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Easing the Blockade

Assessing the Humanitarian Impact on the Population of the Gaza Strip

Due to the pivotal nature of the remaining access restrictions, the easing of the blockade on the Gaza Strip since June 2010 did not result in a significant improvement in people's livelihoods, which were largely depleted during three years of strict blockade. Because of the ongoing restrictions on the import of building materials, only a small minority of the 40,000 housing units, needed to meet natural population growth and the loss of homes during the 'Cast Lead' offensive, could be actually constructed. The housing shortage has exacted a high 'price' from families confronted with poor and overcrowded housing conditions, with a disproportionate impact on women and children. In light of the high unemployment levels and the large demand for construction materials, thousands of people are left with no alternative but to risk their lives working in tunnels along the border with Egypt or in access-restricted areas near the perimeter fence surrounding Gaza.

Executive Summary

In June 2010, following the tragic results of the flotilla's attempt to break the blockade, Israel announced a package of measures to ease the access restrictions it had imposed on Gaza since June 2007. These measures followed the gradual expansion in the variety of items that were allowed to be imported that began in late 2009. In January and February 2011, OCHA conducted an assessment of the humanitarian impact of these measures, which involved 80 interviews and focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders, as well as extensive field observations.¹ The analysis of the findings was further enhanced by statistical information collected by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS).

The partial lifting of import restrictions in the context of this package increased the availability of consumer goods and some raw materials, allowing a limited reactivation of private sector activities. However, due to the pivotal nature of the remaining restrictions, this relaxation did not result in a significant improvement in people's livelihoods, which were largely depleted during three years of strict blockade. During the second half of 2010, the unemployment rate in Gaza decreased by less than two percentage points (from 39.3 to 37.4 percent), remaining one of the highest in the world. Coupled with a significant rise in food prices, this minor improvement in employment has had little or no impact on the high rates of food insecurity prevailing throughout Gaza (52 percent of the population).

Because of the ongoing restrictions on the import of building materials, only a small minority of the 40,000 housing units, needed to meet natural population growth and the loss of homes during the 'Cast Lead' offensive, could be actually constructed. The housing shortage has exacted a high 'price' from families confronted with poor and overcrowded housing conditions, with a disproportionate impact on women and children. Many families that succeed in repairing or expanding their houses are now exposed to the risk of collapse, due to the substandard quality of some of the construction materials available in the market, particularly in the event of a natural disaster or a new armed conflict.

In light of the high unemployment levels and the large demand for construction materials, thousands of people are left with no alternative but to risk their lives working in tunnels along the border with Egypt or in access-restricted areas near the perimeter fence surrounding Gaza (most of the latter collecting rubble). During 2010, at least 58 Palestinian civilians, including nine children, were killed in these circumstances, and another 257, including 46 children, were injured. The relaxation of the blockade also entailed the approval of over 100 projects funded by international organizations to improve the quality of extremely deteriorated water and sanitation, education and health services. UNRWA for example, the largest UN implementing agency, received so far approval for 43 such projects, which are worth approximately 11 percent of the cost of its entire work plan for Gaza. The implementation of these projects has been slowed down and expenses increased due to a multi-layered system of approvals regulating the entry of each individual consignment of materials. This has been compounded by the recurrent disruptions in the supply of construction aggregates, due to the limited opening of the single relevant crossing (Karni). Therefore, while the potential benefit of these projects, once implemented, is significant, due to the recurrent delays in implementation, the population has so far not experienced any improvement in the quality of services.

Finally, no significant change has taken place in the access of people to the outside world, including to other areas of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). Exit permits via Israel continued to be granted only on an exceptional basis, with an insignificant increase in the number of travelers (mainly traders) observed during the second half of 2010 compared to the first half - from 106 to 114 persons a day. A more significant, albeit limited, improvement followed Egypt's decision to begin operating its crossing with Gaza on a regular basis to special categories of people.

As an occupying power, as well as in every instance in which it exercises control over Gaza and its population, Israel is bound by international humanitarian and human rights law obligations. This legal framework prohibits Israel from imposing restrictions that are detrimental to the rights and needs of the population and which are not strictly required by legitimate security needs. Such restrictions may amount to collective punishment, which is prohibited under any circumstances. While the recent relaxation measures constituted a step in the right direction, to comply with these obligations and achieve a genuine improvement in the humanitarian situation, Israel must fully abolish the blockade. This includes a removal of restrictions on the import of construction materials and the exports of goods, as well as a lifting of the general ban on the movement of people between Gaza and the West Bank via Israel. Additionally, Israel must remove to the fullest extent possible the current restrictions on the access of people to areas in the vicinity of the perimeter fence and to sea waters along Gaza's coast. When resorting to the use of force, it must ensure that civilians and their property are not targeted, and that the necessary measures are adopted to prevent or minimize the negative effect that military operations have on the civilian population.

Endnote

¹This report is based upon field research commissioned to Al-Sahel Co. for Institutional Development and Communications, and supplemented with further research and analysis by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA—oPt).

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