

Welfare Association UK Takes All-Party Parliamentary Britain-Palestine Group Delegation to visit projects in Palestine

2nd – 6th September 2007

The delegation consisted of Richard Burden MP, Karen Buck MP, Julie Morgan MP, Alistair Carmichael MP, Martin Linton MP, and was led by Welfare Association's consultant Julia Wickham. The purpose of the trip was to provide an insight to the daily lives of Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza, and an understanding of the difficulties in carrying out projects under the Occupation, as faced by Welfare Association (WA).

The first day of field visits began with a briefing from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in East Jerusalem. The delegation was given an overview of the situation in both the West Bank and Gaza, discussing the effects of the continuing closure of the main crossings in Gaza, in particular Karni and Rafah and the restrictions of movement for people and goods caused by increased roadblocks and checkpoints. The MPs also saw how the planned construction of the Israeli wall/fence in the West Bank will total 449 miles, (56% is already constructed with 10% under construction and a further 33.5% planned), and were briefed on the economic and humanitarian impact of Israeli settlement expansion.

In Nablus, the delegation visited the Hamdi Manko Cultural Centre, supported by WA, and interacted with some of the staff and students of the Sharek programme about their cultural activities. In the Old City of East Jerusalem, Welfare Association outlined some of the social issues faced in their programmes, such as overcrowding, unemployment and school drop-out rates.

UNRWA hosted the delegation on a trip to Gaza, where they saw that the continuing closure of the main Gaza crossing points at Karni and Rafah have had a significant impact on the daily lives of Gaza's 1.4 million Palestinians with 85% of the population in Gaza were dependent on food aid. At the beginning of August, the situation was dire: 75% factories were shut; there was a shortage of raw materials and a rise in prices of basic foods such as flour, rice and powdered milk. The Rafah crossing with Egypt had been closed since 10 June (resulting in the humanitarian chaos of thousands of civilians trapped on the border, and several deaths); Karni had been closed since 12 June and Erez since 14 June. The effects of these closures were – and continue to be devastating: in the first 2 weeks, US\$1.5 million in fines had accrued by Palestinian importers for rented containers stuck on the other side of border, and for breach of supply contracts. Exports, as well as imports, have been paralysed.

In August in Gaza OCHA has documented: 85% of manufacturing businesses have been temporarily shut down with over 35,000 workers laid off. An additional 35,000 workers have been laid off from other sectors including construction, trade and service sectors. Direct and indirect potential losses are estimated at \$35 million - including \$8 million for the furniture sector, \$15 million for garments and textiles and \$3 million for processed food. The agricultural sector has estimated export losses at \$16 million. In addition 23,000 farmers and 43,000 farm workers (particularly cash crop growers, small holders and animal farms) are directly affected by the tightened

closure. Also during August, essential items such as diesel, chlorine, spare parts and water pipes needed for construction and repair of water and sanitation facilities in Gaza were blocked at the crossings, preventing necessary repairs of an already fragile water and sanitation system.

In Gaza the MPs were able to visit a number of Welfare Association projects. The first port of call was the El Beit El-Samed Palestinian Women's Charity, which aims to meet the medical, educational, social and cultural needs of women and children. Later, the delegation visited the Al Ahli Arab Hospital, located in Gaza City, which provides



From left to right: Karen Buck MP, Sara Apps, Richard Burden MP, Julie Morgan MP, Julia Wickham, Suhaila Tarazi, Martin Linton MP, Alistair Carmichael MP

healthcare for the poorest citizens of Gaza. Last year, WA donated £250,000 worth of medical supplies to West Bank and Gaza Hospitals, and a further £28,000 provided Al Ahli hospital with urgently needed pharmaceutical supplies and surgical supplies (especially high quality stitching threads) in addition to oxygen cylinders and fuel for ambulances.

At the end of the visit Richard Burden MP noted: *To properly understand the impact of occupation on the lives of ordinary Palestinians, you really have to see it with your own eyes. That is why I am grateful to the Welfare Association for facilitating this visit for Members of Parliament. We held a range of meetings with key political figures, government departments and humanitarian agencies and those were very informative. But this was not just a visit where MPs saw the inside of meeting rooms without seeing what life is like for ordinary people on the ground. We saw for ourselves the devastation which has been brought to Gaza by Israeli military strikes and the way the continuing blockade is strangling the area. We saw the impact of closures in the West Bank and witnessed the daily humiliation which Palestinians have to endure at checkpoints. And, yes, we saw it from the other side too, visiting the Israeli town of Sderot where residents live in fear of Qassam rockets fired from Gaza.*

Most of my colleagues were on their first visit to the area and were shocked by what they saw. I have been there many times before but you never become immune to the suffering you see there. Neither should you be. We all have a responsibility to do what we can to help bring an end to the occupation and to build the just peace which Israelis and Palestinians deserve.