
OPT: Egyptian steel barrier tests Gazan mettle

GAZA CITY, 25 March 2010 (IRIN) - Egypt's imminent completion of an above-and-below-ground steel barrier along its border with the Gaza Strip is putting Gazans on edge: How will they survive without the huge trade conducted via underground tunnels?

A lucrative tunnel smuggling trade in a range of commodities took off after Israel imposed an economic embargo on the Strip after a Hamas takeover in June 2007. The World Bank and Palestinian economists estimate that at least 80 percent of Gaza's total imports come through the tunnels.

"Digging tunnels and working in them is one of the few jobs available for Palestinian youth in Gaza," Omar Sha'ban, a Gazan economist, said.

"Tunnel workers reportedly earn US\$25 per day, a huge sum in the current Palestinian economy. However, they are subjected to daily bombings... by the Israeli Air Force, tunnel collapses and fires."

Ziad al-Zaza, economy minister in the Hamas government, said there were some 20,000 tunnel workers before Israel's military operation in Gaza in early 2009, and about half that number now. The Israeli military said it damaged or destroyed 60-70 percent of the tunnels in the offensive.

Tunnel owner and manager Abu Antar*, 45, said an end to the tunnels between Gaza and Rafah in Egypt would mean no income for him and thousands of others who rely on the tunnels for work.

"We have succeeded in cutting through the Egyptian fence, but the thing we are afraid of now is that the Egyptians will electrify it and add seismic sensors to detect us underground, which would make our mission impossible. Tunnels are our only source of living," the father of seven told IRIN.

Egypt's steel barrier will be 10-11km long and will extend 18 metres below ground on completion, the Egyptian authorities have said. Egyptian daily [al-Shorouq](#) recently reported that "work on the main wall is in its fourth and final stage," after which cameras and detection devices will be installed.

It is believed this process will take a few weeks and then will undergo a testing period before becoming fully operational.

Dangerous work

Abu Antar said the tunnel he owns has 50 people working in it.

"Every day we work in the tunnels and wonder if we'll get out alive. Many times the earth has collapsed... Death is inevitable in this type of work. We are dealing with fear 24 hours a day. Many people have died. Every month there are more casualties in the tunnels from the continuous [Israeli] air strikes," he said.

Accidents in the tunnels are frequent. According to Palestinian human rights organization Al-Mezan, 120 tunnel traders have been killed over the past three years.

Tunnel workers estimate there are over 1,000 tunnels between Gaza and the town of Rafah on the Egyptian side of the border - dug at depths of 15-35m and up to 1km long.

"Humanitarian disaster"

"A tunnel costs around 200,000 US dollars [to build], so when these tunnels get destroyed by Israeli planes, or when they are blocked by the Egyptian wall, poverty and unemployment will go up and up," he said. "Blocking the tunnels will lead to a huge humanitarian disaster. All residents of the Gaza Strip will then rely on UN food aid," said Hamas minister al-Zaza.

"We call on the Egyptian and Israel governments to lift the siege imposed on Gaza and let Palestinians work on the ground, not underground, and let Gazans live with dignity and pride," al-Zaza said.

Israel imposed severe import restrictions on the Gaza Strip after the Hamas takeover in 2007 and in retaliation for the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel. The import ban affects everything which could conceivably help Hamas develop weapons, including iron, steel and most building materials. All exports are banned and imports are confined to a limited supply of humanitarian goods. Items such as school text books, desks, medical equipment, household goods and shelter kits face huge delays.

Israel has praised Egyptian efforts to combat smuggling. Egypt says its security was under threat by an increasing flow of illicit goods and militants through the tunnels to its territory.

Israel accuses Hamas of using the tunnels to bring in weapons, a charge Hamas denies.

On a tour of Gaza earlier this month, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes warned of big problems if the tunnels were successfully blocked.

"If those tunnels were blocked, however undesirable they may be, and however undesirable the effect they're having on the Gazan society and Gazan economy, the situation without the tunnels would be completely unsustainable," Holmes said. He repeated calls for Israel to end its blockade of the Palestinian territory.

*Not his real name

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