

Executive summary

A year on from the November 2007 Annapolis Conference and the stated determination of the Government of Israel (GoI) and the Palestine Liberation Organization to conclude a comprehensive peace agreement by the end of 2008, Palestinian living conditions in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) remain in severe distress.

The Gaza Strip is subject to a tight blockade, with poverty and unemployment at unprecedented levels and dependency on aid deepening; in the West Bank the intricate system of Israeli closures has intensified, notwithstanding the removal of some obstacles to movement in recent months. The Palestinian economy is stagnant, its productive capacity waning, unable to generate sufficient employment to absorb a young and growing population or replace job losses in the Israeli labour market over the past several years.

Levels of violence - both Israeli-Palestinian and internal - are high, with immediate and longer term implications for the welfare of the Palestinian population. The GoI continues to destroy Palestinian homes and infrastructure and confiscate West Bank land for settlement expansion and Barrier construction. In Gaza, the truce between Hamas and Israel, which has held since June, is edging closer to collapse. Although the truce has brought marked improvements in the security situation, the GoI has not responded with any real relaxation of the closure regime, creating further misery for an already impoverished population. The situation has been compounded by continued internal Palestinian political divisions, which place further strain on overburdened and degraded public services in the Gaza Strip, depriving many communities of essential support.

The rights and freedoms to which Palestinians are entitled under international law continue to be routinely ignored or violated with impunity. These include the right to life, security, freedom of movement, employment, essential services, education, shelter, adequate standards of living, protection from displacement and the overarching right to self-determination. Denied such protection, Palestinian civilians across the oPt, including refugees, are becoming increasingly vulnerable and dependent on large scale and expanded programmes of relief assistance. These can mitigate the worst effects of the crisis but are insufficient to reverse its impacts. Indeed, as the crisis enters its ninth year, there are signs that the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance in reducing poverty in the oPt is declining, as the gap between available resources and needs widens. Absent an overhaul of the tight regime of movement and access restrictions that allows for unimpeded access by Palestinians to all parts of the oPt, it is unlikely that this gap will shrink in the immediate future.

The ability of aid agencies to meet basic needs over the past 12 months has been undermined by heightened restrictions on passage of goods into the West Bank and continued curbs on imports into Gaza, coupled with periodic blanket closures in response to any deterioration in the security environment. The situation has been exacerbated by global increases in the cost of food commodities and adverse climatic conditions which have harmed local food production.

Palestine refugees, who account for around 40% of the total population of the oPt and a majority in Gaza, continue to bear the brunt of the protracted crisis.

Throughout 2008 and consistent with trends over the past several years, they have endured higher levels of poverty and unemployment than non-refugee Palestinians. This is largely due to conditions in Gaza, but also reflects deteriorating living conditions amongst refugees in the West Bank over the past 12 months.

In a context of persistent and deepening vulnerability for refugees across the oPt, in particular for families in Gaza and those in the West Bank affected by the Barrier and other movement restrictions, UNRWA is launching a new appeal for emergency assistance in 2009. This is the largest appeal UNRWA has made since its current emergency programme began in late-2000. Interventions seek to (1) provide social safety net assistance to alleviate the impact of increasing poverty and unemployment, through targeted programmes of food aid, temporary job creation and cash assistance; (2) guarantee access to essential public services, including primary and environmental health; (3) protect the rights of Palestine refugees using a broad range of strategies that focus on the immediate and longer term impacts of the conflict; and (4) improve UNRWA's capacity for coordination, management and delivery of emergency services through investment in resources at field and HQ levels and development of programme planning tools and systems, as part of the Agency's Organisational Development Plan.