

Gaza

4.30 pm

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise this issue today. Such a debate is timely not only because of the current situation but because of the information that I bring following the all-party group visit to Gaza last week.

For the sake of clarity and the avoidance of doubt, let me explain the trip. On 15 February, I was part of an all-party group that entered Gaza via the Erez crossing at the north-east of the strip. The attempt to enter began at 9 am and was eventually successful in the late afternoon. We left on the afternoon of 17 February, having spent two nights in the area. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who led the delegation, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Martin Linton) and to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather). I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd) and the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) would be here in the Chamber today if they could because we were all so profoundly shocked by the things that we saw.

The trip was funded by the Welfare Association, which is a respected non-governmental organisation and charity that is in receipt of Government funds, including £300,000 under the current emergency aid programme. It was efficiently organised by the Council for Arab-British Understanding. **Our tours in Gaza were supervised by the Welfare Association or the UN.** I want to be as clear as possible about the brief of the visit, which was exclusively humanitarian. We were there, in part, to see the aid projects that the British Government have funded.

I am aware that my hon. Friend the Minister also made a visit to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem on 18 January, on the day of the ceasefire, and that a substantial aid package of some £27 million has been announced by the Government. I do not wish to assume a lack of knowledge by the Minister, but I hope that, at least in my preliminary comments, I can talk about the situation in Gaza from the point of view of an eye witness. I can also talk about the testimonies of eye witnesses to the bombardment of Gaza. Such testimonies may indicate the scale of the problems and the difficulties that present themselves to the delivery of aid. The first and most obvious of those is that it is still difficult to get in and out of Gaza, because of the border restrictions imposed by the Israelis, let alone to bring relief to a 1.5 million people.

At the time of my hon. Friend's visit, it was the end of 23 days of the worst violence that has been seen in the Gaza strip since 1967. By conservative estimates, it left 1,285 people dead, 82 per cent. of whom were civilians. If one excludes police officers from that figure—and I do not see why we should—civilians accounted for 70 per cent. of that number, 22 per cent. of whom were children. Some 4,336 people were wounded in the attacks, 43 per cent. of whom were women and children. Most of those injuries were not

minor. They were serious injuries that require, in some cases, amputations and long and complex medical treatment. That is leaving aside the trauma and the psychological effect that many have suffered as a result of living in a very confined position. Many people describe Gaza as “the world’s largest prison”, and there was no route of escape during the intensive bombardment. About 2,500 homes were destroyed.

We visited Beit Hanoun and Izbet Abd Rabo and saw for ourselves entire villages that had been destroyed. At Abd Rabo, 5,000 people had been made homeless in one village and 200 killed. The whole civil apparatus of Gazan society has been destroyed: 60 police stations, 30 mosques and 29 schools. More than 120 commercial buildings have been completely destroyed and 200 partially destroyed. I stood in the ruins of the Parliament building—the Legislative Council—and wondered what the purpose was of destroying Gaza’s newly democratic institution. When we asked why such acts of wanton destruction had taken place, we always heard that it was for the Israelis to explain.

We visited four hospitals, which had come under varying degrees of attack, at al-Quds, al-Wafa, al-Hilal and al-Awada. I do not wish to go into detail about the degree of criminality involved because it is perhaps not a matter for this debate, but it may be for another debate. None the less, it is important to bear in mind the enormity of the offences that have been committed by the Israeli defence force—or Israeli occupation force—during this time.

According to the human rights organisations that we spoke to, including the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, which is a widely respected organisation, such actions may well amount not only to war crimes but to crimes against humanity and to ethnic cleansing. The organisations spoke about the targeting of civilians in their homes, the use of civilians as human shields, the killing of people in cold blood and the targeting of medical staff. I have already said that the overwhelming majority of people killed during the attack were civilian, and also that entire areas were razed to the ground. I raise such points, because they emphasise the difficulty that the Government will face when they have to deal with the Israeli authorities over the supply of humanitarian aid. Moreover, such points are relevant because although we have no new Government in Israel at the moment, we are anticipating a Government that is far to the right of the Government who led the invasion and who may, unfortunately, include racist and fascist elements.

Martin Linton (Battersea) (Lab): It is now more than five weeks since the end of the Israeli invasion. Does my hon. Friend not think that it is a great shame that the intense humanitarian need that we saw all too vividly in Gaza should have to wait so long before the crossings are fully open? Does he not think that it is incumbent on all parties concerned, particularly the Israelis but also the other parties to the agreement, to do everything that they can to open those crossings? The Gazans should not have to wait for the Israelis to form a Cabinet—that could take months—nor should they have to wait, however long it takes in Cairo, to find a complete settlement between Hamas and Fatah. The needs of the Gazans are immediate. The crossings must be opened as soon as possible so that their humanitarian needs can be met.

Mr. Slaughter: My hon. Friend anticipates what I was about to say and the questions that I was going to pose for the Minister at the end of my remarks.

The political context is inseparable from the humanitarian context in that sense. We were privileged when we reached the west bank to meet the Prime Minister, Salam Fayyed, and the chief of staff to President Abbas, Rafiq Hussein. The clear message from the Palestinian Authority is that it is difficult to negotiate with the Israelis at all at the moment, because of the Israeli attitude and the Authority's weakness and disorganisation. The Palestinians are concentrating on Palestinian unity, which is long overdue, and external aid, both material and in terms of pressure on the Israeli Government, to achieve what my hon. Friend suggested.

I shall give two examples of the problems with aid, although I do not imagine that my hon. Friend the Minister underestimates them. We visited al-Wafa hospital. It is not an emergency hospital, but a hospital for elderly people and for rehabilitating people with long-term problems arising from strokes, comas and so on. It is an extremely impressive institution. Two new blocks costing \$5 million had just been built—**one by the Welfare Association** and one by the Kuwaiti Government—and were due to open on 1 January. However, they were shelled almost into destruction. Certainly, they will need \$2 million or \$3 million to renew the buildings. Part of the hospital was funded by the Department for International Development. The gardens around the hospital, which were well laid out as part of the rehabilitation features, were paid for by DFID—there is a plaque proudly displayed on the wall to that effect.

We were in the surreal position of being shown around the gardens by local people, who pointed out where white phosphorous had landed and burnt into the ground. They showed us lumps of it. Four weeks after they landed on the hospital, those lumps were still smoking, and they would still burst into flames when poked or prodded. The Government ought to take up with the Israeli authorities the arrogance and disregard shown in that action.

We also visited the United Nations Relief and Works Agency warehouses in the centre of Gaza city. As was well documented, the warehouses were bombed by the Israelis, who must have known from their global positioning system co-ordinates exactly where they were. Phosphorous bombs and heavy ordnance—fortunately, in one case, the ordnance did not explode—were landing next to fuel tankers that were there to supply fuel to the people of Gaza. The fact that the Israeli defence force and the Israeli Government are prepared to do that says more about the scale of the task we face in dealing with them than I can.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea said, the problem of access is not new—it does not date from 27 December, but at least from the election of the Hamas Government. The response to years of telling the Palestinians that they had to adopt democratic standards seems to be to bomb their Parliament building. There have been two years of an almost complete blockade in which, ironically, the only way that Gaza continued to function, if it did at all, was through the tunnels under the Egyptian border.

The tunnels are now not only being bombed, but policed by the Royal Navy to ensure that materials do not get through. Of course, the policing is designed to stop arms supplies, and that is a necessary pre-requisite to peace, but disarming both sides, too, is a pre-requisite to peace. However, that puts the cart before the horse, which is an apposite analogy, given that a lot of the transport in Gaza is horse and cart because of the lack of fuel—

Martin Linton: Donkey and cart.

Mr. Slaughter: Donkey and cart, as my hon. Friend has corrected me. To close the tunnels before opening the borders has simply reduced the people of Gaza to an even more parlous state than they were in before.

We visited the **Qattan centre** in Gaza city, which is a fantastic children's centre. Any Sure Start project would be green with envy if it saw its facilities, but it serves more than 12,000 children and was three or four years behind its building schedule—fortunately it escaped bombing—because it has been impossible to get building materials such as glass or concrete over the border. We also visited the al-Moghraka sewage works and proposed water treatment plant. We did not see the plant, because it has not been built. The money is there—again, it was provided by the **Welfare Association and the European Union**—but the materials cannot be transported into the country. The consequence is that conditions are completely unsanitary. Sewage frequently floods the streets and fields, and it contaminates the water supply. It flows out into the Mediterranean, where the restriction on fishing means that virtually anything caught off the coast is inedible. That is the heritage from which the bombardment came.

As has been indicated in the debate, that makes the opening of the crossings the number one priority. The last week for which I have figures, which is only up to 18 February—I am again grateful to the PCHR, which documents such things—show that some materials and food containers are coming through the Kerem Shalom crossing; some fuel is coming through the Nahal Oz crossing; and a few containers of seed and fodder are coming through the Karni crossing. However, that represents a fraction both of the need and of the materials that were passing into Gaza before the election of the Hamas Government. Opening the crossings is a sine qua non of dealing with the current situation.

I hope to give my hon. Friend the Minister a chance to reply, but also to be precise about the issues that the Government need to address. First, we all agree that the crossings have to be opened, but how will that happen? Secondly, how is the aid that has been promised going to be delivered? I know that some of it has been delivered, but some of it still has to be delivered. Thirdly, how is Israel going to be made to live up at least to some of its international responsibilities? It seems to pick and choose when it wishes to adhere to those responsibilities. We must also include the question of reparations. We should surely look to the Israelis to pay for the wilful damage to United Nations and British Government property, and that of non-governmental organisations, leaving aside any question of criminal culpability.

In the longer term, there is clearly a much more serious and difficult problem in relation to the reconstruction of Gaza, to which the world has essentially turned a blind eye since the Israeli troops withdrew four years ago. The UK Government should take a lead on coming up with a game plan to deal with the problem. It seems to many informed observers—people who are much more informed than me—that the Israelis have a strategy to bomb or starve Gaza back into the stone age. The rationale is that Israel does not see Gaza as part of a one or two-state solution in the middle east, but as something to be parcelled off and got rid of, and to be entirely fenced off from the rest of Palestine.

The people of Gaza are not going to put up with that. I was privileged to hear a very passionate speech from the Palestinian ambassador last night at a meeting in the Palace in which he noted that Palestinians' impetus is to get into, rather than out of, Gaza. The activities of the Israelis are proving counter-productive. They bolster support for Hamas and Palestinian resistance, and make the peace process much more difficult. They are also making the process of reconstruction more difficult. Only the international community can do something about it, and the Government have a substantial role to play. I hope that the Minister, notwithstanding the difficulties of the situation, will be able to give me some comfort in his response.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Michael Foster): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter) and thank him for bringing us together to debate UK aid to Gaza, and for his extremely valuable insights on the humanitarian situation there, following his recent visit along with our hon. Friends. I enjoy reading his blog and the Gaza diary on his website, which gave an accurate reflection of his visit.

I welcome the other colleagues who were also present at the last Westminster Hall debate on aid to Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories, which took place in January. I pay tribute to their commitment and dedication to the issue.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to update the House on this important subject and on the events that have taken place since that debate. As my hon. Friend so graphically described, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains extremely grave. Some 1.4 million people—that is, nearly the entire population—still depend on some form of humanitarian aid. Scheduled power cuts of six to eight hours occur in most of Gaza every few days, and unscheduled power cuts continue. Some 50,000 people are without running water, and a further 100,000 receive running water in their homes only every seven to 10 days. About 21,000 homes were destroyed or badly damaged during the conflict. The United Kingdom focuses on alleviating suffering and helping to rebuild the lives of those devastated by the conflict.

As hon. Members will be aware, the UK has pledged nearly £27 million for the relief effort in Gaza. Of that, we have spent more than £15 million. When I last spoke to the House on the issue, I explained how the UK was rapidly spending the money that it had pledged, including funding for the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and non-governmental organisations, which are providing food, shelter, safe

drinking water and medical treatment, as well as providing for the clearance of unexploded ordnance.

Since that debate, new commitments have included almost £1 million to Mercy Corps to provide shelter and emotional support to children and young people traumatised by the conflict; more than £660,000 to Islamic Relief for psychosocial support, house repair and emergency school rehabilitation; more than £420,000 to Handicap International to provide emergency medical care for 21,000 extremely vulnerable people; £340,000 to UNICEF to co-ordinate the effective provision of emergency water and sanitation; and £15 million to the World Food Programme for distribution of food vouchers.

I am pleased to report that the money provided by the UK is having an impact on the ground. For example, our funding to Oxfam has helped to provide tens of thousands of ordinary people in Gaza with essentials. Every day, Oxfam water tankers distribute drinking water to as many as 60,000 people in the worst affected parts of north Gaza, and since the end of January, Oxfam has provided hygiene kits to 2,100 families.

Our funding has helped Handicap International to open three new support centres in Gaza where people with injuries and disabilities can go for treatment. Handicap International has also provided four hospitals with 71 pieces of equipment—including wheelchairs, crutches and walking frames—to help those with injuries. The contribution of the Department for International Development to the Mines Advisory Group has helped it to clear unexploded ordnance from all United Nations Relief and Works Agency schools, allowing 220,000 children to return to school.

Those are only a few examples of the difference that UK aid is making to the lives of ordinary Gazans. None the less, there are still many more people to reach. If humanitarian workers do not have adequate relief items, safety and access to those whom they need to reach, they cannot do their job. The issue of access was raised in the previous debate and by my hon. Friend in this debate. I remind the House that it was a problem long before the current crisis. It is imperative that action be taken. The borders must be opened. We need to find a solution urgently so that Palestinians living in Gaza can get the help that they need in a way that also addresses Israel's security concerns.

Access for people and humanitarian supplies must be increased to meet the genuine humanitarian needs of the people in Gaza. The UN has said that only 20 to 25 types of relief item are getting into Gaza, out of 4,000 different items needed. Items turned away include school textbooks, dates, plastic bags used by the UN to distribute food aid and even equipment used to store medical vaccines. In addition, the UN estimates that 450,000 litres of fuel are needed daily to operate the Gaza power plant at full capacity. The Israeli Supreme Court has ruled the daily humanitarian minimum to be 314,000 litres, yet since the ceasefire, only about 260,000 litres have entered Gaza, resulting in continuing scheduled and unscheduled power cuts.

Access for humanitarian personnel is also problematic, as my hon. Friend has highlighted in his comments and on his blog, although there is some anecdotal evidence that the

situation is improving. However, since the cessation of hostilities, the Israeli authorities have allowed only limited numbers of international aid workers into Gaza. Of 178 requests to enter Gaza submitted by international NGO staff members in January, only 18 staff members were allowed in by the end of the month.

We are continuing to press at the highest levels for increased access. During my visit to the region last month, I spoke with Isaac Herzog, the Israeli Minister responsible for coordinating the relief effort, and pressed for increased access. That led to a public Israeli commitment to facilitate access for 500 aid trucks a day in the near future. The Foreign Secretary has also discussed access with Israeli Foreign Minister Livni, and our Prime Minister has written to the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, on the same matter. We are in regular discussions with our partners in the US and UN on how access can be improved. It will be vital to see progress on the issue before the international conference on Gaza reconstruction takes place next week in Sharm el-Sheikh.

To address my hon. Friend's point about tunnels and access, we have made it clear to Israel that closing the tunnels without opening the crossings will do nothing to help Israel's security concerns about arms smuggling through the tunnel regions. We have also made it clear that the opening of the Karni crossing point, with its conveyor facility, is vital to allowing wheat flour across in sufficient volumes to meet the staple food requirements of the people in Gaza.

How we take forward the reconstruction of Gaza is critical. Fully rebuilding Gaza will take time, money and commitment from everyone involved. It will also take courage on the part of the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships. The first stage of the process is early recovery, which includes rehabilitating water supplies and sewage facilities, repairing and reopening schools, and moving people from tents to permanent housing. The Palestinian Authority estimates that that will cost \$1 billion.

The international conference that I mentioned will be a first and welcome chance for donors to discuss the opportunities and challenges for an early recovery programme and, importantly, to make their pledges. In the longer term, full reconstruction will be needed. The World Bank, the European Community and the UN will take the lead on a full needs assessment in Gaza, working closely with the Palestinian Authority. Donors will need to provide funding. We would, of course, welcome an Israeli contribution to reconstruction in Gaza.

On the breach of international humanitarian law, I remind my hon. Friend that the UN Human Rights Council, in its resolution of 12 January, decided to send an international fact-finding mission to investigate violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law by Israel in Gaza. We will consider the results carefully—

5 pm

Sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(11)).