



## **EUROPEAN COORDINATION OF COMMITTEES AND ASSOCIATIONS FOR PALESTINE**

### **Catastrophic effects of the siege of Gaza: the EU must act, now, to stop this crime**

#### Executive Summary

#### **Catastrophic effects of the siege of Gaza**

Since 2007, the Palestinian inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, now 2 million people, have been subject to a blockade by Israel.

This blockade impacts all the aspects of the population's daily life and it consolidates the fragmentation of the territorial and political Palestine, undermining dignified life and self-determination for the people towards the construction of a democratic and independent state.

The Palestinian population in Gaza has also suffered from three devastating military attacks from Israeli forces, in 2008-2009, 2012 and 2014, resulting in great human and material casualties. The March of Return, held between March 2018 and the end of 2019, was violently repressed. Israeli soldiers shot peaceful protestors with live ammunition and disabling bullets, killing 308 people (including doctors, paramedics, journalists, women and children) and wounding 36.143, of which about 300 required an amputation. Today 2.4% of people in Gaza are disabled.

The increasing impact of the blockade on the economic, political and social crisis in Gaza has been reported by official sources and NGOs. The decrease in revenues generated a high level of dependence on food subsidies from UN programs, now at 80% of the population, and a severe increase of the poverty and malnutrition, affecting primarily the children (50% of the population). The lack of vital supplies such as water and electricity, together with the deterioration of the environment, have made Gaza an uninhabitable place.

The health sector has been particularly affected by the blockade. In the last 14 years, it has never had availability of instruments (medicines, devices, medical instruments and parts of machinery for diagnostic departments and laboratories) in amounts and kinds sufficient for normal operation, nor with a regular flow. Life-saving critical medicines for infants, those against cancers and other progressive diseases are often unavailable.

Many patients need to receive treatment outside of the Gaza Strip, but they face constant prohibitions, limits or delays in receiving permits from Israel, frequently with lethal consequences. Prohibitions are also exercised against health personnel leaving to receive training abroad, and against medical specialists coming from overseas.

After having been kept out of Gaza by strict quarantine measures, Covid-19 hit in the community in August, and is growing steadily today (end of December 2020). A first total lockdown in October was unsustainable for a population with 60% of families living below the threshold of poverty and the number of malnourished children has increased dramatically. Social distancing is difficult in any case given the housing situation (on average 4 children per family and co-housing of extended families). The figure of 15,000 positive cases at the end of October increased to 33,594 on December 12 and 69 deaths in October became 260. There is no sign that the pattern of increase is ceasing, despite full week-end lockdowns.

Local health experts and the WHO sent alerts about the overcrowding of hospitals and the lack of essential medical tools for the sick, including oxygen and test kits. Immediate and longer-term support is absolutely needed. Moreover, especially in the case of another complete lockdown which may be unavoidable in the near future, increased economic and food support to the population will be required.

### **The EU must act, now.**

The siege of Gaza is a collective punishment imposed by Israel on the Palestinian people of Gaza, which is illegal under international law. Meanwhile, the military attacks against the population and the infrastructures can be qualified as war crimes. The current division among Palestinian parties has worsened the situation, but this cannot reduce the primary responsibility of the occupying power, namely Israel, nor be an excuse to leave the situation of the Palestinian people in Gaza as it is.

### **In the context of a further deteriorating situation due to the pandemic, the European Union cannot just make statements or provide some care.**

We, therefore, ask the EU to take the following actions:

- Impose sanctions (cut in military aid and trade, research funds and suspension of preferential trade agreements) against Israel, as long as it persists in very serious violations of international law and of the human rights of the population, which the EU cannot continue to ignore. As long as the siege of Gaza is not lifted, the EU, in accordance with its own rules and principles, has the tools to impose sanctions.
- Open a direct dialogue with the current government in Gaza, and at the same time favour all efforts to reach an agreement of national unity between the Palestinian parties.
- Work for the removal of the siege of Gaza with the opening of a sea route, renewing the previous and agreed project of building a commercial port so that goods produced in Gaza can reach external markets and work for the opening of a direct corridor to the West Bank (Oslo agreements).
- Immediately prepare a health intervention plan for Gaza with the opening of a dedicated line of funding and a mechanism to provide, in a stable and continuous manner, at the very least the necessary life-saving medicines that are chronically lacking. This in addition to providing immediate support for the Covid19 emergency.
- Remove the constraints placed on the disbursement of funds to Palestinian NGOs.

EU must also require Israel to accept EU political and technical missions, and to issue reliable entry permits in order to have an EU office in Gaza as soon as possible.

## Blockade on Gaza: A chronic crisis due to occupation and siege

The Gaza Strip, 365 square kilometres of land, is home to over 2 million people, of which 70% are under 30 years old. Since 2007, it has been fenced and subjected to blockade from the State of Israel, which has the primary responsibility of the dire situation. Israel is the agent of the depression of the economy, the impoverishment and food insecurity of the people, in the majority children, and of the de-development in medical care supply.

Egypt joined the blockade in 2013, while the current division among Palestinian parties has worsened the situation. The role the Palestinian Authority played in abandonment and economic boycott did not help in releasing the pressure on the people of Gaza. In addition, in 2017, the USA cut funds to UNWRA and UNFP and closed USAID projects, worsening the conditions for Gaza, highly dependent on them, due to the tight blockage of passage of people and goods on land and sea, and the military repression which prevent the people to use even its own primary resources like agriculture and fishing.

The lack of energy supply has worsened all the aspects of daily life impacted by the blockade. At least for a decade, the electric supply was most often at 4 hours, and never above 15 hours a day. Israel's bombings demolished the single power plant of Gaza twice (producing 140 MW and 30% of the amount needed for a 15hrs/24 supply), and the supply from Israel was periodically cut while the provision from Egypt (30 MW) was unstable. This was coupled with precarious allowance of gasoline for generators by Israel and limited passage of solar devices. The lack of energy blocks viable local production of all kinds, commerce, food preservation, severely cut water delivery to the population and prevent sewage management, severely hindered hospital services and triggered a total collapse of all living standards.

The increasing impact of the blockade on the economic, political and social crisis in Gaza has been reported by official sources and NGOs<sup>1</sup>. Recently, UNCTAD calculated the cost of the siege as a loss for the Gaza economy of almost 17 billion dollars (6 times Gaza's GDP) and quantified the resulting unemployment rate at 52% (64 % for people under 30). The decrease in revenues generated an increase in dependence on food subsidies from UN programs, now at 80% of the population<sup>2</sup> and a severe increase of the poverty and malnutrition, affecting children primarily (50% of the population).

The blockade impacts all aspects of the population's daily life and it consolidates the fragmentation of the territorial and political Palestine, undermining dignified life and self-determination for the people towards the construction of a democratic and independent state.

Since the beginning of the blockade, Palestinians in Gaza suffered from three devastating military attacks from Israeli forces, in 2008-2009, 2012 and 2014, resulting in great human and material casualties<sup>3,4,5</sup>.

|                                      | Cast Lead (2008-2009) | Pillar of Defense (2012) | Protective Edge (2014) |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Duration                             | 22 days               | 8 days                   | 55 days                |
| Palestinians killed                  | 1,409                 | 167                      | 2,251                  |
| Unarmed Palestinian civilians killed | 1,172                 | 87                       | 1,462                  |
| Palestinian children killed          | 348                   | 32                       | 551                    |

|  | Cast Lead (2008-2009) | Pillar of Defense (2012) | Protective Edge (2014) |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Palestinians injured                           | 5,380                 | 5000                     | 11,231                 |
| Israeli soldiers killed                        | 10                    | Na                       | 67                     |
| Israeli civilians killed                       | 3                     | Na                       | 6                      |
| Houses damaged/destroyed                       | 14,000                | 2,174                    | 18,000                 |
| Displaced persons                              | 28,000                | 10,000                   | 500,000                |
| Nb of people without access to municipal water | Na                    | Na                       | 450,000                |
| Electric plant destruction                     | Yes                   | No                       | Yes                    |

But in fact, the abuse of lethal violence on Gazans is permanent. The March of Return, held between March 2018 and the end of 2019, was violently repressed. Israeli soldiers shot peaceful protestors with live ammunition and disabling bullets, killing 308 people (including doctors, paramedics, journalists, women and children) and wounding 36,143, of which about 300 required an amputation. Today 2.4% of people in Gaza are disabled<sup>6</sup>. On a daily basis, surveillance by drones and airborne attacks create a permanent feeling of insecurity among people. An investigation into the State of Israel's excess of violence against the civilian population is examined at the International Criminal Court<sup>7</sup>.

### **Dismantling the health system as a tool of occupation**

In Gaza, the main body responsible for public health in all its specialities is the Ministry of Health with 13 hospitals and 50 clinics, while UNRWA, with 21 clinics, and some NGOs, offer partial services. In the last 14 years, the Ministry of Health has never had availability of instruments (medicines, devices, medical instruments and parts of machinery for diagnostic departments and laboratories) in amounts and kind sufficient for normal operations, nor with a regular flow. Life-saving critical medicines for infants, those against cancers and other progressive diseases are often unavailable. The chronic shortage of electricity and fuel for generators as well as the lack of funds to maintain adequate personnel, seriously impacted the population's ability to access adequate diagnosis and treatment. People with some specific pathologies have not had any chance of care.

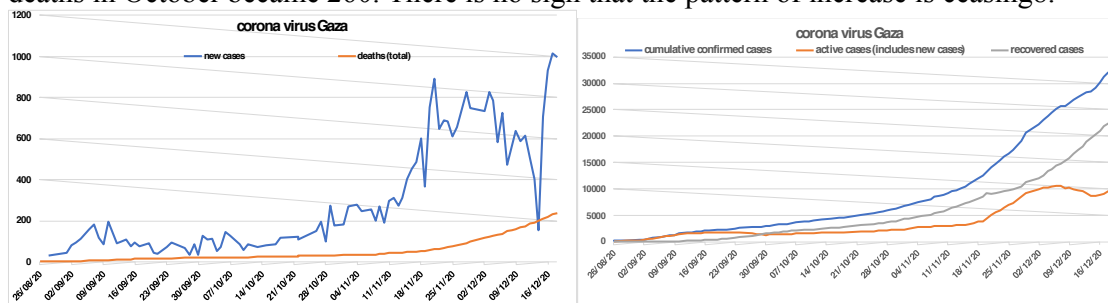
This situation imposes for some patients the need to seek treatment abroad, but they face constant prohibitions, limits or delays in receiving exit permits from Israel, which also had lethal consequences. Prohibitions are also exercised against health personnel leaving to receive training abroad, and against medical specialists coming from overseas.

Each military attack provoked a catastrophe for the health facilities which, already impoverished, did not have the capabilities in terms of personnel, space, drugs and other supplies, to cope with the daily wave of wounded. Therefore, the health supply for the population as a whole suffered serious blows, with delayed intervention for elective surgeries and any other not trauma interventions (source MoH, Gaza). However, even in the situation of medical crisis due to military attacks, medical instruments and essential medicines (anaesthetics, antibiotics, painkillers, sutures, bandages, surgical and laboratory instruments, medical/nursing support teams) were not provided or allowed by Israel to enter the territory promptly to help cope with emergencies. Very often, people not treatable in Gaza were prevented from leaving the strip for care, causing further pain, amputations and in many cases the death of patients. Following each of these crises, the level of Israeli-controlled health provisions decreased.

To conclude, over time, the denial by Israel of adequate means to provide welfare and public health has been used as a means to subdue the people of Gaza, in defiance of international humanitarian law (4th Geneva Convention), and of the condemnation of international organisations<sup>7</sup> and the international community.

### **A new emergency also for Gaza: the Covid 19 pandemic**

Covid19 was kept out of Gaza for 5 months by costly preventive measures by the Ministry of Health: the creation anew of 16 quarantine centres in the 5 governorates for those allowed to return to Gaza; with dedicated personnel for surveillance and care of the quarantined. Nonetheless, Covid19 hit the community in August, and is growing steadily today (December 20). A first total lockdown in October had moderate effects in reducing the diffusion but was unsustainable for a population with 80% dependence on food, and 60% of families living below the threshold of poverty. Families who could barely feed their children by means of casual labour, were no longer able to buy enough food. As a result, the number of malnourished children is increasing dramatically. In addition, unfortunately, in the reality of Gaza, social distancing is difficult in any case given the housing situation (on average 4 children per family and co-housing of extended families). Clean water is not available to most, making the required sanitary care very difficult. The figure of 15,000 positive cases at the end of October increased to 33,594 on December 12 and 69 deaths in October became 260. There is no sign that the pattern of increase is ceasing<sup>8</sup>.



Source: Ministry of Health data, (November 28, 2020). Available at: [www.we4Gaza.org](http://www.we4Gaza.org)

Giving the seriousness of the present situation, full weekends lockdown started again on December 5th. Local health experts and the WHO sent alerts about the overcrowding of hospitals and required support because of the lack of essential medical tools for sick people, including oxygen and test kits. Healthcare institutions need immediate help and long-term support to recover and provide for the people. The population also needs help to endure the lockdown and continue feeding itself. Lockdown for now is the only preventative measure that works, and we all are aware how costly it can be for more disadvantaged people. In Gaza, its cost may have immediate deleterious effects for the majority.

### **What we ask from the EU**

European institutions have repeatedly expressed themselves clearly, even recently, in favour of the end of the siege of Gaza and for the respect for the human rights of its population. Meanwhile, the situation further deteriorates and the use of the siege as collective punishment continues in defiance of international law, and without any EU initiatives to pressure Israel using the tools in its current possession.

We ask the EU to take the following actions:

- Impose sanctions (cut in military aid and trade, research funds and suspension of preferential trade agreements) against Israel, as long as it persists in the very serious violations of international law and of the human rights of the population, which the EU cannot continue

to ignore. As long as the siege of Gaza is not lifted, the EU, in accordance with its own rules and principles, has the tools to impose those sanctions.

- Open a direct dialogue with the current government in Gaza, and at the same time favour all efforts to reach an agreement of national unity between the Palestinian parties.
- Work for the removal of the siege of Gaza with the opening of a sea route, renewing the previous and agreed project of building a commercial port so that goods produced in Gaza can reach external markets and work for the opening of a direct corridor to the West Bank (Oslo agreements).
- Immediately prepare a health intervention plan for Gaza with the opening of a dedicated line of funding and a mechanism to provide, in a stable and continuous manner, at the very least the necessary life-saving medicines that are chronically lacking. This in addition to providing immediate support for the Covid19 emergency.
- Remove the constraints placed on the disbursement of funds to Palestinian NGOs.

For all these reasons, it is necessary that the EU also requires Israel to agree on accepting EU political and technical missions and to issue reliable entry permits in order to have an office in Gaza as soon as possible.

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