

the status quo in gaza is not an option



background information

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The massive death and destruction in Gaza have “shocked and shamed the world”ⁱ. During the 50 day war from 8 July until 26 August 2014, nobody and nothing was safe in the Gaza Strip, which is one of the most densely populated areas in the world with some 4,700 inhabitants per square kilometer. With the Gaza Strip effectively sealed off, removing the option of fleeing the coastal enclave, the ground offensive in the Gaza Strip with air, artillery and naval support, left people with simply nowhere to run to other than UNRWA schools for some degree of protection. More than 500 children were killed during the conflict.

About 60,000 homes are estimated to be damaged, one third of which are rendered uninhabitable, leaving the families with no home left to return to. The Gaza Power Plant (GPP) remains inoperable, resulting in electricity outages of 18 hours a day. Some 450,000 people remain unable to access municipal water due to damage or low pressure.

The Gaza economy has been brought to a virtual standstill due to damage in the main industrial areas, mostly situated in Eastern Gaza. The average seven year old Palestinian child from Gaza has never left the 365 square kilometer coastal enclave due to the blockade in place since 2007, and has witnessed three major military escalations. Over the years, people in Gaza have developed various coping mechanisms as a normal response to a very abnormal situation, but this most recent escalation depleted all resources.

At the height of the conflict, 85 of UNRWA’s 156 school buildings in Gaza sheltered almost 300,000 displaced, with the remaining school buildings either unsafe or damaged.

Several UNRWA emergency shelters were subject to direct attacks by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), killing and injuring dozens of displaced sheltered in the UN schools.

UNRWA lost 11 colleagues and at least 111 UNRWA installations are confirmed damaged. Throughout the emergency, UNRWA was working under incredible pressure in Gaza, providing assistance to hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the fighting and effectively supporting the entire population of the Gaza Strip through various interventions, including food aid: the regular in-kind food commodities to over 830,000 people, an exceptional food distribution of flour and rice to all not currently receiving this regular assistance from either UNRWA or WFP, and in-kind food commodities provided to shelters.

UNRWA welcomed the ceasefire on 26 September. However, without a political solution a new cycle of violence is very likely. The Israeli blockade on Gaza needs to be lifted, and transfers to Gaza’s traditional markets in the West Bank and Israel need to be allowed. Exports remain virtually banned, with only 183 truckloads leaving Gaza in 2013. Palestinians need access to traditional markets, to fishing areas and land. Freedom of movement should be permitted.

The blockade on Gaza has not resulted in a shortage of food commodities, as basic goods can enter. The problem is that nothing can go out; there is no access to markets, thus starving the previously dynamic and export-oriented economy of opportunity. The already dire economic situation was compounded in 2013 by the end of the illegal tunnel trade, which meant that low-cost products arriving from Egypt were replaced by more costly products arriving via Israel.



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Importantly, the private construction sector cannot import from Israel and was effectively destroyed before the war.

The tunnel trade with Egypt was industrial in scale, with some one million litres of fuel and 7,500 MT of construction material entering Gaza on a daily basis. Before the most recent military escalation, the economy and its capacity to create jobs were already devastated, with the majority of the population had become increasingly poor and dependent on humanitarian aid to meet basic needs.

The number of Palestine refugees coming to UNRWA for food aid had increased from less than 80,000 in 2000 to over 830,000 today. According to most recent data before the 50 day war, youth unemployment stood at 65 per cent. 65 per cent of the population are 24 years old or younger. Civil unrest is a significant threat, as the National Consensus Government, formally in place since 2 June 2014, is yet to resume effective power. Key issues remain unsolved, for example payments to former de facto government staff who continue reporting to work in the respective ministries but have received no full salaries since over one year, and no salaries since March.

Pending a political solution which addresses the causes of the conflict, UNRWA's priority is to get regular programming back in service as quickly as possible. Emergency and early recovery programmes will focus on back to school to provide some 241,000 children with education, as well as comprehensive assistance to those with damaged or uninhabitable homes and support to those in need who currently fall through all support networks. The challenges are immense, as the number of displaced in UNRWA schools remains higher than the number sheltered during the peak of the hostilities from 27 December 2008 to 19 January 2009. The predicted maximum absorption capacity of UNRWA schools – 50,000 displaced for a short period of time in UNRWA schools – became the new normalcy.

Donors responded generously to the Gaza Flash Appeals. This critical support from partners in governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector has enabled UNRWA to continue large-scale emergency interventions. Whilst reconstruction can be addressed later, and will depend on the outcome of negotiations on access for building materials, an additional USD 47 million are needed now to help make the current conditions a little more bearable. Funding is needed for cash support and vouchers for Palestine refugees, which represent approximately 70 per cent of the Gaza population.

The Agency started shelter assessments on 7 September and will provide a comprehensive support package to Palestine refugees, which will include support to host families, rental support, minor damage and repair assistance, and a reintegration package through vouchers which can be used to purchase non-food items from pre-selected vendors. The National Consensus Government and UNDP are planning to provide similar assistance to non-refugees. For homes requiring reconstruction or major repairs it remains unclear how shelter construction is to start under the current access regime imposed by the Government of Israel, which does not allow construction material on the local market.

Gaza: Facts and Figures

- 1.2 million refugees out of 1.7 million total population
- 8 refugee camps
- Over 12,500 staff
- 245 schools in 156 school buildings for more than 230,000 students (2013/14 school year)
- 21 health centres
- 16 relief and social services offices
- 12 food distribution centres for more than 830,000 refugees
- Living under a tightened land and sea blockade since 2007
- Shattered local economy
- Long standing restrictions on movement of people and goods led to a de-development of Gaza
- Potentially unlivable place by 2020

ⁱ UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 6 August 2014



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UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight.

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