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CLOSURE UPDATE NO.8

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

This is the eighth 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 Israeli military closure of the Gaza Strip began on February 25th 1996 and is now in its 60th day. The closure has sealed off the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, denying movements of persons and goods, causing tremendous hardship and suffering for Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. The closure of the Occupied Territories, including those areas under Palestinian jurisdiction, constitutes the collective punishment of 2.5 million¹ Palestinian people.

The most recent information collated by the Closure Monitoring Team of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights indicates that the majority of Palestinian people are suffering as a result of the closure. The slight easing of the closure has had little significant impact on the overall conditions in the Gaza Strip, in part, because, this has been accompanied by further restrictions. For example, between 5.00pm on April 22nd and 4.00am on April 26th, all measures which Israel announced it had taken to alleviate the closure were cancelled for Israeli national holidays of Independence Day and Holocaust Memorial Day.

The following issues are discussed in this update; they highlight the effects the closure has had on life in the Gaza Strip: the majority of workers from the Gaza Strip are prevented from travelling to work, the income which they derive sustains not only their families, but forms a vital part of the economy in the Gaza Strip; fishing, another major source of income, has been restricted to a strip of sea which stretches only 12

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Source: Palestinian Bureau for Statistics.

nautical miles from the Gaza coast; over 1,200 Gazan students are prevented from travelling to their schools and universities in the West Bank, denying them their basic right to education and disrupting their studies for 1996; Gazans are severely restricted in their rights to visit their relatives in Israeli prisons; Israeli measures have caused a deterioration in health and health provision in Gaza, and Israeli occupying forces stationed inside the Gaza Strip continue to perpetrate acts of violence against Palestinians.

The information contained in this Update has been prepared 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 the Arabic version, and where there are inconsistencies the Arabic version should be considered the original.

1. **CONTINUED RESTRICTIONS ON THE FLOW OF GOODS TO AND FROM THE GAZA STRIP: THE CASE OF SOFA AND KARNI CROSSINGS²**

Israel has maintained restrictions on the movement of goods and raw materials into the Gaza Strip. At the Sofa border crossing between Gaza and Israel, only limited amounts of raw materials for construction are permitted entry to the Gaza Strip. Israel only allows a small number of vehicles to enter Gaza, and imposes obstacles on their entrance which cause long delays at border crossings. These hindrances have resulted in shortages in materials, high economic losses and widespread unemployment, in an economy which before the closure already had unemployment estimated at 60%.

Additionally, receipts which go directly to the Palestinian Authority, such as taxes and duties, have fallen dramatically. A Palestinian Authority official responsible for customs and excise at the Sofa Crossing stated that income on goods entering Gaza is 75% less than it was at this period in 1995. A huge deficit has been estimated for the Palestinian Authority for 1996, this shortfall will not be made up by donations from international donors.

² Sofa Crossing has the most appropriate facilities for the import/export of construction materials, and it is mostly these types of goods which go through this crossing; whereas Karni has the most appropriate facilities for agricultural and other produce, and it is mostly such goods which go through this crossing.

i. The restrictions at Sofa Border Crossing

Before the closure on February 25th each Palestinian driver would transport 5-7 loads daily from Sofa; this contrasts significantly with the situation now where a driver can wait for up to three days to transport just one load.

The driver of a lorry waiting at Sofa said that he had waited from 7.00am on Friday April 19th to midday April 21st to transport only one load of gravel to Gaza from an Israeli delivery at the border.

The fieldworker from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, responsible for monitoring the movement of goods at Sofa crossing, stated that on April 21st more than 50 Palestinian lorries had waited from early morning to 2.00pm before they could take their first and only load that day from the border. This was because Israeli military refused to allow Israeli lorries to enter the zone in which transfers of the material from Israeli to Palestinian vehicles take place.

ii. Karni Border Crossing

The movement of goods across Karni Border Crossing is also obstructed by Israeli military which employ methods to frustrate the already limited import of vital goods which Israel permits. Before the closure, loading and unloading of lorries and goods at Karni began at 7.30am and finished at 4.00pm, within which time around 600 lorries would be loaded with goods from Israel. Since the closure, although work begins at 7.00am and continues until 10.00pm, only 100 to 150 loads leave Karni daily. These delays are, in part, due to restrictions on the amount of goods which are permitted by Israel to be imported to Gaza, but, are also due to delays caused by “security measures” imposed by Israel.³

2. WORK ON THE GAZA AIRSTRIP PROJECT DELAYED

Restrictions on the import of construction materials to Gaza have resulted in delays to the scheduled completion of the first stage of construction of the airstrip for Gaza.⁴

The coordinator of the Gaza airstrip project stated that completion of the first stage of the project was scheduled for mid-May 1996, and that the closure has delayed this until mid-July 1996. The project is dependent upon imported construction materials from Israel, such as gravel, metal construction components and cement components. The coordinator estimates that daily requirements of cement components for the

³ See Closure Updates 3 & 5.

⁴ Article VII(3) of Annex 1 of the Cairo Agreement, signed between Israel and the PLO in September 1994, provides for the immediate establishing of an airstrip.

project are about 4,000 tonnes, but he estimated that only 40% of the required materials for the project is currently being imported, and this is for use in construction for the whole of the Gaza Strip. The field research of the Palestinian Centre put the level of imports of cement components at only 13,615 tonnes between April 14th and April 20th. The company responsible for the construction has applied to the Palestinian side of the Joint Liaison Committee (of Israel and the Palestinian Authority) in order to obtain permission to import the necessary materials for the project from Egypt; no decision has yet been made on this application.

The airstrip project began on October 18th 1995 but was initially obstructed by the Israeli authorities who claimed that part of the land on which it was being constructed was within a Yellow Area.⁵ The Palestinian and Israeli sides of the Joint Liaison Committee started to negotiate a compromise but these negotiations were frozen upon the imposition of the closure on February 25th.

3. ISRAELI MEASURES CONTINUE TO AGGRAVATE THE HEALTH SITUATION IN GAZA

Gazan patients must travel to hospitals outside Gaza for specialist medical treatment, as facilities and services are not currently available within the Gaza Strip. Permits for such travel are treated like any other application for travel: applications are considered by the Israeli Civil Administration (a division of the Israeli military occupying forces), which subjects these to detailed administrative security checks. Even when permission is granted, patients and ambulances are subjected to rigorous and lengthy physical checks at the border to Israel. Delays caused by these procedures have resulted in fatalities.⁶

Between April 14th and April 20th, 133 applications for permits to travel to hospitals in Israel were submitted, only 40 of which were granted. Amongst those rejected were urgent medical cases and this has resulted in fatalities:

Around 10.30pm on April 19th Khadra Mohammad Al Arabeed, 54 years old and resident of Sha'ati Refugee Camp, was in a very critical state of health at Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. She was suffering from heart disease caused by blocked arteries, and required urgent specialist medical treatment which could not be found inside Gaza, but which was available at the Telha Shomair

⁵ Article IV(4) of Annex 1 of the Cairo Agreement defines these areas as being under Palestinian Authority civil responsibility and Israeli security responsibility.

⁶ See Closure Updates 1, 2 & 3 for details of deaths which have resulted from Israeli administrative and security delays.

Hospital in Israel. The Palestinian doctor at Shifa contacted Telha Hospital, where doctors were willing to accept the patient immediately for treatment. The Palestinian side of the Joint Liaison Committee immediately contacted the Israeli side, seeking to arrange immediate permission for her travel. Despite informing them of the urgency of the case, no response was received from the Israeli side. Mrs. Al Arabeed died in Shifa Hospital two hours later.

4. GAZANS RESTRICTED FROM VISITING RELATIVES IN ISRAELI PRISONS

Since early February 1996, the Israeli occupying authorities have withheld permission from Palestinians who wish to visit their relatives detained in prisons inside Israel. On April 19th, for the first time since the closure, Palestinians from southern Gaza were granted permission to visit relatives detained in Israeli prisons. However visits were subject to the following new conditions:

- i. Male visitors must be 50 years old and over⁷;
- ii. These visits are further restricted to detainees held in Ashkelon, Ketziot and Nafhar Prisons.

Despite the announcement of visiting permission, the recent tightening of the closure for the Israeli national holidays has meant that so far only one visit has been allowed and this was to Ashkelon Prison.

All prison visits have to be arranged through the offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The process of arranging family visits is complicated, and the ICRC, in the role provided to it under the Geneva Conventions, gives all assistance in administering and organising the visits:

- i. Palestinians wishing to visit relatives held in detention must complete a form which they then submit to the Palestinian Red Crescent office closest to their home.
- ii. These applications are then transferred to the ICRC.
- iii. A delegate of the ICRC submits the application to the Israeli Civil Administration at Erez Checkpoint for consideration.
- iv. Visiting permits for male visitors are only granted by the Israeli Civil Administration to men who hold valid magnetic cards, which are only issued by the Israeli authorities after detailed security checks.

⁷ Prior to the imposing of this closure on February 25th, men of 35 years or over were permitted to visit relatives in detention in Israel.

- v. On April 19th permission was further restricted by the requirement that male visitors must be over 50 years of age, and additional security checks are carried out before permission is granted to males.⁸
- vi. Once Palestinians are granted permission to visit detained relatives, they are collected in special buses, supplied and paid for by the ICRC, which transport them to the Israel Military Checkpoint where they cross into Israel. They are required to leave the bus whereupon they and the bus are subjected to security checks by Israeli soldiers.
- vii. If the bus contains males, Israeli military vehicles escort the bus from the border crossing to the prison and back

5. ISRAELI MEASURES STILL PREVENT GAZAN WORKERS FROM RETURNING TO WORK IN ISRAEL

On April 1st 1996 Israel announced that it would allow some Palestinian workers from Gaza to return to work in Israel. However, Israel has supplied only a very limited number of work permits, while at the same time imposing security procedures and other obstacles, which impede the ability of even this small number of workers to cross the border.⁹

By April 20th 1996, the Palestinian Ministry of Labour received 6,264 work-permits from the Israeli Civil Administration, (Israel security requirements restrict permits to workers of 40 years of age and over). On Sunday April 21st only 4,710 workers were permitted to enter Israel to work. Many of these workers arrived at the border in the morning with the requisite permits and magnetic cards, but were not permitted to enter Israel; Israeli security forces claimed that this was because there were mistakes on their work permits or on their magnetic cards.

Workers returning to work in Israel face further obstacles. Israel announced on April 1st that some Gazan workers who formerly worked in the agricultural sector in southern Israel could return to work there.¹⁰ In fact very few workers from this sector have been able to return to work even though they possess the required Israeli permits.

Following the imposition of the closure on February 25th, the Sofa Checkpoint, the main crossing point used by workers in this sector, was closed completely to workers.

It was not re-opened even following the announcement that these workers would be able to return to work¹¹. Israeli authorities are requiring workers in this sector to enter

⁸ Visiting rights for male visitors of 35 years and over were re-instated on September 13th 1995, ending a 9 month ban on all male visitors.

⁹ See Closure Update No.6 pp. 2 and 3, and No.7 p. 5.

¹⁰ See Closure Update No.6 p.2.

¹¹ This crossing point is more convenient as it is in the south of Gaza very close to places of work in the agricultural sector in south Israel. Other crossing points for workers, such as Erez, are in the north of Gaza.

Israel via Erez Checkpoint. This creates great obstacles for workers as their employers are refusing to arrange transport for them from Erez Checkpoint which is some 80 kilometres away from their places of work.

From 5.00pm on 22 April until 4.00am to 26 April 1996 the Gaza Strip was completely sealed by Israeli occupying forces for the Israeli national holidays. No Gazan was permitted to enter Israel to work during this time.

6. ISRAELI OCCUPYING FORCES CONTINUE TO HARASS GAZANS INSIDE THE GAZA STRIP

The Cairo Agreement, signed between Israel and the PLO on May 4th 1994, determined the areas of land over which the Palestinian Authority would have jurisdiction, and those over which Israel would have jurisdiction. This notwithstanding, Israeli security forces have subsequently physically violated demarcation lines, impinging on areas under Palestinian jurisdiction.¹²

At 10.45pm on April 18th 1996 Israeli soldiers, based at the checkpoint near Kfar Darom Settlement in central Gaza, shot at a convoy of 6 Palestinian trucks belonging to the Palestinian Supplies Administration Department.

These trucks were carrying flour and sugar from Egypt to Gaza City, and were accompanied by Colonel Mussa Abu Dayya, Director of Security for the Department. Colonel Abu Dayya had ordered the trucks to stop before reaching the southern military checkpoint by Kfar Darom Settlement. He approached an Israeli officer of the Joint Patrol¹³ by foot and informed him that all but one of the trucks had passengers accompanying the driver.¹⁴ The Israeli officer assured Colonel Abu Dayya that the convoy would be allowed to pass, as long as the Colonel accompanied the convoy.

The convoy was instructed to continue and Colonel Abu Dayya travelled at the rear in his own vehicle. When the trucks reached the bridge linking two parts of the Kfar Darom Settlement, Israeli soldiers fired on the truck which did not have the required passenger. The driver of the truck was not killed, but the truck and the goods it carried were severely damaged. The convoy was halted while the Israeli army checked the trucks; they were only allowed to continue following intervention from the Joint Patrol.

¹² Israeli occupying forces remain within Gaza Strip; re-deployment following the signing of the Cairo Agreement, only resulted in them moving away from populous areas to strategic points around Israeli settlements.

¹³ Joint patrols of Palestinian and Israeli forces operate on lateral roads around Israeli settlements, in accordance with Article II (3) and Article IV(7) of Annex I of the Cairo Agreement.

¹⁴ It is an Israeli security requirement that all Palestinian cars on the main route between Rafah and Gaza must have at least 1 passenger accompanying the driver.

Israeli soldiers continue to harass Palestinians at military checkpoints based near the Mawasi area, in western Khan Younis, inside a Yellow Area.¹⁵ Palestinians are forced to stop 400 metres before each checkpoint, where they, their car and belongings may be subjected to lengthy and thorough searches, these have been known to take up to an hour. Also, restrictions are placed on the vehicles permitted to pass the checkpoint, and the goods which can be transported in these vehicles. For example, gas canisters used for cookers and similar gas appliances, and building and construction materials are not permitted to be transported through these checkpoints.

CONCLUSION

The closure has now been imposed on the Occupied Territories for 60 consecutive days. The closure-easing measures which Israel claims it has implemented have been minor and have done little to alleviate the daily suffering of the Palestinian people.

The Israeli policy of collective punishment is having severe and destructive effects on the Palestinian people. The Palestinian Centre urges the following:

- i. The closure should be lifted immediately and unconditionally.
- ii. The repeated abuses of international accepted human rights standards, perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinian people must end.
- iii. The Israeli government must fulfill its obligations under the peace agreements that it signed.

Until this is done peace and stability in the region remains under threat.

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See note 5 supra.