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**CLOSURE UPDATE NO. 12**

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

This is the twelfth update published by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights documenting the effects of the ongoing closure imposed by Israeli occupying forces on the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military closure of the Gaza Strip began on February 25th and is now in its 137th consecutive day.

**The Background to the Closure**

Throughout the military occupation of the Gaza Strip, West Bank and Jerusalem, Israel has maintained a stranglehold over Palestinian life. The sealing of borders and the restrictions on movement of persons and goods have been a policy of the occupying Israeli military authorities, and constitutes the collective punishment of the 2.5 million Palestinian people who inhabit these areas and is forbidden under international law. The closure imposed since February 25th has been the strictest ever since the occupation began in 1967. It has virtually closed off the Occupied Territories from the outside world, causing immense suffering and hardship for Palestinians. Israel has claimed that the closure is necessary to ensure its security; but, as the subsequent bomb attacks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv prove, and as experts argue, the closure is not effective for this purpose.

Most recent information collected by the Closure Monitoring Team of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights shows that the closure continues to severely disrupt life in the Gaza Strip: the majority of workers from the Gaza Strip are prevented from travelling to work in Israel; the income 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 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 relatives in Israeli prisons; Commercial transactions to and from the Gaza Strip are severely restricted; Israeli measures have caused a deterioration in the health situation in Gaza and restricts the provision of medical supplies to Gaza; Israeli occupying forces stationed inside the Gaza Strip continue to perpetrate acts of violence against Palestinians.

During the period of the closure the Israeli government has introduced a number of measures that it claims are to ease the closure, describing them as humanitarian in nature. However, the benefit of these has been diminished by the imposition of stringent security measures.

The closure has been adopted as an instrument of policy by the Government of Israel that aims at the collective punishment of the Palestinian people. Such methods of collective punishment, which were frequently employed throughout the Israeli occupation, are a violation of international humanitarian law.

### **Preventing food aid to Palestinians in areas of the Palestinian Authority**

Israeli authorities continue to impose arbitrary restrictions on the import and export of agricultural goods from the Gaza Strip. Although Israel states its measures are for security purposes, its actions clearly demonstrate that maintaining economic control over the Gaza Strip is the actual determining factor in deciding what enters the Occupied Territories.

The Government of Saudi Arabia has donated 10,500 livestock to the Palestinian people. The donated livestock arrived at the border on 10 June, and have yet to be permitted to enter Gaza, although prior permission had been granted by Israeli authorities.

On 1 July, Palestinian and Israeli officials from the respective Ministries of Agriculture met to resolve the issue. At the meeting, the Israelis agreed to allow the meat to cross the border the following day. However, when this was attempted, Israeli security refused to allow the meat to enter the Gaza Strip.

In response, the Palestinian Minister of Agriculture announced a restriction on all meat imports from Israel.

### **Prohibiting Exports of Agricultural Produce**

Subsequent to the Palestinian ban on meat from Israel, Israeli authorities closed the Karni crossing, denying the export of Palestinian agricultural goods to Israel, the West Bank and the outside world.

On 7 July, around 226 tons of vegetables and fruits from Gaza were denied access to cross the border; the next day another 12 tons were denied access. At the time of publication, the outlet remains closed, hundreds of tons of Gazan agricultural products await export.

At the same time, all Israeli meat is being refused permission to enter the Gaza Strip by Palestinian Authorities.

### **Delegation from the Ministry of Agriculture prevented from attending meeting**

A Palestinian Delegation, headed by Atta Abu Karsh, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture, sought to meet with Israeli officials in the Ministry of Agriculture to break the prohibition on the movement of goods. A meeting was planned with the Legal Adviser of the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture in Tel Aviv on 8 July. But, Israeli security forces detained the delegation at the checkpoint and interrogated a Director General in the Ministry of Agriculture, Mahmoud Abu Samra, for several hours. Eventually the delegation was denied permission to cross the checkpoint and was forced to return to Gaza.

A meeting did take place on 9 July at which the Israeli authorities agreed to permit the entry of the Saudi donation into the Gaza Strip after inspection by Israeli soldiers. Israel also agreed to allow the export of Palestinian agricultural goods if the Palestinian Authority lifted its ban on Israeli meat products.

### **Continued denial of access to medical treatment outside Gaza**

Israeli military authorities persist in refusing to issue travel permits to many patients from the Gaza Strip who seek medical treatment outside the Gaza Strip. These patients sometimes require urgent medical attention not available in the Gaza Strip, and many have already been accepted for treatment at hospitals in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and in Israel and neighbouring countries.

Israel maintains its policy of denying permits to patients with eye diseases because they do not consider the conditions to be urgent medical cases. There are a number of

patients who are awaiting permission to leave the Gaza Strip for treatment at St. John's Hospital in East Jerusalem, some of whom have been waiting for over one and a half months.

Frequently, decisions regarding medical permits are postponed or delayed, and many applications are returned without a reason for denial, although all required documents have been completed correctly and attached to the application. During the month of June, Palestinian authorities submitted 470 applications for medical treatment which fell into the Israeli criteria of a "critical" case. Of these, only 150 were accepted--less than one third the total number of applications.

### **Denying family visits to Palestinian prisoners inside Israeli prisons**

There are more than 3,500 Palestinian prisoners currently held in Israeli gaols. Approximately 1,300 of these prisoners are from Gaza. Since the redeployment process began in May 1994, Israeli authorities have transferred all Palestinian prisoners from prisons and detention centres within the Occupied Territories to prisons inside Israel. This is itself a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prevents the transfer of residents of an occupied territory to the land of the occupying power.

In further defiance of international humanitarian standards, Israeli authorities deny Palestinian prisoners their basic rights, including the right to receive visits from their families. Israel often uses the pretext of security to deny permission for families to exit the Gaza Strip to make these visits. Even when visits are allowed, the restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupying forces make the visits excessively difficult: only women, children and men over fifty years of age are eligible for exit permits; families must disembark from the buses they are travelling in and walk one kilometre from the Palestinian side of the Erez checkpoint to the Israeli side, where they undergo stringent security checks by Israeli soldiers; the families then re-embark on the buses, which have been inspected, and are escorted in convoy under Israeli guard to the appropriate prison.

On 20 May, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), which co-ordinates family visits, suspended the visit programme in protest of these Israeli regulations. The ICRC recently reached a settlement with Israeli officials and announced the family visit programme would resume on 1 July.

The agreement established a new procedure for family visits. The ICRC will issue tickets for families who are allowed to visit and provide a list of names to Israel four days prior to the visit. Those allowed to visit are: fathers and sons, with no age limit;

mothers; daughters; wives, with no age limit; sisters and brothers up to age sixteen. The ICRC stated relatives of those suspected by the Israelis to be involved in suicide bombings are not allowed to visit. According to these regulations the first family visit was to occur on 3 July.

However, on 5 July, the Israelis cancelled all family visits. A visit was scheduled for that day to go to four prisons (Telmond, Kfar Yona, Ramla, and Ramla prison hospital). Visitors arrived at dawn at Erez Checkpoint and waited many hours before being told, without explanation, that the visit was cancelled.

### **Additional restrictions on family visits to Gaza from outside of the Occupied Territories**

Israeli military authorities imposed strict measures on Diaspora Palestinians wishing to visit their families in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

According to Israeli procedures, residents of Gaza and West Bank can apply for immediate family members outside the country to visit the Occupied Territories. Recently, Israeli authorities returned hundreds of applications submitted by the Palestinian Authority Minister of the Interior. Five thousand applications were submitted from the Gaza Strip during the month of June, but Israel refused, or returned without reason. Over 1,700 applications and another 60 applications were refused because they failed security background checks. The rejection of these applications is particularly harsh on Palestinian families, as summer is the regular time for Diaspora Palestinians to visit family members residing in the Occupied Territories.

There is often a delay in receiving decisions regarding applications for visiting families, as Israeli authorities have no established schedule for reviewing and responding to the applications. Furthermore, Israel has imposed new restrictions on visits from Palestinians living outside the Occupied Territories:

### ***Palestinians in Algeria***

Applications for family visit permits submitted to Israel from Palestinians living in Algeria were not accepted by Israeli authorities because they require an exit visa from Algeria. However, Algeria discontinued this type of visa two years ago; its policy is that any Palestinian resident in Algeria can exit and return without restriction.

### ***Palestinians in Syria and Iraq***

Authorities in Israel now require Palestinian visas from Syria and Iraq to be stamped on individual passports. However, Syria and Iraq issue separate visas which are not stamped on passports.

### ***Palestinians in Libya***

Israeli authorities reject all applications from Palestinians who had resided in Libya.

On August 30, 1995, the Libyan government refused permission to remain to all Palestinians living and working in Libya. Approximately 7,000 families were forced to leave the country. Currently, Palestinians formerly residing in Libya fall into several categories:

- 1) Some families returned to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank because they already possessed valid identification cards for the Occupied Territories.
- 2) Some families entered the Occupied Territories prior to the currently imposed Israeli restrictions.
- 3) Some families returned to other countries where they resided before moving to Libya.
- 4) The remainder of the families (approximately 3,000) are stranded on either the Egyptian/Libyan border or the Egyptian/Israeli border because they do not possess the proper visas to enter or pass through these countries and officials refuse to issue the visas. These families are living in makeshift housing and have no means to support themselves.

In addition to the harsh effects of the closure felt by students and business men, detailed in previous closure updates, the Palestinian Centre has received reports of cases in which families in the Gaza Strip are separated due to the closure restrictions.

### **Conclusion**

For the 137th day, Israeli military authority continues to impose a closure on all Palestinian territories. This systematic policy of collective punishment against the Palestinian people is a severe violation of internationally accepted standards of human rights and is in direct conflict with the progress of the peace process. Without exception, every Palestinian citizen continues to suffer under the unrelenting

restrictions imposed by Israel and the deteriorating human rights conditions in the Occupied Territory.

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights expresses condemnation of the apathy demonstrated by the international community regarding Israel's policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Centre reiterates its demand of governments around the world to ensure that Israel respect the standards established under international human rights conventions and calls upon those countries directly involved in the peace process to intervene on behalf of the Palestinian people.

Furthermore, the Palestinian Centre stresses the fundamental role the United States plays as a co-sponsor of the overall peace process and protests the silence of the administration in addressing Israeli practices in the Occupied Territories. To end the suffering of the Palestinian people and for the sake of peace, the United States should demand the Israeli government to end the gross violations against humanity currently occurring in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

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