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Background

Olives are a centuries-old mainstay of the Palestinian economy, with the soil and climate producing some of the world's highest quality olive oil. The olive is also symbolic of Palestinians roots in, and attachment to, the land. Some 45% of agricultural land (over 900,000 dunums) is planted with an estimated 10 million olive trees, with the potential to produce between 32,000 – 35,000 metric tons of oil. Approximately 93% of the olive harvest is used for olive oil, and the remainder for pickles, table olives, and soap. Up to 100,000 families depend upon the olive harvest for their livelihoods to some extent. The vast majority of the harvest is consumed domestically, with a small amount exported abroad, principally to Jordan, with increasing interest and demand from the international organic and free trade markets.

This year, the olive industry promises to contribute over US\$ 123 million (based on 2006/7 figures) to the fragile West Bank economy - 18% of total agricultural production. However, the movement restrictions and obstacles imposed by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), which reduce access to land and markets; the Barrier which separates many farmers from their olive groves; the closure of the Gaza Strip crossings; and the increasing attacks and destruction by Israeli settlers against farmers and olive trees, combined raise concerns about the potential success of this peak olive season.

Access to Fields and Markets

When the harvest is complete, the next stage is for farmers to send the fresh olives to the approximately 270 licensed commercial olive presses in the West Bank. This must be done quickly otherwise the quality of oil is reduced. Once the oil is pressed and packaged, farmers

need access to markets to sell their goods. However, Israeli movement restrictions affect access to fields, markets and processing, raising transport costs and impairing delivery schedules. The blockade on the Gaza Strip also affects imports of olive oil from the West Bank. In the 2006/2007 year harvest, there was a surplus of 7,000 metric tons of olive oil, worth approximately US\$ 28 million, which went unsold. Prices fell below cost price, heavily affecting farmers.

Ensuring Access and Protection

The olive harvest follows a two-year cycle with significant fluctuation between alternative seasons: 2008 will be a peak, high-yield year. The season began officially on 10 October and continues through November. Picking is manual and labour-intensive, involving the extended family, with more than half of the Palestinian population expected to participate. In recent years, West Bank farmers have been joined by international and Israeli solidarity groups to ensure protection in areas of friction and to complement the workforce in areas where Palestinian access is restricted behind the Barrier.

In the West Bank, the main friction points are the olive groves in the vicinity of Israeli settlements and outposts where Palestinian farmers working their fields have faced incidents of crop theft, tree uprooting, harassment and physical attack. As a military occupying power, the IDF is obligated to ensure public order and life in the occupied territories and the Government of Israel has repeatedly committed to ensuring that Palestinian olive farmers have access to their fields. In June 2006, following continued access problems and harassment of farmers by settlers, the Israeli High Court ruled that, "protecting the security and possessions of the local residents is among the most basic obligations of the military commander in the field."

In the West Bank, the Israeli and Palestinian District Civil Liaison Offices (DCLs) are coordinating this olive season to ensure improved access for farmers. According to the Israeli authorities, the IDF and the Police will be present at friction points for designated few day periods to ensure protection for Palestinian farmers from settler harassment. As in previous years, Israeli human rights and solidarity groups have organised to accompany

Source of Data: United Nations Development Programme, World Food Programme, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, The World Bank.

Participating UN Institutions:

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR), United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), World Food Programme (WFP).

The Olive Harvest in the West Bank and Gaza

West Bank farmers to certain potential friction points, although the IDF has announced that Israeli access will be restricted in certain areas. According to the military orders issued this year, these restricted areas are far larger than in previous years, mainly in the vicinity of Israeli settlements and outposts.

The West Bank Barrier

Tens of thousands of olive trees have been uprooted for the construction of the planned 725 kilometre-long Barrier. The route of the Barrier, 86% inside the West Bank, undermines the olive farming industry as a source of livelihood by separating Palestinian farmers and their families from their olive groves. The IDF has installed gates in the Barrier and implemented an associated permit (or prior coordination) regime to facilitate access for farmers, but the 'visitor' permits are difficult to obtain and do not meet workforce needs. An OCHA/UNRWA survey found that in the northern West Bank, 80% of people who used to work land now isolated to the west of the Barrier do not receive permits. For this olive harvest, the IDF has announced an allocation of 3,000 extra permits which will go some small way towards addressing these access restrictions.

The 59 Barrier gates which are to some degree accessible to Palestinians operate on a daily, seasonal or seasonal-weekly basis. Although the IDF has announced longer opening hours for the olive harvest, 30 Barrier gates remain closed throughout the year except during the olive harvest. Therefore essential activities such as ploughing, pruning, fertilising and pest and weed management cannot be carried out, affecting the quantity and quality of the olive oil yield. Limited access to water supplies also hinders the ability of many farmers to provide partial irrigation at critical times, limiting the ability to increase productivity.

The United Nations and the Olive Harvest

The UN recognizes the significance of the olive sector for the Palestinian economy in promoting the right to enjoy an adequate standard of living and in reducing poverty as well as the industry's potential impact on the overall humanitarian situation - particularly in the health and food sectors and on children. Over the years, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has implemented approximately US\$ 26 million in projects to develop olive trees and improve the olive harvest. From 2003 to 2006, the World Food Programme (WFP) purchased olive oil directly from small farmers in the West Bank for distribution to WFP beneficiaries in non-olive oil producing governorates to ensure a fair profit to small producers with marketing difficulties and establish a profitable market price for olive oil in general.

On 9 July 2004, the International Courts of Justice (ICJ), the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, opined that Israel's construction of the Barrier, where it intrudes into the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, violates international law. The ICJ called on Israel to cease construction of the wall 'including in and around East Jerusalem', to dismantle the sections already completed, and 'to repeal or render ineffective forthwith all legislative and regulatory acts relating thereto.'

The ICJ also stated that Israel has the obligation to make reparation for any damages caused to Palestinian farmers, and where possible to "return the land, orchards, olive groves and other immovable property seized from any natural or legal person for purposes of construction of the wall." On 20 July 2004, this legal opinion was overwhelmingly reaffirmed by the UN General Assembly, but the Government of Israel has continued construction, the majority of it inside the West Bank.

Olive trees make up 80% of orchard areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Total amount of olives to be picked in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip: 128,000 metric tons.

Largest fertile groves: Jenin (43,950 acres/175,803 dunums), Nablus (46,359 acres/185,439 dunums), Tulkarm (26,535 acres/106,142 dunums), Ramallah 37,606 acres/150,426 dunums).

Expected amount of oil to be produced: 32,000-35,000 metric tons compared to 8,870 in 2007 (non-peak year).

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, tens of thousands of olive trees have been destroyed in the Gaza Strip since 2000. Gaza has 6,310 acres/ 25,240 dunums of fertile olive land remaining. Estimated olive oil production in Gaza in 2008 is 1,450 metric tons.

There are approximately 270 operating olive presses in the occupied Palestinian territory. - Olive oil comprises 15% to 19% of Palestinian agricultural output depending on the season.

The costs for the farmer to produce 1 kg. of olive oil is US\$2.3.

One litre of olive oil is sold from US\$6.00 – 7.00.

11,400 metric tons of olives are used for pickling.

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