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CLOSURE UPDATE NO. 21

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

For the 55 consecutive day, Israeli has imposed a closure on the Occupied West bank and Gaza Strip. While Israel announced limited easing measures, the benefit of these has been marginal. Palestinian continue to endure the severe consequences of closure; an apparent fall in living standards brought on by a worsening economic situation, caused by the loss of income.

The most recent closure follows this slight easing. On 4 September absolute closure was re-imposed following a suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem. Despite the identities of the suicide bombers being undiscovered and that no Palestinian groups have claimed responsibility, closure was imposed on the West bank and Gaza Strip.

Consequently, an almost complete ban on movement of persons and goods outside the Gaza Strip exists at this moment.

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights continues to monitor the closure and its devastating impact on life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and particularly in the Gaza Strip. This update covers events up until Thursday 21 September 1997.

In particular, this report looks at the free movement, the closure of Erez border crossing, the closure of Qarni border, the depression in the construction industry brought on by closure, and the deterioration of Gaza workers living conditions

Report on free movement

The Israeli closure has prohibited Palestinians from Gaza, travel to and transit through Israel. The fieldwork unit of Palestinian Centre found that Palestinians were trapped in Gaza and the West Bank, and have been refused permission by Israeli authorities to return to their homes. This information is based on reports from the PNA Ministry of the Interior and Civil Affairs.

West Bank Palestinians forced back to Gaza

Although, on 19 August, 130 West Bank Palestinians were granted Israeli permits to return to their homes, having been trapped in Gaza since the closure of 30 July. Four others were denied permission and were forced to remain in Gaza.

A second group were permitted to return to the West Bank on 4 September. 81 West Bank Palestinians arrived at Erez checkpoint only to be subjected to three hours of security checks, (12.00 hours - 15.00 hours). When they were permitted to leave, they were a few miles into their journey home when Israeli forces stopped their vehicles en route to the West Bank and forced them to return to Gaza. The bombs had been exploded in Jerusalem, and rather than permit the families to continue, they wanted to ensure that the consequences of the closure would be felt.

As of 17 September, 103 Palestinians are registered with the PNA Ministry of the Interior as requesting permission from the Israelis to return home.

Gazans trapped in the West Bank

Similarly, Palestinians from Gaza are trapped in the West Bank. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs in Jericho, there are some 44 persons who wish to return home. The office reported their case to the Israeli side in the liaison committee but as yet the Israelis have not granted authorisation to return to Gaza.

Gazans unable to travel abroad

The Israelis cancelled pre-issued permits to travel to Ben Gurion airport to travel abroad. 96 people were scheduled to travel between 4 and 11 September but whose permits had been administratively cancelled. After 14 September Israeli authorities began to allow Palestinians from Gaza to travel to the airport.

The route through Jordan was also closed to Palestinians. Israeli authorities denied permits for anyone wishing to travel across Israel for travel to Jordan, even to travel to the airport there.

Palestinians in Gaza have no limited means of travelling abroad, and import and export shipments of goods are similarly effected. The Government of Israel has refused permission for the Palestinians to use the airport and wishes to obstruct use and the completion of the seaport. It appears that Israel is determined to subjugate Gaza Strip and the Occupied Territories to the Israeli Government's will.

A further example that highlights the mockery of justice in Israel is that between 4 and 15 September Palestinians were denied access to Israeli courts. Seven permits were issued for these people to travel to present their cases. Therefore, not even complaints can be made on the consequence when closure is being enforced.

Closure of Erez Checkpoint

On 5 September early in the morning, Israeli authorities closed the crossing and stopped all movement of goods through this checkpoint. By 8 September basic humanitarian supplies were permitted to enter. Some 35 vehicles carrying Israeli flour and animal feed were permitted to cross at this military checkpoint, using the "convoy system". This is where Palestinians vehicles travel

in convoy under Israeli guard to their collection points in Israel and back to the destinations in Gaza. By 17 September the figure for the transportation of goods had increased to 120 vehicles.

During the previous easing of the closure after 3 August 1997 up to a maximum of 250 vehicles a day travelled through the Erez checkpoint to Gaza. This was in addition to another 50 vehicles travelling to and from Erez Industrial Zone.

The closure easing measures only permit a certain degree of sustainability within the Gaza Strip. The absolute closure ends this immediately and the impact on economic activity, on stocks of products, including essential items can be diminished very quickly. At the same time as incomes fall, prices also escalate rapidly, causing greater hardship for the population. Some aspects of this are examined below.

The movement of vehicles, that in any case are subjected to security clearance and on-the-spot security checks, is essential to providing an economic and social environment for Palestinians and others, such as person engaged in business. It is apparent that the aim of stopping all movement of goods is intended to increase the dependency of Palestinians on Israel and to permit Israel to control the Gaza Strip and the rest of the Occupied Territories.

Closure of Qarni

On the afternoon of 4 September Israeli military authorities closed the Qarni crossing loading area to all vehicles, Israeli and Palestinian. Vehicles yet to unload were obliged to leave the loading bays, and return with their goods.

Later the Palestinian Authority at the crossing was informed formally that Qarni was closed to all traffic of goods for Gaza.

On 10 September, basic food stuffs were permitted entry into the Qarni crossing loading areas, these goods were bound for Gaza. Later, a limited number of goods were permitted entry for export. Commonly 250 loads travel through Qarni crossing.

The majority of the Palestinians workers employed at Qarni have been recruited as part of job creation scheme. Only 100 workers are required at the crossing but a part-time shift is in place that permits 500 workers to be employed. All 500 workers are laid off during periods of absolute closure.

Stagnation of the construction sector

The closure has left the Gaza Strip in certain industries. The construction industry is particularly badly affected because of its reliance on building materials. There are factories that are based in the Gaza Strip that can produce these building materials but they in turn rely on obtaining cement and other products from outside.

The fieldwork team reported from the consequences of the closure on factory producing building materials. The Palestine Building Company based in the Gaza Strip is a factory with a capital of

\$1,000,000 it produces bricks, tiles and other building materials, including road paving. The factory is designed to work 24 hours a day and can produce around 20% of demand in the Gaza market. As a result of the closure the company is facing severe financial problems. Below are some examples of the effects of the closure on that factory:

1. The factory does not work for an average of 25% of days annually due to the closure. Although the factory can work for additional two days using existing stocks, it has to stop work thereafter. From 1 - 25 August and 7 - 15 September 1997, the work was stopped at the factory because of a shortage of cement.
2. Replacing faulty equipment and ensuring maintenance of existing equipment is also problematic, as parts have to travel from Spain. Although orders are sent out the machine parts are held at the airport for weeks on end. From 26 June 1996 - 29 July 1996 work was stopped at the factory because a piston (an essential part of the machinery for pressing tiles and bricks) was held at Ben Gurion Airport. Between 15 September - 19 October 1996 the work of the factory was again stopped because a computer programme that controlled the work of the machinery being held at Ben Gurion airport. In another incident work stopped for three weeks in March 1997 the box in which a machine part was imported had the address "Gaza, PNA". Israeli authorities refused to allow the box through until the address was changed on the box from "PNA" to "Israel".
3. The quality of the factory's products are also affected by the closure. Orders for gravel and other raw materials are made by telephone. Sometimes orders arrive in Gaza that fail to meet standards of quality specified. The costs and inconvenience of transport arrangements force the company to make do with these lower quality raw materials. Consequently lower quality products are produced that do not meet international standards, denying the possibility of producing products for export and filling the Gaza market with low quality building materials.
4. Transportation and closure has had a direct effect on prices. Raw materials now cost a great deal more than two years ago.

	Good Gravel	Very Good Gravel
1995	25 shekel/ton	35
1997	50	75

Also the price of cement jumped from 300 shekel to 500 shekels per ton.

The combined effect of the closure has caused a reduction in the workforce and output of the factory. The number of workers dropped from 20 in 1995 to 10 in 1997, as the factory moved from three shifts of eight hours to two shifts of eight hours. Those that were remained in employment also faced a reduction in their salaries.

Deterioration of worker's conditions

Since the closure of 30 July Gaza workers are not permitted to return to their workplaces in Israel or elsewhere. From 2 September, this was eased slightly permitting workers of over 35 years of age to travel to work: 2,300 were permitted to travel on 2 September, 5,200 on 3 September, 4 September 7,300.

On 5 September, however, no workers were permitted to return to work. Even the 2,500 workers of Erez Industrial were denied access from 4 - 7 September.

The Israeli Government often seeks mislead reporters by announcing that workers are being granted access even when this has not occurred, or exaggerates figures of movement of worker. For example, misleading figures announced and reported by the BBC today, 21 September 1997, of an increase of 4,000 workers on the supposed 60,000 travelling in from Gaza and the West Bank. Present reports from fieldworkers have shown that the closure remains rigidly in place and that no workers are travelling into Israel from Gaza.

Conclusion

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights expresses its deep concern about the continued imposition of closure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and for the suffering caused by the closure to Palestinians.

The closure appears to be nothing more than a measure of collective punishment prohibited by international law, and in particular, by the Fourth Geneva Convention. The closure is a systematic and intentional violation by the Government of Israel of the human rights of the Palestinian people, employed under the pretence of security. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights calls on the international community to pressure the Government of Israel to stop its illegal policy of collective punishment of closure. Closure is particularly pernicious when there is no evidence that the bomb attacks were carried out by Palestinian within the Occupied Territories or evidence to support that closure provides any additional security advantage.

The Palestinian Centre further calls on the United States to deal with the Palestinians and Palestine in an honest and even handed way and to stop adopting the position of the Government of Israel. A position that violates international law by demanding that the PNA to launch massive waves of arrests against Palestinian citizens who support Islamic movements and also with demands of taking illegal measures of civil society organisations with Islamic affiliation and uses the closure as a means of collective punishment to achieve its demands.

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