

WFP warns of deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza

Jerusalem, 28 August 2006 - Ahead of an international donor conference this week on the reconstruction of Lebanon in the Swedish capital, Stockholm, WFP has warned that the situation in Lebanon must not be allowed to overshadow the rapidly deteriorating living conditions of the people in Gaza.



The economy is really reaching rock bottom. Industries which were once the backbone of Gaza's economy and food system, such as the agriculture and fishing industries, are suffocated by the current situation and risk losing all viability," said Arnold Vercken, WFP Country Director in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt).

Farmers have been heavily affected by sporadic closures which have cut the agricultural cycle, limiting supply of vital inputs and isolating the Gaza market from external trade. No exported goods left the Gaza Strip in July.

Farmers destitute

Furthermore, the destruction of nearly 400 hectares of agricultural land, as well as irrigation pipes and greenhouses, in July has left farmers destitute with no support to re-cultivate their land.

Even the agricultural banks have stopped providing loans to farmers.

Gaza's infrastructure lies crippled, affecting the lives of the 1.4 million population on a daily basis. Power and water supplies remain low and unreliable.

Farmers, who are forced to purchase power and water to maintain their crops, are passing on inflated production costs to customers at a time when the purchasing power of the population is at an all-time low and less than one third of the population are bringing home an income.

As a result, farmers are struggling to sell their produce and make ends meet.

Daily struggle

Gaza today remains completely reliant on an external food supply and commercial stocks.

Over a six-week period from 1 July-15 August, WFP transported some 5,000 tons of food into Gaza for its expanded caseload.

There is now a one-month stock of food aid available.

In contrast to Lebanon, where humanitarian food aid needs have been essentially met, the growing number of poor in Gaza are living on the bare minimum and face a daily struggle to cover their daily food needs.

Some 70 percent of Gaza's population are food insecure and the vast majority are dependant on assistance from the United Nations to cover their basic needs.

Assistance

WFP has responded to the rising poverty by increasing the number of people assisted to 220,000 from 160,000 previously.

They include poor farmers, fishermen, daily workers and disabled/disadvantaged individuals – around 50 percent of the non-refugee population, or 16 percent of Gaza's total population.

Over 35,000 of those assisted are farmers and fishermen. Fishermen are currently faced with an insurmountable challenge.

The fishing industry – already in a steep decline due to restricted waters and pollution – has been paralyzed by a total closure of the Gaza coastline since 25 June.

The markets are now empty of fish and 35,000 people reliant on the industry are suffering a devastating loss of income.

"Band aid"

"WFP food assistance is acting as a band aid in an attempt to prevent a further decline of livelihoods and nutrition among the poorest. Any improvement in the current humanitarian situation would only occur if Gaza's economy were given a firm kick-start.

"However, rising criminality and a return to kidnapping illustrate the precariousness of the situation and this deters foreign investment and much needed job creation," warned Vercken.

The evidence of the increasing poverty and destitution is visible everywhere in Gaza.

The streets – normally bustling with traffic – are now noticeably quieter as people are staying at home or replacing their cars with donkey carts or bicycles to save fuel.

Garbage

Poor people continue to raid the garbage cans for anything they can sell. Shops and markets are functioning but with very few customers.

Shop owners speak of rising numbers of customers requesting credit.

Despite the deteriorating situation, WFP faces severe funding shortfalls, which have become a huge constraint on its work in the Palestinian territory.

The current two-year operation, launched in September 2005, which requires US\$103 million, is only 44 percent resourced.

The operation originally aimed to provide 154,000 tons of food assistance to 135,500 Palestinians in the Gaza strip and 344,500 in

the West Bank.

However, since international funding to the Palestinian Authority was cut off in January, an increasing number of Palestinians are facing impoverishment.

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