



UNRWA

PRESS RELEASE

Press Release No. HQ/G/07/2003

18 May, 2003

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

18 UN Agencies and NGOs Protest Gaza Closure

On 11 May 2003, the Israeli authorities closed the Erez crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip in both directions for internationals, except for holders of diplomatic visas or passports. The closure affects virtually all international staff of United Nations organisations, NGOs and other humanitarian and development agencies. This move follows four weeks of increasingly severe restrictions that have seriously disrupted aid workers' freedom of movement and the distribution of humanitarian relief to 1.2 million Palestinians. On 17 May 2003, the Israeli authorities partially lifted the closure with respect to certain named staff of a few UN organizations, but not for all international staff of these organizations who need to cross Erez. The closure was also lifted for certain named staff of one humanitarian non-governmental organisation.

The undersigned UN and other international and non-governmental organisations protest in the strongest terms Israel's imposition of this unprecedented measure, which is in direct contravention of international law.

We fully respect Israel's security concerns. But we firmly reject the clear implication of the measures imposed at the Erez crossing for the last month that UN officials and international aid workers constitute a security threat to the State of Israel or its citizens. We call on the Israeli authorities to reopen the Erez crossing immediately, on a 24 hour-a-day basis, for all international staff members of all United Nations organisations and of all other international humanitarian and development agencies operating in the Gaza Strip. We seek a prompt return to procedures that will allow UN international staff members and other humanitarian aid and development workers to exit and enter Gaza freely, with minimal delays.

The closure of Erez has made the operations of all UN Agencies, NGOs and other humanitarian and development agencies unreasonably difficult, inefficient and costly. If these new restrictions persist, a number of international and non-governmental humanitarian organisations may be forced to stop their operations in the Gaza Strip. Médecins du Monde and UNAIIS have already announced that, because of the blockade at Erez, they have had to suspend operations in Gaza.

It is not clear to us why the Government of Israel has imposed these unprecedented restrictions. The restrictions are violations of applicable international law and, in many cases, bilateral agreements between the Government of Israel and the agencies concerned. They also go against the undertakings on humanitarian access given by the Government of Israel in August last year to the UN Secretary-General's Personal Humanitarian Envoy, Ms. Catherine Bertini.

We have not received any official explanation of the need for these restrictions nor any indication of how long they will be kept in force. We are further disturbed that these restrictions come at a time when the Government of Israel is promising publicly to ease the plight of the population in the occupied Palestinian territory and to support humanitarian relief efforts.

If the Government of Israel is serious about wishing to support our humanitarian efforts, these restrictions should be lifted immediately.

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Signatories:

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)
World Food Programme (WFP)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
World Health Organisation (WHO)
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Médecins sans Frontières
Médecins du Monde
Pharmaciens sans Frontières – Comité International
OXFAM GB
Care International
MERLIN
Enfants Refugiés du Monde
Solidaridad Internacional
CRIC (Centro Regionale d'Intervento per la Cooperazione)
Movement for Peace, Disarmament and Liberty
UNA International Service (UK)
World Vision

For more information contact: Paul McCann at UNRWA HQ Gaza on (972) 8 677 7526.