
UN, aid agencies call for opening of Gaza crossings to allow rebuilding of schools

28 July 2009 – Just one month before the start of the academic year in Gaza, the education of thousands of school students is being jeopardized by the ongoing blockade of crossings into the area, a chorus of United Nations voices warned today in an urgent call for Israel to open the borders. The 18 schools that were completely destroyed and the 280 others that were damaged in the Israeli military offensive six months ago have not been rebuilt or rehabilitated because of restrictions placed on the movement of reconstruction materials and other supplies into Gaza, according to a joint news release issued by various UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In north Gaza, 9,000 students from 15 damaged schools have been spread among 73 schools in the same area, with 4,000 of them squeezed into two schools, and some 1,200 secondary students running the risk of being left without a school next month.

"The blockade has caused untold suffering to children in Gaza, who face another academic year in terrible conditions," said Philippe Lazzarini, acting UN Humanitarian Coordinator of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) in the joint statement.

"Together with the communities we serve, the United Nations and non-governmental humanitarian organizations working in oPt collectively call for immediate steps to end the blockade, as is required by international humanitarian and human rights law," the statement continued.

Since the imposition of the blockade in 2007, students have faced chronic shortages of educational supplies, "though we acknowledge the recent moves to allow textbooks, uniforms, and stationery into Gaza."

Ensuring access to education is an obligation of all governments according to international agreements ranging from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the statement said.

In the nearly 400 governmental schools, attendance and performance have declined as a result of the ageing infrastructure, overcrowding, and frequent disruptions caused by military operations, resulting in only 20 per cent of Gaza's 16,000 sixth graders passing standardized exams in mathematics, science, English and Arabic in the first semester of the 2007-2008 school year, according to a fact-sheet issued by the agencies.

"What you see behind you here at the American School is the destruction of hope for the next generation," said Chris Gunness, UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) spokesperson, at a 'Back to School' advocacy event.

"This is hope, reduced to a pile of rubble: hope for an educated, prosperous future, lying in ruins," said Mr. Gunness, adding that hope "can and must be rebuilt."

Mr. Gunness noted that UNRWA has a \$371 million repair and rehabilitation plan, but unless the blockade is lifted and building materials are allowed in, the project will remain on the shelf.

"My message is simple," he said. "Allow the rebuilding and repair of schools and homes. Children in Gaza, like children the world over deserve a dignified way of life."