

Parliamentary Briefing
3pm - 4.30pm on Wednesday 21st November, House of Commons.
Hosted by the Britain Palestine All-Party Parliamentary Group
and Welfare Association.

Richard Burden MP introduced John Ging, Director UNRWA Operations in Gaza.

Gaza as a Hostile Entity: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

Recently Israel declared Gaza a hostile entity and on that basis has been implementing a new series of crushing sanctions significantly adding to the human misery and suffering of 1.5 million civilians in Gaza

Public statements on behalf of the Government of Israel link these sanctions to protection of the Israeli civilian population under daily assault from rockets fired from Gaza. This presupposes that the civilian population in Gaza are either themselves responsible for, or somehow more capable of, stopping the rocket fire than the powerful military of the occupying power.

My message here today is, that not only are these sanctions, which are indiscriminate and collective in their impact, not working, but because of their profound inhumanity, they are in fact counterproductive to their stated purpose. Furthermore, while Gaza is not yet an entity where the majority of its people are hostile to their neighbor, it inevitably will be if the current approach of collective punitive sanctions continues.



Left: Richard Burden MP and Right: John Ging Director UNRWA Operations in Gaza

Why therefore are the current policies being pursued with such vigor when there have been so many sincere statements of concern and support for the plight of the civilian population in Gaza and those statements including by the Government of Israel and senior members of the International community, emphasize the imperative to avert a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, yet one continues to develop.

The answer in my opinion is also the reason why I am here today and that is that I am increasingly of the view that those of us on the ground have failed in our duty to effectively convey the true scale and impact of the humanitarian problem that is developing in Gaza.

We take in good faith the frequent expressions of concern from both Israel and the wider international community, we are confident that if the facts as they are, were fully known, a more humane and legal approach would be pursued.

In defense of the outside world, it is very difficult to gain a comprehensive representation of the daily reality for ordinary people through a two minute TV report or from the cockpit of an aircraft or turret of a tank, you must be on the ground for days and weeks to begin to appreciate the full horror of the humanitarian situation.

I take this opportunity to compliment the Parliamentary delegation from this House who visited Gaza in September and I encourage more visits and also to the Israeli population living within rocket range of Gaza, because it is through meeting with the civilian populations on both sides that one gets the clearest sense of the price that they are paying for the current political failure to effectively address the reasons generating the violence.

So allow me to bring you a sense of the daily reality for the civilian population of Gaza, who have been living under occupation for almost 40 years and are who are now struggling to survive the effects of the most severe and prolonged closure regime ever.

Simply put, it is a bewildering and miserable subsistence for the entire civilian population of Gaza at the moment. The source of bewilderment is the fact that there is no tangible basis for hoping that

it will get any better any time soon, in fact over the past two years every hopeful opportunity has been for them irrationally dashed and followed by even worse circumstances. Gazan's expect better of their neighbor and they expect more of the International Community, all of whom as I have already said, regularly express concern about their humanitarian plight, but to no avail as their living conditions continue its relentless downward spiral, to what can now only be described as truly appalling.

To bring you a sense of the daily reality, allow me to start with the Casualty figures for this year. 649 Palestinians have been killed and 2,819 have been injured, in those figures are the deaths of 63 children with a further 86 children injured. It is an undisputed fact that those young children did not deserve to die or be injured and yet they have paid the price for political failure, 63 of them the ultimate price.

Lets also be very clear about the security challenge that we face, living in the midst of the civilian population of Gaza are those who are bent on the violent destruction of Israel, they fire rockets into Israel on an almost daily basis, terrorizing the civilian population within range, a total 2 Israeli's have been killed and 99 injured this year as a result this rocket fire. The targeting of the civilian population in Israel is totally unjustified, illegal and inhumane.

After the violence, the most devastating issue impacting on the humanitarian situation in Gaza is the lack of access for people and supplies in and out of the Gaza Strip, in essence nothing, but a hand

full of privileged persons gets in and out and only a restrictive list in limited quantities of humanitarian supplies gets into Gaza. Most recently the Government of Israel decided to reduce the supply of fuel and electricity to Gaza. These draconian measures have a devastating impact on all aspects of human existence in Gaza. I will briefly mention a few:

The impact on the medical situation for those affected is quite simply atrocious, 91 of 416 essential drugs are in chronically short supply or have run out altogether. Almost 800 patients needing treatment abroad are currently denied permission to leave Gaza, it is very difficult to convey through words the physical suffering of those who are ill and the mental anguish caused to their families by these decisions to deny them access to the life saving medical care that they urgently need.

The food situation is equally bad, with almost 1.2 million Gazan's now relying on handouts of Food from the UN. It is all the more tragic as this is a man made problem rather than the result of a natural disaster. I must highlight that our available resources are now so overstretched, we are only providing 61% of the daily calorie intake needed to sustain life, which means that those who have no other means to supplement our ration are hungry and their nutritional status is in significant decline. For example, at present we do not have sufficient funding to provide just one high nutrient biscuit per day to the 200,000 school children in UN schools.

And what about the water and sanitation situation, it is one of the most obviously visible examples of the third world status of Gaza's overwhelmed infrastructure. We welcome Mr Blair's inclusion of Gaza sanitation projects in the first round of the investment in infrastructure as we had the disgusting spectacle of a tsunami type flood of millions of litres of human waste and waste water drowning an entire village in northern Gaza causing death, injury and destruction when the banks of one of the overloaded reservoirs burst in March of this year. And I might add that this was a tragedy that had been predicted for four years without response.

And of course the sealing of Gaza from the outside world, has destroyed the economy, 80,000 employed in the productive private sector have lost their jobs in the past 5 months, precious jobs providing the dignity of work and the foundations of a viable and sustainable economy, which took years to nurture, destroyed in a matter of months. The Agriculture sector once the source of so many plans and hope, also lies in ruins, unable to export their produce.

An entire population trapped, unable to leave, means that as well as the patients, 660 students are denied transit through Israel to resume their studies abroad including in the UK and the USA. Equally, thousands of migrant workers who returned for a holiday to Gaza prior to the closure of the crossings points in June are also unable to return, many with time limited work permits that have already expired – All of this is of course generating exasperation and desperation for those involved. Even high profile Human Rights Activists like Raji

Sourani the Head of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights is denied permission to leave Gaza, an invitation by Mr Blair for a meeting this not gain him even a momentary parole from Gaza.

By what other definition or name can these sanctions be described other than arbitrary, punitive and collectively imposed on a civilian population, themselves helplessly caught in the middle of a conflict.

And having described all of this very real and painful human suffering, I must also highlight that UNRWA's preoccupation with a less visible destruction, but one with even more devastating consequences in the longer term and that is collapsing educational standards. The collapse revealed in failure rates of up to 90% in basic literacy and numeracy is the inevitable cumulative consequence of years of occupation, poverty, violence and under funding.

I hope through these examples I have conveyed to you some sense of the humanitarian impact of the current policies on the population of Gaza and that almost every family is facing a daily personal crisis, powerless to change or even escape their current circumstance. They therefore depend on our help and not just for food, medicine or a blanket, they need help to recover a dignified life and a better prospect for their children. So my message to you here today, is that the current sanctions are indiscriminate in their impact and are creating substantial human suffering and misery for the entire civilian population in Gaza which is inevitably feeding a cycle of frustration

and despair, which in turn is the fertile recruiting ground for extremists.

I therefore appeal to you to use your considerable influence to ensure that the current designation of Gaza as a hostile entity does not become through action or inaction, a self fulfilling prophesy. The prospect that it will if we remain on our present course is so inevitably obvious to those of us on the ground, that I am compelled to discard the usual niceties of diplomatic speak and say to you bluntly, the current policy of collective and inhumane illegal sanctions against the civilian population in Gaza is actually supporting the agenda of the extremists.

In our 212 UN schools in Gaza, we teach the 200,000 children Human Rights values and the importance of the Rule of Law in all circumstances, now more than ever, through our actions, we need to give example of our commitment to these inviolable principles which underpin our civilization.

I appeal to those that can help, to do so, to break the current provocative and retaliatory cycle of violence and take the agenda back from those engaged in violence by measuring all action against international humanitarian and human rights standards. I do not underestimate the formidable courage and wisdom that will be needed to exercise such restraint, but quite simply we can draw on the experience of past failure to predict that further death, destruction

and devastation lies ahead for the people of Gaza and their neighbors until it is found.

Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders, they don't make the decisions today but will be shaped by the ones that we are making now and will in their turn shape successor generations. Now is our moment to influence not just the present but also the future, we won't have a second chance, it is an urgent and awesome responsibility with the most profound and far reaching consequences.

Thank you for allowing me to bring the reality of Gaza to you here today and we place great hope in your wise and courageous role in shaping an International response which holds accountable all action to humane and legal standards and replaces the current outlook of bewildered despair with one of real hope.

John Ging
Director of UNRWA Operations in Gaza.