



Press Conference

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Press Conference on Emergency Relief Coordinator's Recent Middle East Trip

There had been no change of policy since 2007 on Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip and as a consequence, reconstruction activities in the enclave had barely started, the top United Nations humanitarian official said at Headquarters today.

At a press conference on his trip to the Middle East last week, John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator, called for a relaxation of the blockade to allow reconstruction to start and give Gaza residents a chance for a normal life.

Characterizing as unreasonable the linking of the fate of some 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza with the release of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, he expressed hope that the Israeli authorities would allow construction on water and sanitation projects. The entry of goods through illegal tunnels imposed a "gangster economy" which was not in the interest of Gaza or Israel, he said, noting that some progress had been made "in the margins" of the blockade, with some categories of goods, including glass, now being allowed in.

Turning to the situation in the West Bank, he said the Palestinian people, in East Jerusalem, some of whom had lived there for 60 years, had been put under pressure by the recently announced redevelopment plans, pointing out that East Jerusalem was occupied territory and the construction of Israeli settlements there were, therefore, illegal.

He said he had visited the West Bank's Area C, where Israel maintained military control, and had seen its effects on the Bedouin population. Communities were being "squeezed" because of settlements, the separation barrier, evictions and demolition of property. Some improvements had been made, such as some easing of restrictions on movement, but continuing restrictions on the West Bank's Palestinian community, and the realities on the ground, were "not easy to square with the desirability of the two-State solution", he said.

Turning to the situation in Haiti, Mr. Holmes said the emergency shelter operation had now reached 60 per cent of the 1.2 million to 1.3 million homeless people and everybody would have shelter by 1 April, the start of the rainy season. Since rubble from the earthquake was being cleared and some housing was deemed safe, people were being encouraged to return home if possible, he said, adding that the plan was to build "transitional" shelter – wooden structures with corrugated roofs – before the start of the hurricane season. Other priorities included sanitation – which still "had some way to go" – and agricultural inputs for the planting season.

Condemning "unreservedly" the recent attack on the World Vision International office in Pakistan, where six local staff had been shot dead in cold blood, the Under-Secretary-General called for the protection of humanitarian workers.

Answering questions about Gaza, he said the blockade had resulted in Gazans suffering not from lack of development, but from a process of "de-development", stressing that since Israel was still responsible for the enclave, the blockade was illegal. Due to a lack of treatment facilities, untreated sewage was being pumped into the sea, he said, noting that Gaza's sole overused aquifer was becoming increasingly salinized.

He went on to say there was a "striking feeling of gloom" among Palestinians because, amid continuing settlement activity, there seemed no immediate end to the blockade and no outlook for an exchange of prisoners. Gazans wanted to see the border crossings opened for goods, as well as people, he said, emphasizing that it was not in Israel's best interest to undermine Gaza. There were no security reasons for closing the crossings, and if Egypt succeeded in shutting down the tunnels, the situation in Gaza would become unsustainable, he warned.

Recalling that hopes had been high some weeks ago for Corporal Shalit's release in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, he said the talks had somehow "hit a brick wall". However, there should not be a link between Corporal Shalit's release and the fate of the 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza.

The Israeli settlement policy in East Jerusalem was nothing new, he said, in reply to another question, while reiterating that the United Nations position since 1967 had been consistent – such policies were an obstacle to peace. He said he had told the Israeli authorities that the facts on the ground were difficult to reconcile with the provisions of the Road Map, to which all the parties concerned were committed.

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