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### **The humanitarian impact of a divided government**

By Robert Piper

As if 49 years of occupation and nine years of closures are not inflicting enough suffering on innocent Palestinians, the long-standing divisions between Fatah and Hamas are making things even worse for people in Gaza especially. Despite the swearing-in of a Government of National Consensus in April 2014, the gap between Ramallah and Gaza city seems to be widening not narrowing.

As a result, many of the basic needs and rights of Gaza's population – already devastated by Occupation policies - such as in education, health, social welfare, water or municipal services are at best only being partly met. The ongoing crisis has left tens of thousands of government workers in Gaza without full pay since May 2014. Formal coordination amongst Ministries is poor, or non-existent in some cases. A lack of clear authority is translating into a lack of decision-making, planning and priority-setting.

In the health sector, for example, over 40% of Ministry of Health employees, including doctors and nurses, have not been paid their full salaries regularly since May 2014. Reduced working hours, strikes and staffing shortages are common. Coordination between Ramallah and Gaza on the supply of essential drugs and medical supplies has become precarious with shortages of pharmaceuticals being a main reason for referrals outside. For ordinary Palestinians trying to get health care inside Gaza, all of this has a profound effect. It means waiting as long as 24 months for elective surgery and long delays for diagnostic procedures, like tissue sample diagnostics for cancer patients. It means long waiting-lists for interventions to treat chronic if non-life threatening diseases which can also mean a deterioration in general health. In some cases, patients have to live with chronic ailments, unnecessarily, while operating theatres are available but lying idle, unstaffed and underequipped.

In the education sector, there is a shortage of at least 600 teachers due to lack of funding for new recruits. The lack of regular budget allocations for operational costs has left many public schools dependent on revenues from school canteens. The Ministry of Social Affairs' social workers no longer have money for transport to investigate reports of abuse of children in their homes. The Ministry has no chance of recruiting the 160 case managers we estimate they should be hiring to provide individual support to 33,000 of the most vulnerable children in Gaza, many orphaned, injured or disabled. And with over 60% of its facilities and equipment in an increasingly dilapidated state, the Palestinian Civil Defense in Gaza is ill-prepared to respond to any large-scale emergency, be it natural or Man-made.

The operation of the Gaza Power Plant, which supplies 30% of Gaza's limited electricity supply, repeatedly falls victim to disputes between Ramallah and Gaza City over arrangements for fuel supplies and taxes. A stand-off over the rate of fuel tax subsidies for the Gaza Power Plant led to blackouts of up to 18-20 hours a day in mid-April. Only donor-funded emergency fuel, distributed by the UN, is keeping critical water, sanitation and health facilities going, uninterrupted.

The situation cannot continue like this. The overarching solution is a political one of course, well beyond the realm of humanitarians. There are some obvious interim steps to alleviate this suffering in the short term such as improving communication between West Bank and Gaza Ministries, reactivating technical committees between the two wings of ministries, reviewing allocations to critical services like health, education and social welfare in light of the dire humanitarian situation, or more rounds of emergency payments at least for essential service-providers like health workers and teachers. But all this is really beside the point. Nine years is too long. Band-Aid solutions have run their course. Palestine needs to reunify under a democratic Government. The costs of failing to do so are spiraling, and they are hitting the most vulnerable citizens hardest. The UN is standing-by to help in any way we can but the starting-point lies elsewhere.

*\* Robert Piper is the UN Coordinator for humanitarian aid and development assistance in the occupied Palestinian territory. This article was originally published in Arabic, in Al Quds newspaper.*

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