
Poor Palestinians unable to purchase enough food

Jerusalem, 22 February 2007 - The United Nations has warned that rising unemployment and poverty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, coupled with economic suffocation, are posing acute challenges to food security, leaving many families totally reliant on outside assistance, as well as threatening vital sectors of the Palestinian economy.

The warning comes in a report by WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) due to be released this month, reviewing and analysing 2006 statistics and assessing food security and socio-economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Weakening economy

It says that while food security levels in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) have been maintained through regular humanitarian assistance and strong social solidarity among Palestinians, almost half of the population remains food insecure or is at risk of becoming food insecure. The weakening economy is leading to a marked decline in living standards. According to the report, 84 percent of Gazans and 60 percent of West Bankers were found to be reducing their living expenditures by the end of 2006. Many people, who cannot afford to buy food, have been forced to sell off valuable livelihood assets such as land or tools.

Long-term health risk

"The poorest families are now living a meagre existence totally reliant on assistance, with no electricity or heating and eating food prepared with water from bad sources. This is putting their long-term health at risk," stressed Arnold Vercken, WFP's Country Director in the oPt.

One particularly disturbing factor noted by the report is the growing proportion of the urban population suffering food insecurity, alongside the more traditionally vulnerable rural and refugee populations.

All Palestinians are to a greater or lesser extent caught between rising food prices and declining purchasing power.

Political dialogue and stability

"In recent years, Palestinians have shared the burden of rising poverty, but without sustainable economic recovery, the humanitarian caseload will only increase over time," said Erminio Sacco, FAO Food Security Advisor in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"Food assistance alone cannot prevent this decline - there also has to be economic growth which requires political dialogue and stability," said Vercken.

The report illustrates how restrictions on trade and movement experienced over 2006 have led to the progressive fragmentation of the economy, dragging previously self-reliant sectors of society (farmers, workers, fishermen, traders and small shop owners) into poverty and debt.

Stagnant trade

Gaza relies almost entirely on imported food, thus any closure of the Karni commercial crossing has a direct impact on the availability and price of basic commodities.

The stagnation of trade experienced in 2006 drastically affected employment and income opportunities throughout the Gaza Strip leading to a serious rise in poverty.

The WFP operation was originally designed to provide 154,000 tons of food assistance to 135,500 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and 344,500 in the West Bank.

Impoverishment

However, since various restrictions were placed on international funding to the Palestinian Authority in January 2006, an increasing number of Palestinians have been facing impoverishment.

WFP has responded to growing needs by raising the number of beneficiaries from 480,000 to 600,000.