

POWERLESS IN GAZA

European Parliamentarians' trip. 6-11 November 2008.
Jenny Tonge House of Lords 21.11.08

A small girl lies in Al Nasr Children's Hospital, arms spread out and tied to the bed. Tubes emerge from her belly and an endotracheal tube, leading to a ventilator, is strapped to her mouth.

She is fully conscious and her eyes roll around in terror, appealing to us to do something, as she struggles with the restraints—her doctors can only watch and hope.

She had emergency surgery for an intestinal obstruction and a chest infection followed, hence the ventilator.

Trouble is, the hospital has nearly run out of drugs and they have nothing to relieve her agony. Antibiotics, muscle relaxants, even simple painkillers are not there because of the Israeli blockade on Gaza.

Later that evening the power was turned off because the Israelis had refused to let diesel through to Gaza's only power plant. That means her ventilator will stop, unless the hospital's engineers can get the emergency generator's going.

I almost hope they didn't succeed and that little girl, the same age as one of my grand daughters, is at peace.

That child is my abiding image of Gaza. It will not go away.

Our party consisted of 12 parliamentarians from Europe. Scots, Irish, Welsh, Italian and Swiss MPs joined Lord Ahmed, Clare Short and I. We had been invited by the 'European Campaign to lift the Siege of Gaza' (a consortium of NGOs), to take in medical supplies and see for ourselves what is going on. Sadly, for reasons known only to them, the Egyptians government refused to let us go via the Rafah Crossing into Gaza. So we hitched a lift on the third voyage of the little 'Free Gaza' boat from Larnaca in Cyprus.

21 people in a 6-berth cabin cruiser for a 15-hour journey to Gaza, with the added frisson that the Israelis might harass us, was an adventure in itself. It passed with only a brief encounter with the Israelis, who throughout our visit tried to pay us as little

attention as possible, including banning all journalists and diplomats from entering Gaza whilst we were there.

We visited two hospitals, a refugee camp school run by UNRWA, sewage works, the power plant, the airport, agriculture projects and of course the Hamas Legislative Council, with its photographs in the places of elected members held in Israeli prisons.

We had meetings with fishermen and relatives of Israeli prisoners and all the usual civil society groups.

We met UNRWA, the hero of the UN and the Director in Gaza John Ging, who was as frustrated by the situation as anyone I have met.

We also talked with Prime Minister Ismail Hannieh and were taken to see some of the tunnels the Gazans are digging through to Egypt to get supplies in and beat the blockade. Those of us who remembered the Second World War felt this was the most poignant proof that the people of Gaza really are in a prison. The tunnels are narrow and apart from the well-strengthened shaft down, they are fragile and frequently cave in. Many men have lost their lives already trying to dig through to Egypt.

There are good things to say about life in Gaza.

There are no Israeli checkpoints, so that daily humiliation and harassment does not occur and this we heard from many people; since the fighting stopped between Hamas and Fatah, Hamas have restored order. It is now safe for anyone to walk around in Gaza, even after dark. This is much appreciated by all.

Everything else is bad news.

The airport, power plant and sewage works, all built with EU, 'our' money, were rendered useless by Israeli bombing several years ago and although the EU has given money for the rebuilding and repairs, little has been done because the necessary materials cannot be brought in.

The sewage from 1.4 million people flows untreated into the sea, poisoning fish. Houses are flooded with sewage when there is heavy rain. How long before eco systems in the Mediterranean are damaged?

We really need to ask why the EU goes on strengthening its cultural and trade bonds with Israel when this is going on. Israel is making complete fools of us all.

The power plant runs out of diesel, at the whim of the Israelis and as the main electricity supply is from Israel anyway, power cuts are a way of life. Likewise clean water.

The hospitals are modern, the doctors and staff well trained, just as good as ours, but they cannot get spare parts for kidney machines, or medicines for their patients and those patients who can afford it cannot leave Gaza for treatment because of the difficulty getting visas—death often arrives before a visa. A superb new radio diagnostic and therapy unit with the latest in linear accelerators, a gift of Saudi Arabia, lies idle, because the essential parts and radioactive materials needed for the procedures cannot be imported.

Schools full of glowing children, longing for a future, have a chronic shortage of books and paper, let alone computers. Students with scholarships to universities outside Gaza for postgraduate degrees cannot get visas to leave so they drift about, idle and frustrated.

Fishermen are confined to a 6-mile limit (the UN gave them 20miles) and if they stray, the Israeli gunboats fire water cannons, arrest them, beat them, and imprison them. People get sick eating their fish because of the pollution, so they need to get further out.

Farmers grow excellent crops but they rot, waiting to be exported.

One farmer told me

“We have farmers, teachers, doctors, professors and institutions as old and as revered as some of yours, but we have been reduced to beggars.”

75% of the people of Gaza are now unemployed, malnutrition is visible now and 70% of the children are anaemic.

Why, why why does this have to happen? There are two main reasons.

The Palestinians, in free and fair and internationally observed elections, elected Hamas and the West disapproved and decided to punish Hamas.

Israel is allowed to break International Law, the 4th Geneva Convention, UN resolutions and Human Rights agreements without any censure from the UK, EU or USA.

Those of us, who search for reasons why we are so pathetic and hypocritical in our foreign policy, are accused of anti-Semitism. I am not anti-Semitic. I am not anti anything except injustice. This injustice to the Palestinians is like a cancer eating away at world peace.

We talked to Hamas. They are offering recognition of Israel in its 1967 borders, an acceptance of previous agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority and a 20 year 'hudna'—that's cease fire to you and me. Why can we not use that as a basis for talks with Hamas, for goodness sake?

A five-month truce was held by Hamas until recently, when the Israelis invaded the North of Gaza and killed 6 'islamists.' Hamas responded with a volley of their rockets towards Sderot, which of course was what made the headlines—the Israelis always make sure of that.

We left Gaza in our little boat, bringing two patients out for treatment. We also had some students with us, the lucky few who had managed to get visas and were hitching a lift. 29 people on that little cabin cruiser was a tough call, but with blessed calm weather, we made it back to Cyprus. The Prime Minister Hanneh came to wave us goodbye.

As we left the lights went out in the Gaza Strip, because the fuel had run out -----

Jenny Tonge
House of Lords
November 2008