power Gaza’s power plant has also been blocked. This has led to a blackout in large parts of Gaza.

Abu Khalil, a resident of Gaza City, told Amnesty International this week: “Today I went to look for bread in several bakeries but couldn’t find any. There is no electricity, it’s pitch dark. A few months ago we bought an electric cooker because cooking gas is difficult to find and very expensive, but now without electricity we can’t even cook. We are sitting at home in the dark; the children don’t know what to do with themselves. We can’t do anything. Until when can we live like this?”

Other residents of Gaza told Amnesty International that they could not even find candles in the market any more and that the few people who have back generators in their homes and who still have fuel do not dare to use them because nobody knows until how long the blackout will last.

On Thursday the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), the main UN aid agency, which provides humanitarian assistance to close to one million Palestinian refugees in Gaza, announced that its supplies had run out. It had been warning for several days that this would happen.

At the same time the Israeli authorities have been denying international journalists access to Gaza for a week. On Thursday a convoy of European diplomats were likewise refused entry.

“Gaza is cut off from the outside world. Israel is seemingly not keen for the world to see the suffering that its blockade is causing to the one and a half million Palestinians who are virtually trapped there,” Philip Luther said.

The breakdown last week of a five-and-a-half-month ceasefire between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants in Gaza has generated a renewed wave of violence. The killing of six Palestinian militants in Israeli air strikes and ground attacks on 4 November prompted a barrage of Palestinian rockets on nearby Israeli

towns and villages. Five other Palestinian militants have been killed by Israeli forces and others injured in recent days. Palestinian rocket attacks have continued. No Israeli casualties had been reported until earlier today, when one Israeli was lightly wounded by shrapnel in an attack on the Israeli city of Sderot.

“This dangerous spate of attacks and counter-attacks must be swiftly halted. Both sides know from past experience that their actions are putting the lives of civilian populations of Gaza and southern Israel at risk,” said Philip Luther.

Prior to the ceasefire of 19 June 2008, some 420 Palestinians had been killed by Israeli forces, half of them unarmed civilians, including some 80 children, since the beginning of the year. In the same period, Palestinian armed groups killed 24 Israelis, 15 of them civilians, including four children.

The five-and-a-half-month ceasefire brought a welcome respite for the civilian population in Gaza and southern Israel from the daily attacks which had blighted their lives for the past eight years, during which some 4,750 Palestinians and 1,100 Israelis were killed. Most of the victims on both sides have been unarmed civilians, including some 900 Palestinian children and 120 Israeli children.