

CLOSURE UPDATE

Reported by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights on the closure imposed on Gaza Strip by Israel

Following the fourth bomb in Tel Aviv on 4 March 1996 the borders of the Gaza Strip have been totally sealed off and the area isolated from the outside world. No person or vehicle can enter or leave.

On 25 February 1996 Israel imposed a total closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip following 2 suicide bombings by Hamas in Israel. The total closure did not prevent 2 more bomb attacks in Israel on 3rd and 4th of March. The policy of total closure contradicts accepted international human rights standards and constitutes the collective punishment of the 2 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, causing a deterioration in their already impoverished living conditions. Palestinian and Israeli reports suggest that the closure will last at least until the Israeli elections in late May 1996.

Israel claims that total closure of her borders with the West Bank and Gaza Strip is a necessary security measure. It locks Palestinians inside these two areas, severely restricting freedom of movement and the import of basic foods and amenities. The effects are devastating for the livelihood of thousands of families in Gaza. Yet it is clear that closures are not effective in preventing suicide bomb attacks inside Israel.

The policy of total closure undermines the position of the Palestinian Authority: since its foundation in May 1994 Israel has imposed over 300 days of total closure on the Gaza Strip. For the remaining time the norm was a limited closure rather than an open border.

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 closures on the lives of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

A. ECONOMIC SITUATION WORSENS AS A RESULT OF CLOSURE

The economy of the Gaza Strip is already in crisis. The total closure has caused a paralysis in all economic sectors in Gaza. Official Palestinian reports estimate daily economic losses of \$ 6 million. The Gazan economy is very much dependent upon Israel: Gaza depends heavily on the ability of Palestinians to work in Israel; Gazan produce is exported to markets in Israel, or abroad via Israel; the closure demonstrates

the control Israel has over Gazan commercial transactions with other Palestinian autonomous areas in the West Bank.

The Karni Outlet, at the border between Israel and Gaza Strip, was designed for the purpose of commercial transactions between Israel and Gaza. Israel made assurances that it would remain open for such purposes in the event of closures.

The Outlet was completely closed between 25th and 29th February; transactions were severely curtailed thereafter; in the wake of the latest bomb in Israel on 4 March the Outlet is once again completely sealed, preventing the entry of even the most basic provisions into Gaza.

The worsening economic situation is calamitous in human rights terms. The most fundamental rights are based on a stable and adequate economy. The closures diminish any human rights benefit Palestinians can gain from the peace agreements. Their right to self-determination is curtailed, whilst the continued occupation denies economic and social rights.

I. Palestinian workers denied access to Israel

The economy of Gaza relies upon thousands of Gazan workers travelling into Israel every morning. Since the transfer of autonomy the number of workers permitted into Israel has been reduced dramatically.

The process of gaining entry for work in Israel is complicated, prolonged and the majority of applications are turned down without reason; work permits are only issued to married workers over the age 30 years. Many valid permits have been confiscated by Israeli soldiers; in the last 3 months Israeli soldiers have taken 340 work permits at Israeli checkpoints.

When a closure is imposed, all permits are cancelled, and Palestinians must re-apply for them when the closure is lifted.

The closures and the resultant inability of Gazans to reach their work-places in Israel has resulted in a dramatic rise in unemployment in Gaza. Around 90,000 (57%) of the total workforce is unemployed. Even when no closure is imposed only 13,000 workers can travel to Israel each day.

The Palestinian Authority Ministry of Labour estimates that the revenue lost because workers cannot travel to Israel is between \$750,000 and \$900,000 daily. This translates into a cost to the Gazan economy equivalent to the total aid to the Palestinian Authority from donor countries.

The following table details the number of workers who have been allowed entry to Israel each month between the period January 1995 to February 1996:

MONTH	NUMBER OF WORKERS	REMARKS
Jan 95	22,949	Closure imposed on Gaza Strip on 22nd January

Feb 95	9,598	Until 19th February all workers were prevented from entering Israel. Thereafter numbers workers allowed entry were only gradually increased.
Mar 95	13,244	Total closure imposed between 21st and 23rd March.
April 95	17,088	Total closure between 21st and 23rd April
May 95	17,161	Total closure between 3rd and 7th May.
June 95	17,603	
July 95	19,117	Total closure between 24th and 29th July.
August 95	19,163	Number of workers allowed into Israel was reduced to 0 as a result of an Israeli order to renew magnetic cards (required for each Gazan in order to enter Israel to work) between 10th and 23rd.
September 95	16,800	Total closure imposed between 20th and 30th.
October 95	10,649	This number includes only those workers who crossed to Israel after 17th October.
November 95	16,050	
December 95	16,564	
January 96	21,753	
February 96	22,447	Total closure imposed between 13th and 29th February

Source: Palestinian Authority Ministry of Labour

ii. **Commercial transactions cease under the closure**

The total closure has led to a cessation in all commercial activity which is with or via Israel. Sources in Gaza already identify shortages in basic provisions such as wheat and dairy goods, and a resultant drastic increase in prices. There is a paralysis in construction activity due to a severe shortage of building materials.

80% of Gazan Commercial activity is conducted with Israeli, and 20% with the West Bank and international markets. The sealing of the Karni Outlet commercially isolates the Gaza Strip.

Damage has been greater to the agricultural sector, with high losses reported by farmers. The Minister of Agriculture estimates that agricultural losses of \$2 million during the first 4 days of the closure. The Marketing Department of the Ministry reported, for example, estimated losses in the rose sector of the flower industry alone at \$ 1 million.

Consignments of agricultural produce regularly rot while waiting in trucks at Karni for permission to enter Israel.

iii Vehicle transportation severely curtailed

On 21st March 1995 Israel issued a military order which prevented all Palestinian vehicles, including commercial vehicles, from entering Israel from the Gaza Strip, resulting in an estimated loss of \$600,000 daily. Israel has since allowed a limited number of vehicles to cross the borders, but only in groups and only under military escort.

Between 25th and 28th February, following the recent closure, no Palestinian vehicle from Gaza has been allowed to pass; on the 29th only 38 commercial vehicles (carrying vegetables and flowers from Gaza to Israeli and West Bank markets) were allowed through; on March 1st 53 vehicles were allowed; on 2nd March 8 vehicles were allowed.

B. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND SAFE PASSAGE DENIED

The total closure denies Palestinians at all levels freedom of movement between Palestinian autonomous areas in West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Palestinian-Israeli peace agreements provide special arrangements have been implemented, denying the right to free movement between these areas.

Senior Palestinian Authority officials, including Ministers and members of the elected council have their freedom of movement restricted. On establishment of the Palestinian Authority its officials were issued with special "VIP" permits by Israel. 4 days after the closure had been imposed only some "VIPS" were allowed to move between West Bank and Gaza Strip. Since the third bomb they have again been totally denied passage. This restricts the extent of Palestinian Authority cabinet activity at this vital time.

C. CLOSURE CAUSES GRAVE DETERIORATION IN HEALTH SITUATION

27 years of Israeli occupation have left the Gaza Strip with a dearth of health facilities and infrastructure. Gazans cannot be guaranteed adequate medical treatment and are forced to seek medical treatment in hospitals in Israel, the West Bank or abroad. Since the total closure on 25th February Israeli authorities have denied all but 6 permits for patients to travel outside Gaza for medical treatment; despite the fact that Israel had previously agreed to exclude such cases from any closure. This measure jeopardises the lives of many Palestinians who struggle to live without appropriate medical treatment.

30 cancer patients were scheduled to receive chemotherapy in Israel and Jerusalem; such treatment is not available in Gaza. It is a spurious argument that critically ill patients such as these are a security threat to Israel.

In order to travel for medical reasons Palestinians must undergo complicated and prolonged procedures imposed