

DIGNITY DENIED

IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

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ICRC



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Occupied

"To be a Palestinian means to face limits in every aspect of life. We are blocked everywhere: we lose our jobs, we cannot travel freely, we are separated from our families. To be a Palestinian means to be deprived of many things that to others are normal."

Mohammed, a Jerusalemite

Throughout the occupied Palestinian territories, in the Gaza Strip as well as in the West Bank, Palestinians continuously face hardship in simply going about their lives; they are prevented from doing what makes up the daily fabric of most people's existence. The Palestinian territories face a deep human crisis, where millions of people are denied their human dignity. Not once in a while, but every day.

Nothing is predictable for Palestinians. Rules can change from one day to the next without notice or explanation. They live in an arbitrary environment, continuously adapting to circumstances they cannot influence and that increasingly reduce the range of their possibilities.

In 2006, the West Bank Barrier separated the village of Abu Dis, home to 30'000 people, into two different parts separating families from each others, and farmers from their fields. Abu Dis used to be a thriving village on the road connecting East Jerusalem and Jericho. Since the road is blocked, some 50% of the 187 businesses along the road had to close down.

Trapped in the Gaza Strip

"Even after the disengagement, they did not leave us alone, they return every now and then, levelling our land, uprooting our trees and destroying our houses. In addition, you only know that you are inside the buffer zone when they shoot at you."

Saleh, farmer, Gaza

While the Gaza Strip is sealed off, the conflict between militants and Israel continues inexorably. Palestinian militants are launching rockets towards Israel almost every day. The Israeli army regularly carries out incursions deep into the Strip, air strikes and attacks from the sea. The civilian population remains trapped, with no escape possible, and is also affected by continued intra-Palestinian clashes.

Since the violent clashes between Hamas and Fatah-affiliated forces and the Hamas takeover in June this year, the crossing points remain closed to most Gazans. Studying or receiving medical treatment in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel or abroad has become nearly impossible, with the exception of patients who are in need of life saving treatment. And sometimes even they are not permitted to leave.

Since its unilateral disengagement in 2005, Israel has gradually established a buffer zone along the fence that surrounds Gaza, extending into the Strip's already cramped and overpopulated territory, with heavy consequences for the population. More and more agricultural land is being lost through the ill-defined extension of this buffer zone, and this is endangering anyone who gets too close. Indeed, Gazans are often killed, wounded or arrested when they approach the fence.

The ICRC team passing Erez check point on foot to evacuate a wounded civilian from the Gaza strip into Israel, where an ambulance is waiting. July 2007.

"It is difficult to find certain types of medication, such as antibiotics. We have already run out of cereals, and these days milk powder for babies is very hard to find. When you do find it, it is unaffordable for most, as its price has increased dramatically."

Dr Salah, pharmacist, Gaza

"First, they took land for the road, then more land for the security zone along the road, and then they destroyed my house because it was too close to the security zone. Now they have levelled the land again. I have nothing left."

Abdul, Gaza

ENOUGH TO SURVIVE, NOT ENOUGH TO LIVE

Gazans are getting increasingly anxious as shelves in grocery shops begin to empty because of the closure. Prices have skyrocketed, and the little that comes in to Gaza is virtually unaffordable. The prices of many foodstuffs, such as chicken, have at least doubled in the past four months, as stocks dwindle without resupply.

According to the World Food Programme, some 80,000 Gazans have lost their jobs since June 2007, increasing the already high rate of unemployment to the point where around 44% of the working population is jobless. Many local industries had to shut down and fire their personnel, as 95% of local production depends on imports of raw materials from Israel. Israel has restricted imports to what it deems "basic goods" – mostly staple food products – while other essential items needed to keep industry running or repair infrastructure cannot enter the Strip.

SHRINKING AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

Gaza farmers remember how green and fertile their land was in the recent past. Rich harvests from their citrus and olive trees were exported to the West Bank and Israel. Today, a large part of their land has been levelled and their trees uprooted during the frequent military incursions.

Some 5,000 farmers who rely on exporting tomatoes, strawberries and carnations to support their families are about to suffer a 100% drop in sales. The harvest season for these important crops started in June, but the embargo on exports has left them rotting in containers at the crossing points.

A woman looks for her personal belongings in the ruins of her house, destroyed during an Israeli military operation in Gaza Strip in September 2007.

"We don't know how this will end. Hospitals are fighting to get enough fuel. If they run out, hospital laundries will be rationed first. Then, medical equipment will be affected. And that would only be the beginning of a terrible end."

Abu Hassan, Gaza

CRUMBLING INFRASTRUCTURE

The infrastructure of the Gaza Strip is in a fragile state. Some eight months ago, a wastewater lagoon in northern Gaza containing hundreds of thousands of litres of raw sewage burst its embankments. Sewage flooded a Bedouin village, killing five people, injuring 16 others and destroying the homes of thousands. Since then, no substantial repairs could be carried out due to a lack of funding and Israel's restrictions on imports of spare parts.

Basic services such as hospitals, water and sewerage systems can only function if they are connected to the electrical grid. If the grid fails to provide the required power, all basic services will suffer.

Five people were killed and 250 homes were destroyed when a waste water reservoir collapsed in Beit Lahia, in the Gaza Strip.

Since Israeli air strikes destroyed a large part of the Gaza Power Plant in June 2006, it has been working at roughly half of its original capacity. The electrical supply to the Gaza Strip is precarious, unreliable and dependent on external sources. In its current state, it cannot produce sufficient power to meet the needs of the population.

As a result, essential infrastructure such as hospitals, water systems and sewerage systems is having to use backup generators. Relying on generators is risky, and creates new dependencies on fuel and spare parts, quite apart from the higher running costs. Current import restrictions are preventing delivery of essential fuel and spare parts, which means that vital services are in danger of complete collapse.

Restrictions on life in the West Bank

"I used to work at Nablus market. But in 2002, because of the city closure, I had to relocate my shop to Beita market, 12 km from my house. Because of the checkpoint, it would take me two hours to reach my shop. So I had to move to Beita, and I only visit my family on Wednesdays, when the market is closed. I miss my children."

Murad, Nablus district

A Palestinian farmer waiting at the West Bank Barrier gate separating him from his olive groves located behind the Barrier, in the area of Ariel settlement.

Erlend Linklater/CRC

"We were woken up by the light of the flames. We ran out and saw that our olive trees were burning. The fire brigade could not reach the fields because the gate was closed. Our fields are behind the West Bank Barrier and we cannot access them every day, so we could not clean the land properly. That evening, we could do nothing but watch our trees burn, because the gate was closed."

Farmers from Beitunia, Ramallah district

ACCESS TO LAND

The humanitarian situation in the West Bank is also deteriorating day by day. Palestinians stand by powerlessly as their land is confiscated. Over the years, Israeli settlements and roads have expanded, taking over more and more of the land that the same families have cultivated for generations.

Since the construction of the West Bank Barrier, which lies deep inside Palestinian territory, large tracts of farming land have been out of reach for farmers, as the Barrier cuts off many villages from their lands. During the summer, farmers helplessly watched as wild fires destroyed olive trees isolated behind the Barrier. They were barred from the area because the gate was not scheduled to open or they lacked the appropriate permit. Some of the trees had taken over fifty years to grow – two generations of labour and care lost in one night.

To get the permits needed to access his own land, a farmer has to fight his way through a bureaucratic maze, where he will be asked to provide an array of documents proving land ownership and residency. Most farmers spend hours at the offices of the Israeli Civil Administration applying for these permits. Many applications are eventually rejected on security grounds, which may include a relative once having been in an Israeli prison.

Palestinians queuing at Huwara checkpoint, one of the two entry passages along the main road connecting Nablus to the rest of the West Bank. Private vehicles are not allowed through this check point, unless the owner holds a special permit.

ACCESS TO ROADS

Many West Bank roads that used to connect Palestinian villages to nearby cities are now closed off by concrete blocks, ditches, earth mounds or iron gates. These obstacles separate Palestinians from their lands, their water sources and even their rubbish dumps. They divide one community from another, villages from cities, and districts from each other.

People in the West Bank watch from their houses as Israelis use freshly paved roads, built on Palestinian land, connecting Israeli settlements to each other and linking them smoothly to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Palestinians have to use dirt tracks, taking long detours to reach their schools, work places, hospitals and places of worship, or simply to visit relatives and friends.

In the once booming city of Nablus in the northern West Bank, the population of 177,000 is limited to two exit roads. They are not allowed to continue southward in their own cars but have to use taxis, putting a further strain on their already limited economic resources.

"I had to build a high fence around my house to protect my children. Before, my children were stoned by settlers when they were playing outside. They stone us for the simple reason that we continue to live on our land and do not want to leave."

Anwar, Hebron

HARASSMENT BY SETTLERS

Palestinians living close to Israeli settlements are not only dispossessed of their land, but are often harassed by settlers. The number of assaults on civilians in the West Bank has grown steadily. ICRC data collected in the field indicates that the number of offences more than tripled in the last five years, while complete police investigations are rare and most of the time reach the conclusion that "the culprits could not be identified."

Olive trees chopped down by settlers in Wadi al Hussein / Hebron in 2005. Up to today, settlers continue to trespass into this land, belonging to Palestinian families.

An appeal for a dignified life

The dignity of the Palestinians is being trampled underfoot day after day, both in the West Bank and in Gaza.

Israel's harsh security measures come at an enormous humanitarian cost, leaving those living under occupation with just enough to survive, but not enough to live normal and dignified lives.

Israel has the right to protect its own civilian population. However, there should always be a sound balance between Israel's security concerns and the protection of the rights and liberties of the Palestinians living under occupation. So far, the balance between the Israeli legitimate security concerns and the right of the Palestinian people to live a normal life has not been struck.

The 1.4 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip continue to pay for conflict and economic containment with their health and livelihoods. Cutting power and fuel further compounds their hardship and is contrary to fundamental humanitarian principles.

In the West Bank, the establishment of Israeli settlements affects every aspect of Palestinians' lives and leads to the loss of much land and income, together with recurrent violence by settlers. Exhausting movement restrictions hinder access to work and have led to unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty.

Only prompt, innovative and courageous political action can change the harsh reality of this long-standing occupation, restore normal social and economic life to the Palestinian people, and allow them to live their lives in dignity.

An old woman from Budrus in Ramallah district, waits for a gate to be opened so as to reach her olive groves. She lost almost all the trees in fires, as she could not access her land frequently enough to clean off the dry grass. The fire deprived her and her family of their main source of income.

A Palestinian family crosses Huwara checkpoint, one of the two entry passages along the main road connecting Nablus to the rest of the West Bank. Private vehicles are not allowed through this check point, unless the owner holds a special permit.



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