

CLOSURE UPDATE NO.2

Report by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights on the Closure imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israel

This is the second Closure Update of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. It documents the effects and implications of the continuing total closure which has been imposed by the Israeli authorities on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, since 25th February 1996.¹ The closure blocks all passage between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, through Israel and to the outside world.

The effects of the closure which we documented in Closure Update No.1 remain and have been intensified. However there are now a series of other effects. One of the most recent developments was the imposition on Friday 9th March by Israeli authorities of a total ban on access to the sea from Gaza; this has remained in place ever since. This measure prohibits Palestinian fisherman from fishing even within the very limited zone prescribed by the Cairo Agreement. This constitutes a severe violation of the agreement and increases economic suffering, unemployment and food shortages.

The information contained in this update has been provided by the staff of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights who have been given the specific mandate of conducting daily monitoring and documentation of the devastating effects of the latest closure on the lives of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

1. Continued Prevention of Commercial Transactions

The Israeli authorities have continued the total ban on commercial transactions from Gaza. Gazan produce cannot be exported to or via Israel. The Qarni (Karni) Outlet was designed so that commercial transactions could continue even in the event of total closure. This outlet remains closed. The outlet was closed on 25th February and re-opened on 29th. However, on March 4th the Israeli authorities informed the Palestinian authorities at the outlet that it would be closed. This has led to a further deterioration of the economy in all sectors.

i. Agriculture

When there is no closure on commercial transactions the Gaza Strip exports to Israel or to the West Bank and outside markets through Israel. Around 15,000 tonnes of vegetables, 500 tonnes of citrus fruits daily and around 2,000,000 flowers are exported weekly from Gaza.

On March 4th when the closure was imposed, the Israeli authorities ordered 27 vehicles from Gaza, which had reached Jericho before the closure and which carried around 500 tonnes of citrus bound for Jordan, that they must return to Gaza.

There has also been 2400 tonnes of citrus fruits specially prepared for export and bound for European markets, ships were waiting in Ashdod port to transport them. However they were not allowed to be transported.

During March, 700 tonnes of strawberries were ready to be exported according to commercial contracts. As yet nothing has been transported and clearly these are perishable goods. More than 5.000.000 flowers ready for export are now in storage in Gaza and these will also perish if they are not permitted to be exported for sale very soon.

As a result of this total damage of Palestinian farmers and exporters are estimated at US\$ 2,000.000 daily. Around 2,000 workers employed in production of these goods in Gaza are now unemployed. Four factories for preparing produce for export have been closed already. 150 haulage vehicles for Gazan produce are rendered superfluous.

ii. Shortage of Basic Food Supplies

There has been a severe shortage in basic food supplies such as wheat, flour, rice, sugar, milk powder for infants and dairy products.

The shortage of flour is the most dangerous; usually 8,000 tonnes are imported from Israel monthly. Since March 4th, Israeli authorities have prohibited the import of flour.² On March 5th, Israeli authorities ordered more than 30 haulage vehicles carrying flour and waiting at Karni outlet bound for Gaza, to return with their load. This causes great losses for Palestinian importers.

Gazan bakeries have been closed since March 5th due to the shortage of flour. Subsequently the Palestinian National Authority distributed a limited amount of flour which was reserved for the soldiers to bakeries so that they could re-open. However this step is not a permanent solution and does not facilitate the bakeries to remain open for more than a few days.

iii. Shortage of Building Materials

The building sector is one of the most important in the local economy. It has been paralysed as a result of the closure as the import of basic building materials is prevented. There is a severe shortage, particularly of cement. Thousands of workers in this sector are now unemployed.

iv. Paralysis of the Industrial Sector

Local industry depends mostly on raw material imported from Israel or via Israeli ports. Many factories have had to close due to a shortage of raw materials and because of the inability to export.

This has also resulted in the unemployment of hundreds of workers employed by the factories and increasing the already high level of unemployment.

2. Continued Deterioration of Health Conditions

In the first Closure Update it was mentioned that the Gaza Strip is heavily dependent on Israeli and West Bank medical facilities. This is due to improper infrastructure in the Gaza Strip as a result of more than 27 years of Israeli occupation. Difficult medical cases from the Gaza Strip are transferred to Israel, the West bank, Egypt or Jordan. According to special arrangements between Israel and the PNA, carried out through the Joint Liaison Committee, where patients are issued the necessary permits to travel.

We have pointed out in the First Update of ... as a result of Israeli delays in issuing the permit and as a result of the unnecessary delays at the checkpoint.

On Sunday March 3rd, Ahmed Zanoun from Rafah died as a result of Israeli refusal to issue him a permit in order to travel to receive medical treatment in Israel. The following are details of his case:

Ahmed Mohammed Zanoun, born in 1964 in Rafah, married with 5 children, was suffering from a heart condition which required urgent medical treatment. On February 29th, he was transferred to Nasser hospital in Khan Younis and stayed there until 3 March where his health deteriorated severely and his doctor requested his urgent transfer for specialist treatment in hospital in Israel. Although the required arrangements were taken by the Palestinian National Authority authorities no response was given by the Israeli side of the Liaison Committee. The Israeli officer's response was that the Ministry of Defence should be approached for a permit. Although the family of the patient and many human rights organisations have tried to contact the Ministry of Defence, no response has been received. Ahmed died on March 3rd at 10:30am.

30 cancer patients cannot continue their course of chemotherapy treatment. Amongst these cases Izzat Abu Haseira, 50 years old, is suffering from leukemia. His condition is deteriorating and requires urgent specialist medical treatment in Israel. Until today he has not been given a permit for which he applied on March 3rd.

Lack of Medicine:

As a result of the total closure, there has been a shortage in medicines which are imported from Israel or abroad. The Centre's fieldworkers document the lack of Ventoline Solution, antibiotics and other drugs.

3. Prohibition of Access to the Sea of the Coast of Gaza

Since March 8th, the Israeli military has imposed a total closure on the Gazan coast, prohibiting Palestinian fishermen from fishing in severe violation of the Cairo Agreement of May 1994. It should be mentioned that this agreement which was signed between the PLO and the Government of Israel, the protocol concerning Israel's redeployment from the Gaza Strip gives Palestinians freedom to the sea....

There are 800 fishing boats. According to the Agreement each must be licensed by the coordinating Palestinian-Israeli authorities. 4,000 are employed in the fisheries sector in Gaza. This sector contributes to the local economy by US\$ 3,000,000 annually.

4. Continued Deprivation of the Right to Education

The Israeli authorities are still depriving access to around 500 Gazan students to their educational institutions in the west bank.

Recently Israeli authorities demanded that the Palestinian National Authority ensure that all Gazan students at Birzeit university in the West Bank, stay away from the university as the area is not under Palestinian autonomy and that they must stay in Ramallah. This deprives these students, who have the requisite permits from their education.

5. Continued Restrictions on Freedom of Movement for Palestinians

Palestinians are still prevented from movement between areas under Palestinian jurisdiction in the West bank and Gaza. In addition to what was mentioned in Update No.1, Israeli authorities have cancelled all permits categorised as VIP. This means that senior Palestinian government officials cannot conduct work which requires their movement between the autonomous areas.

On March 7th, Israeli authorities allowed elected members of the Palestinian jurisdiction in the West Bank and Gaza. In addition to what was mentioned in Update number 1, Israeli authorities have cancelled all permits categorized as VIP. This means that senior Palestinian government officials cannot conduct work which requires their movement between the autonomous areas.

On March 7th, Israeli authorities allowed elected members of the Palestinian Council from the West Bank to come to Gaza to participate in the First session of the Council, according to special arrangements, the process of which was humiliating and unacceptable for elected members of a government body. The permits they were granted were only for one day. However, there is no guarantee that the members will be able to move freely in the future. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights calls for the granting of a special status for these members to enable them to carry out their work freely.

6. Restrictions on the Movement of Foreign Nationals

Usually foreign nationals are excluded from any measures imposed by Israeli authorities against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. However, the current closure imposes restrictions upon the movement in and out of the Gaza Strip by foreign nationals. Only diplomats and journalists are allowed to cross the border.

Many foreign nationals are now enclosed in Gaza and cannot leave. Others are stuck in Israel and are prevented from coming into Gaza.

7. Israeli Provocations Inside Gaza

The total closure of the Gaza Strip is accompanied by an extensive presence of Israeli occupying military forces on the roads near the settlements. Israeli soldiers are positioned at checkpoints inside the Gaza Strip. They behave provocatively to the Palestinian citizens, obstructing their movements between the north and the south.

Since March 3rd, soldiers on the checkpoint near Gush Khatif are stopping Palestinians in cars, searching them and delaying them sometimes for hours. On 4th march, they stopped a Palestinian from Khan Younis, subjected him to a body search and made him stand with his hands in the air for 30 minutes. Then they exploded a sound bomb very near to him in order to terrify him. Then they released him.

On 27th February, the Israeli soldiers, near Kfar Darom deliberately fired upon 2 Palestinians, hitting one of them in the chest.

CONCLUSION

Israel continues to impose a collective punishment against the Palestinian people, which constitutes a severe violation of international principles. Total closure remains in place on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; during the last week it took on additional facets when the closure was also imposed on access to the sea; foreign nationals.

Palestinian economic and social suffering is increasing as a result of great losses in total economic sectors; the rise in unemployment both as a result of the closure of local factories and because Palestinian workers cannot go to work in Israel.

Basic food supplies are not available, including flour and dairy products. Many medicines are not available and many patients are denied access to proper medical treatment in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

These developments are evident to the whole world and the international community has stood by passively allowing this treatment of the Palestinian people without intervening. However the fact that Israel is not ready to accept or to recognise is that it bears the first and last responsibility for what is happening in the region. Israeli occupation remains the basic obstacles to stability, order and peace in the region.

See the annex of this report which documents the dates of the total closure imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israeli authorities between September 1993 and March 1996.

Since 29th February and 3rd march the Israeli authorities have allowed only very limited amounts of flour to be imported to Gaza.