

Gaza: Humanitarian Catastrophe Looms

by Dean Andromidas

A humanitarian catastrophe is threatening the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, because of the policies of the Bush Administration and the Israeli government. The ongoing criminal blockade by Israel of the Gaza Strip has begun to create mass hunger in the population of 1.2 million people, the vast majority of whom are dependent on emergency food aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

The refusal of the Bush Administration to recognize the new Palestinian administration led by the Hamas party, which won elections on Jan. 26 that were deemed totally fair, and without violence, by former United States President Jimmy Carter, is not only hypocritical, but a crime against humanity. Not only is the United States withholding recognition of the new government, but it has joined Israel, an occupying power, in pressuring the international community to follow its policy, including cutting off all official aid to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The European Union announced on April 7 that it will also be cutting aid to the PNA worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Food Supplies Cut Off

At the beginning of April, David Shearer, head of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, informed the Israeli Foreign Ministry that Gaza was on the verge of a humanitarian disaster. This warning was backed by a report by UNRWA, stating that the lack of basic food supplies because of the Israeli closure of the border crossings, has caused a significant increase of hunger. This situation comes on top of the degradation of the population of the Gaza Strip since Ariel Sharon came to power in 2000. According to the World Bank, poverty increased from 22% of the population to 75% over the last five years. Some 25-40% of the workforce is unemployed, and 44% of the population is expected to survive on \$2 a day.

The Israeli government refuses to transfer custom duties it collects on goods shipped through Israeli ports destined for the Palestinian National Authority, amounting to \$50 million a month, which is crucial for paying the salaries of PNA workers: not only security personnel and administration, but also teachers, hospital and health workers, etc. The PNA employs no fewer than 140,000 people, who sustain over one-third of the population. In Gaza alone, 73,000 people are employed by the PNA. Thus the failure of the transfer of these



Palestinian Red Crescent Society

A building in Gaza bombed by Israeli jets. Gaza's suffering is compounded by the strangulation imposed by Israel, the United States, and the European Union, which cut off food aid and imposed a blockade.

funds, and the U.S. and the European Union freeze on aid, amounting to \$800 million, will wipe out the livelihood of one-third of the Palestinian population. This is nothing less than collective punishment—a war crime under the Geneva Conventions.

The Bush Administration is now even demanding that the PNA return \$50 million transferred earlier this year for infrastructure projects.

Already, 986,000 of Gaza's 1.2 million people are refugees, receiving some form of aid from UNRWA, which provides food aid to 137,000 families, an UNRWA representative told *EIR*; now another 25,000 families, whose wage earner works for the PNA, and will not be receiving his salary, will have to seek food aid from UNRWA. The UN agency is already lacking \$120 million of its \$457.9 million budget for basic food needs for the year. While it needs \$150 million for its projects such as building schools, it has only received \$14.3 million.

On top of this, the H5N1 avian flu virus has hit both Israel and the Palestinian territories very hard, threatening to wipe out the poultry industry in Gaza. Already 250,000 birds have been culled, representing 10% of the number of fowl in Gaza, and another 250,000 are expected to be culled as well. According to statements at a Jerusalem press conference on April 5 by officials of the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 30,000 farmers in Gaza alone lost their chickens, leaving them unable to provide for their estimated 200,000 family members. The officials said that the continued closure of the Karni crossing between Israel and Gaza is making it impossible for sufficient alternative supplies to enter Gaza, where

poultry has been the most important source of protein to the population. WHO official Luigi Damiani told the press conference that fish could serve as an alternative source of protein, but Israel refuses to allow Palestinians to fish off the Gaza coast.

Given the poverty and high population density of Gaza, it is feared that the bird flu could mutate into a deadly human strain. Ambrogio Manenti, the regional head of WHO, told the press conference that doses of the anti-viral drug Tamiflu are needed for at least 3% of the population, although he said it would be much better for 25-30% of the population to receive the drug. Donors have yet to transfer the funds promised for dealing with this crisis.

Warsaw Ghetto Conditions

This humanitarian catastrophe is the legacy of former Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's policy of "unilateral withdrawal" from the Gaza Strip, a policy which his successor, Ehud Olmert, promises to pursue in the West Bank. This policy, referred to by Olmert as "creating the borders of

Israel" or "convergence," in reality is aimed at turning all the occupied territories into the moral equivalent of the Warsaw Ghetto. Already conditions in Gaza make it the Warsaw Ghetto of the Middle East. The only difference is that Palestinians who can afford to, are free to emigrate, and indeed one can only conclude that this is its true purpose. Already 245,000 Palestinians, close to 15%, have emigrated in the past five years.

The Bush Administration has been a full partner in creating these Warsaw Ghetto conditions. After removing all the settlers from Gaza last Fall, Sharon, with the backing of the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, established a regime whereby the Israeli government has the last word on who and what may come into or out of Gaza, including millions of dollars worth of agricultural exports, as well as all imports, including food and medical supplies. All this is based on "security considerations." It must be noted that there has been only one terrorist attack originating from Gaza against Israeli territory in the last five years. The only security threat from Gaza are the homemade Qassem rockets that are launched from time to time over the fence that surrounds Gaza; their destructive effect is extremely limited, and does not warrant an Israeli policy that punishes the entire Palestinian population. The Israeli military has been firing hundreds of artillery shells, including into the Gaza football stadium, after three Qassemes were fired which landed in open fields in Israel. In three days, 15 Palestinians, including women and children, were killed.

Through the mediation of Rice, a regime was set up where there are now only three crossing points, which the Israelis

want to reduce to two. One is at Rafah, between Egypt and Gaza, where only people are allowed to cross, but no cargo; another is at Keren Shalom, in the southeast corner of Gaza, entering Israel near the Egyptian border; the third is the Karni crossing on the northeast corner. The Israeli government, which wants to totally isolate Gaza from Israel, want to permanently close the Karni crossing, where goods imported through Israel's port of Ashdod, which is only 6 kilometers away, can enter. Closing the crossing would force the Palestinians to bring all their imports, at far greater expense, through Egypt's Port Said or Alexandria, which are, respectively, 200 and 400 kilometers away. Meanwhile Israel refuses to allow the construction of a Gaza seaport, and the reconstruction of the Gaza airport, which was destroyed on orders from Sharon.

Since the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, these crossings have been closed for 60% of the time, according to Christer Nordahl of the UNRWA Gaza field office. Nordahl told *EIR* that at least 300 trucks have to enter Gaza daily, but Israel has only opened the Kerem Shalom crossing, which can handle 15 trucks a day! Nordahl called the situation "unbelievable, but also unacceptable," and charged that the United States has not put any pressure on Israel to open the crossings.

There is no sign that the government, now being formed by Olmert, will change this policy. In fact, it has reiterated that it will continue to build the "separation wall" on the West Bank, with 35% of the West Bank behind it, fencing in over 2 million Palestinians into two or three ghettos. It is already worse then ghettoized by the over 400 checkpoints that cover the entire transport grid of the West Bank, making it an ordeal to travel from one town to another.

Recognize Hamas

Hamas has met all the demands of the international community, and more. The accusations being made by the Israeli government and the Bush Administration are groundless. Hamas has adopted in full the positions of the former government, led by Fatah, including UN Resolution 242, which stipulates an agreement based on the 1967 borders, that is, the two-state solution. Yet the Israeli government refuses to accept Resolution 242. As for the two-state concept, the Israelis recognize the PNA as merely a local administration, not even as "national," as seen in the fact that the government, media, and general population drop the word "national" when referring to the Palestinian National Authority. Palestinian President Abu Mazen is referred to as "chairman" of the "Palestin-



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The Israeli "separation fence" slices through a Palestinian neighborhood on the West Bank. The new Ehud Olmert government vows to continue this policy, which will make the West Bank as much of a "Warsaw Ghetto" as the Gaza Strip is already.

ian Authority," since "President" would imply national statehood.

The question of Hamas's recognition of Israel's right to exist has been forcefully addressed and clarified by Hamas spokesmen recently.

Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh stated his government's positions in a commentary in the British *Guardian* on March 30. After accusing the United States and European Union of "scandalous double standards" by cutting aid and other measures, to force Hamas to make statements and commitments, while doing nothing to pressure Israel, he made clear his desire to move towards a peace agreement, presenting the same demands as the Palestinian Liberation Organization has done:

"No plan will ever work without a guarantee, in exchange for an end to hostilities by both sides, of a total Israeli withdrawal from all the land occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem; the release of all our prisoners; the removal of all settlers; and recognition of the right of all refugees to return." Through this statement, UN Resolution 242 is clearly recognized by Hamas.

He concluded: "If we are boycotted in spite of this democratic choice—as we have been by the U.S. and some of its allies—we will persist, and our friends have pledged to fill the gap. We have confidence in the peoples of the world, record numbers of whom identify with our struggle. This is a good time for peace-making—if the world wants peace."

Palestinian Foreign Minister Dr. Mahmoud Zahar, in an interview to the London *Times* on April 7, stated the conditions for the Hamas government to recognize Israel. First, he makes a very simple point: It takes two states to recognize one another. The Palestinians have not been offered even the

terms of what their state will consist of.

"First of all we have to understand what is the nature of these two states? Is it just taking permission or recognition of the Israeli side, or Israeli existence without taking anything? I give you one example. The PLO recognized Israel on the borders occupied from 1948 to 1967, meaning 78 percent of Palestine. The other side recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian society without any square meter. Is this a bilateral recognition? Is it fair?"

"We are not here speaking about 1948 or 1967, we are speaking about what they are going to offer. This is the first point. The second, if Israel is ready to respect the right of the Palestinian people? There are several questions concerning the right of return. We have more than five million Palestinians living outside. What is the fate of such people, to live forever in intolerable conditions in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and everywhere? These questions should be answered. This is a national interest.

"If Israel has the right of return to bring people who have no relation to Palestine, after 3,000 years, I think we, by the same implementation, have the principle of right of return to come back to our land. We left only in 1948."

He further said that if an offer is made, then not only will it be necessary for the Hamas government to accept it, but also the Palestinian people and its institutions, including the legislative council.

Signs of Change

Cracks are already beginning to appear in the attempt to diplomatically isolate Hamas. The first was the invitation Moscow extended shortly after the Palestinian elections, which culminated in a very successful official visit, and a clear commitment of support by the Russian government. Following a meeting on April 4 with the Yang Wei Guo, the Chinese representative to the PNA, Foreign Minister Zahar announced that he had been invited for an official visit to China next month. The tour could include other countries in East Asia. "We will visit countries of East Asia, and China will be the first country we will visit in the region," Zahar told reporters. "I have spoken to the ambassador, and they are ready to receive a Palestinian delegation any time."

Zahar has received invitations from several Arab countries, including Egypt. There are indications that an invitation could be extended by India, and possibly, France.

Shlomo Ben-Ami, former Israeli foreign minister in the Labor-led government of Ehud Barak, broke ranks with much of the Israeli political class, and called on the international community to continue funding the Palestinian National Authority and open up negotiations with the Hamas-led government.

"I think financial aid must be given to Hamas," Ben Ami told a meeting in Jerusalem. "Giving to NGOs will not solve the problem. You cannot call for democracy in the Arab world and then punish the people who are elected." He was speaking

on April 10 on the release of his new book, *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli Arab Conflict*.

Ben-Ami also attacked Olmert's unilateral convergence plan. "The convergence plan is based on fallacies. [Olmert] assumes that if he fails to reach a settlement with the PA—and the PA for him is Abu Mazen—the international community will accept his unilaterally defined borders as final borders. Withdrawing to unilateral borders that include settlement blocs is not going to give us security. . . . The Israeli tradition of playing chess with ourselves has existed for many years. It's painful to depart from that tradition." He underlined that "Hamas is not al-Qaeda. It is an organization that has used terror in the service of well-defined national goals. . . . You can argue the means are inadmissible, but the rationale is essentially nationalistic."

Ben-Ami declared that Hamas should only be required to accept a two-state solution and halt terror, and that negotiations should begin with the Hamas government, without the prerequisite of its extending recognition to Israel, since "they cannot be expected to change their longstanding policy . . . about accepting Israel without signs of a quid pro quo."

Nicholas Pelham, of the International Crisis Group's office in Jerusalem, agreed with Ben-Ami, saying, "Cutting aid to the Palestinian Authority is certain to lead to more violence, not less. Israel and the international community should find a formula for interacting with the Palestinian Authority."

In light of Israel's demonization of Hamas as a terrorist organization, a new book by former Israeli Mossad director Efraim Halevy reveals that Hamas in 1997, through the good offices of Jordanian King Hussein, proposed a 30-year truce with Israel. Although the book claims this news somehow never reached then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a few days after the proposal was made, the Israeli Mossad carried out an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Hamas leader Khalid Meshal. The attempt was foiled when Jordanian police captured two of the four agents. King Hussein was so enraged that he threatened to take military action. It was at that point that Israel agreed to release Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. That decision had to be made by Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who was the moderate in the government at the time.

This leaves little doubt that the assassination was planned by both Sharon and Netanyahu in order to sabotage this peace initiative by Hamas and King Hussein. The latter always thought that the assassination was part of an Israeli plot to overthrow his monarchy and turn Jordan into "Palestine"—Sharon's long-advocated policy. When Sharon himself became Prime Minister, he soon ordered the assassination of Yassin.

The Olmert government is the son of the Sharon government. Will it make the same mistake, with the backing of the Bush Administration, that Netanyahu and Sharon did in 1997?