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## Gaza - Hope not hatred

*By John Holmes*

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I was recently in Gaza, one of the world's most densely packed places and today, a firmly sealed human pressure cooker. The deepening distress of the people I saw there illustrated only too clearly the growing disconnect between the aims and hopes of the resuscitated Middle East peace process and the harsh realities of the deteriorating situation on the ground. This disconnect may prove fatal to peace efforts, and profoundly damaging to one of the world's oldest and largest refugee populations, if urgent action is not taken to address it.

The 1.5 million people of Gaza – more than half of whom are under the age of 18 – are struggling under severe movement restrictions further tightened by Israel following the Hamas takeover in June 2007. In September, the Government of Israel declared Gaza 'hostile territory,' paving the way for further tightening of the economic noose. The population is increasingly feeling the effects of depleting supplies and resources, particularly the most vulnerable: children, the elderly, and the infirm.

Let me be clear. Israeli concerns about security are well understood. Palestinian militant rocket attacks indiscriminately fired into Israel from Gaza must cease immediately. There can be no legitimizing such criminal acts, which I condemn unequivocally. I saw for myself the damage and trauma inflicted on the people of Sderot in southern Israel by the many years of rocket attacks they have had to endure.

Nevertheless, Gaza now desperately needs more reliable food supplies, as well as goods and spare parts of all kinds to keep its power, water and sanitation systems from failing. It needs to import a much wider variety of goods to prop up faltering medical and educational infrastructure, and to restart its collapsed industry and agriculture.

Nearly 80% of the population of Gaza now relies on food assistance from the UN and other humanitarian partners. As many as 85% of Gaza's industrial and manufacturing sites have closed since June 2007, swelling the ranks of unemployed to nearly fifty percent. Electricity and fuel shortages are leading to a rapid deterioration in the operation of water and power systems; water quality is declining rapidly and clean water is only sporadically available for much of the population. 40 million litres of raw sewage are currently being released into the Mediterranean Sea everyday, with untold ecological consequences. The threat of imminent collapse of some of Gaza's sewage lagoons is very real.

But of all Gaza's many shortages, the scarcest of all commodities is hope – that most essential of human needs. Providing the kind of lasting hope needed to counter the growth of extremism is a political task, one that requires responsible leaders – Israelis and Palestinians alike – to take the huge risks necessary for peace.

The despair and sense of humiliation resulting from what must feel like a giant open-air prison can only be imagined. Clearly, this is a tinderbox waiting for a spark. But it can be in no one's interest to see Gaza explode, least of all in Israel's security interests.

So how can we alleviate suffering and help reduce tension? First, humanitarian organizations need immediate, unrestricted, and regular access for all their goods and workers, rather than the grudging minimum allowed at the moment. The UN alone has \$213 million of humanitarian and development projects that are blocked by lack of raw materials, particularly cement. I have pressed upon Israeli leaders the need to let supplies in so these essential projects can restart immediately.

Second, while humanitarian relief is crucial, by itself it cannot relieve the suffering in Gaza. The Gaza crossings need to be opened. Without a free flow of goods and labour in and out of Gaza, the private sector will not be able to provide the jumpstart needed to resuscitate the moribund economy. Opening the main Karni commercial crossing is a critical first step towards this goal. The Palestinian Authority has made constructive proposals about how this could be done, without jeopardizing Israel's security. I urge all sides to consider seriously these proposals, and to agree to a solution, including an acceptable security regime.

Third, Hamas should stop the Qassam rockets from Gaza now, and without conditions. They are indiscriminate; they hurt and kill civilians, and are promoting economic and military responses which only deepen the plight of the people of Gaza.

Fourth, the response of economic strangulation of Gaza is not compatible with Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law. It too should stop. The majority of Gazans should not be punished for the criminal acts of a violent and extremist minority. Only more violence and suffering can come from the current sowing of dragon's teeth.

Finally, let us keep our eyes on the goal of two states living side-by-side in peace, and forging a more secure and prosperous future for their people. It may look ambitious now, but it is the only way forward for the longer term. Peace cannot be forged on the anvil of anger, or created through the denial of human dignity. The only effective way to bring all this suffering to an end is through the rapid conclusion of a just and lasting peace settlement. This is where all our efforts should be focused, so that hope can replace hatred.

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