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CLOSURE UPDATE NO.7

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

This is the seventh in a series of updates published by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, documenting the effects of the ongoing closure imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip.

The closure of the Occupied Territories, including those areas under Palestinian jurisdiction, imposed on 25th February, has now been in place for 53 consecutive days. This systematic policy of closure constitutes the collective punishment of 2.5 million¹ Palestinian people who are suffering severely under the strictest closure ever imposed since the beginning of the Israeli occupation in 1967.

Despite announcements by Israel that the closure would be eased, there has been little alleviation, and in fact a worsening of living conditions for the Palestinian people. This Update concentrates on the following effects of the closure: Palestinian Members of the Legislative Council are subjected to provocative and humiliating restrictions on their freedom of movement; the health situation continues to be aggravated by Israeli restrictions and obstacles; many construction projects have been forced to be halted; Palestinian workers are still restricted from returning to their places of work in Israel; Israeli occupying forces continue to perpetrate violations inside the Gaza Strip.

However, other effects of the closure, documented in our previous Updates, remain: bans on Gazan exports on all production sectors except agriculture are still in place;² the importation of raw materials necessary for industry and construction is still restricted, resulting in shortages and stagnation in this sector; the Gazan economy is in severe recession, unemployment remains very high and the living conditions for

¹ Source: Palestinian Centre for Statistics.

² The potential benefits of the easing of the restrictions on agricultural exports from Gaza are negated by the fact that new security arrangements imposed by Israel at the borders result in costly damage to produce and long delays.

Gazans continue to deteriorate. Restrictions on the freedom of movement remain: the small area of land, which is the Gaza Strip, has effectively been turned into a large prison into which 1 million Palestinians are densely packed; Gazans are denied the freedom to travel through Israeli territory, including to areas under Palestinian jurisdiction in the West Bank; over 1,200 Gazan students are prevented from travelling to their educational establishments in the West Bank, thus they are denied their fundamental right to education; since the first week of February Gazans have been prevented from visiting their relatives in Israeli prisons in Israel.

The information contained in this Update has been provided by a team of staff from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, who have monitored and documented daily, the devastating effects of the closure on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

This Update is based on an Arabic version, and where there are inconsistencies the Arabic version should be considered the original.

1. **MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SUBJECTED TO RESTRICTIVE MEASURES ON THEIR FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT**

Israeli authorities require members of the Palestinian Legislative Council to obtain permits for travel between the Gaza Strip and West Bank, which restrict their freedom to travel between these areas in order to attend Council meetings and to carry out official business. Permits are issued only for limited time periods and only for travel to and from Council meetings. In many cases Israeli authorities have delayed the issuing of permits until the last moment of the assigned dates for the meetings; and in some cases they have refused to issue permits for Council members.³

Around 4.00pm on April 11th Israeli border police stopped 7 Gazan members of the Palestinian Legislative Council,⁴ at Latroun in Israel, which is close the West Bank borders. They were returning together from a Legislative Council session held in Ramallah from 10th to 11th April. They carried with them Israeli permits which they had been issued for this journey, and which were valid for 24 hour travel between Gaza and the West Bank, for use from 9th to 12th April; they had already used these same permits to leave Gaza in order to reach Ramallah without problems. However the border police sought to prevent them from returning to Gaza on the pretext that their permits were not valid for such a journey, and insisted that the Council members

³ For example Israeli authorities denied Moawia Al Masri, a member of the Legislative Council, a permit to travel to Gaza for the First Session of the Council, held in Gaza on 21st march 1996.

⁴ Those members were Kamal Al Sharafi, Fuad Eid, Abdul Rahman Hamad, Emad Al Falouji, Mousa Al Zabout, Saadi Al Krunz, Abdul Karim Abu Salah.

return to Ramallah, threatening to arrest them unless they did so. The Council members were detained at the checkpoint for over 1 hour while checks were made, before being allowed to continue.

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights condemns Israeli harassment of Palestinian elected representatives. They should be treated with the respect which is appropriate for persons of their civil status, and they should be granted immunity and the right to move freely between areas under Palestinian jurisdiction. It is unacceptable that Israel controls their movement in this way, and that they are humiliated by Israeli security personnel. Obstructing the Council's activity like this is not consistent with the spirit of the Declaration of Principles, signed between Israel and the PLO in September 1993, Article 1 of which provides for the formation of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

2. ISRAELI MEASURES CONTINUE TO AGGRAVATE THE HEALTH SITUATION

For specialist medical treatment patients from Gaza must travel to hospitals in Israel, the West Bank or Jordan. Permits for such travel can only be obtained from Israel following rigorous administrative security checks; in addition patients and ambulances are subjected to rigorous and lengthy physical checks at the border to Israel. There has been no tangible improvement in the medical health situation in the Gaza Strip since the last update: Israel continues to restrict both the import of medical supplies to the Gaza Strip, and the transport of Gazans to hospitals outside Gaza.

i. Israel restricts Gazan patients from obtaining medical treatment outside Gaza

Israel denies many patients the necessary permits to travel outside Gaza in order to obtain proper medical treatment. Even the most urgent medical cases have been obstructed and this has resulted in fatalities.⁵

Since the announcement that the closure would be eased on April 1st, the Israeli authorities have issued permits for travel to patients who are suffering from cancer and heart disease, but permits for patients suffering from other medical problems are extremely difficult to obtain.

ii. Israel restricts the import of basic medical supplies

Israeli authorities do not allow the importation of medicine from West Bank suppliers unless deliveries are made to the Gazan checkpoints by Israeli ssvehicles driven by Jews.

⁵ See Closure Updates 1, 2 & 3 for details of deaths which have resulted from Israeli administrative and security delays.

On arrival at Karni Outlet the medical supplies must firstly be unloaded onto the ground where they are then checked. They are then transferred to Palestinian vehicles for distribution to hospitals and pharmacies in Gaza. Medical supplies are often highly perishable and fragile, and subjecting them to this process which exposes them to sunlight and heat and more handling, increases the likelihood of their damage.

The restrictions on the import of medical supplies to Gaza have resulted in a shortage in hospitals and pharmacies of basic medicines and pharmaceutical chemicals and solutions.

iii. Restrictions on the movement of Palestinian ambulances

There are only 24 ambulances in the Gaza Strip, to provide a service for 1 million Gazans. Only 5 of these have been issued with permits by the Israeli authorities to travel to hospitals in or via Israeli territory. Following the Israeli announcement that it would ease the closure, a sixth permit was issued on April 12th.

There are 43 ambulance drivers in the Gaza Strip; only 11 of whom have been issued permits to drive ambulances into Israel. Initially, Israel restricted distribution of this limited number to drivers over 40 years old. However following intensive negotiations in the Palestinian-Israeli Joint Liaison Committee, the age limit was lowered to 30 years.

Notwithstanding the serious medical condition of the patients, and possession of the required permits, ambulances leaving the Gaza Strip are subjected to stringent security measures at the border. These security measures last around 3 hours and in several cases Israeli security personnel at the border have sent ambulances back, demanding that they be changed.⁶ These security checks consist of the following:

- i. Every piece of equipment in the ambulance is checked with an explosive detecting device;
- ii. the driver is subjected to a body search;
- iii. patients are subjected to a body search and their medical documents are checked.

⁶ See details of the death of Khadija Mohammed Odwan in the first Closure Update which resulted from Israeli administrative and security delays.

3. ISRAELI PROVOCATIONS INSIDE THE GAZA STRIP

In May 1994 Israeli occupying forces in the Gaza Strip re-deployed. They did not leave Gazan territory completely, but moved out of the central and populous areas of Gaza to the borders, to Israeli settlements in Gaza Strip to bolster security around them, and to strategic points on the roads around the settlements. From these positions Israeli soldiers provoke Palestinian citizens and subject them to humiliating treatment as they pass near Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip.

Since the imposition of the closure on 25th February this has worsened; there have been numerous reports that Israeli soldiers are stopping Palestinian cars at the military checkpoints and subjecting them to lengthy security checks without explanation. There have been several reported cases of beatings carried out by Israeli soldiers. Palestinian citizens who live near settlement areas are regularly harassed in this way.

On April 5th 1996 Israeli soldiers at Kissufim crossing point, on the Eastern border of the Gaza Strip near the village of Qarara, conducted a controlled explosion on a car belonging to Dr. Faris Mahmoud Abu Moamar, who teaches at the Islamic University in Gaza City. Dr. Abu Moamar and a colleague were on their way to meet an Israeli computer expert at the border-crossing. 40 metres from the border Dr. Abu Moamar and his colleague were ordered by Israeli soldiers to get out of the car, and to stand with their hands in the air while they were interrogated. The Israeli soldiers claimed that they suspected there was a bomb in the car and that the doctor and his colleague were on their way to explode it at the border. Bomb experts were called and without checking the car, a controlled explosion was conducted, and the car was destroyed. Subsequently Dr. Abu Moamar and his colleague were both released, which suggests that the Israeli soldiers did not believe that there was a bomb in the car, and that this was deliberate and unjustified violence.

4. PALESTINIAN WORKERS ARE STILL RESTRICTED FROM RETURNING TO THEIR WORK IN ISRAEL

Before the closure 22,447⁷ Gazans had permits to work in Israel.⁸ When the closure was imposed on 25th February all work permits were cancelled. Israel announced on April 1st 1996 that there would be some easing of the closure, and that some permits would be issued to Gazans so that they could return to work in Israel. The Palestinian Authority stated on 16th April 1996 that they had received only 3,205 permits from Israel,⁹ which are valid only for Palestinian workers over the age of 45 years.¹⁰

However by 15th April only 1,990 of the workers who had been given permits had managed to cross the border into Israel. The reason for this is that workers are subjected to very stringent Israeli security regulations at the border which result in delays of 2-3 hours. Many workers have an hour's journey to their workplace once they have crossed the border, and by this time it is too late for them to start their jobs.

Israeli soldiers at the Sofa Checkpoint in South West Gaza have prevented Gazan workers from crossing the border, even though they have the required permits. For example, on 14th April Israeli soldiers prevented around 400 workers, all of whom had the required permits, from crossing into Israel without giving them any reason.

5. CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS IN GAZA HAVE BEEN HALTED

Throughout the closure Israel has been restricting the import into Gaza of basic materials necessary for construction projects such as wood, metals, cement and technical equipment; thus resulting in a severe shortage.

The Palestinian Authority Housing Ministry states that 21 projects, which were started prior to the closure, by private investors in cooperation with the Ministry, have had to be halted. These include the construction of 3,979 residential apartments and a special building for the Ministry itself. Public housing, planned for construction in the Beit Hanoun and El Awda areas in Gaza, were scheduled to have started already, but the

⁷ Source: Palestinian Authority Ministry of Labour.

⁸ The figure of 22,447 is only a small proportion of the Gazan workforce, which is over 120,000.

⁹ Thus permits have been issued for only 14% of the Gazan workers who worked in Israel prior to the closure.

¹⁰ In this age category alone around 6,000 men had permits to work in Israel before the closure was imposed on February 25th..

contractor, who is based in Amman was prevented from crossing the border into Gaza due to the closure.

CONCLUSION

The closure imposed by Israel on the Occupied Territories, including areas under Palestinian autonomy, constitutes the collective punishment of the Palestinian people, a clear violation of internationally accepted laws and principles.

The high rate of unemployment, desperate living conditions, severe poverty and sense of desperation resulting from the closure threatens the development of Palestinian civil society, and has created circumstances which endanger the whole peace process.

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights reiterates its demand for the immediate lifting of the closure. We call on foreign governments to protect the Palestinian population, and to bring an end to the Israeli Government's policy of the collective punishment of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories in order to make internal political gains before the upcoming Israeli general elections.