



THE RT. HON. SIR ROBERT ATKINS MEP
Representing the NORTH WEST of ENGLAND

Contact Nos: 01995-602225 (H) 07770254444(M)
01995-605690 (Fax) 0032-228-45373 (Brussels)
E-Mail: ratsmep@sir-robertatkins.org www.sir-robertatkins.org



Conservatives
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My Visit to Gaza

Access

Yet again, Israel refused us access via its crossing-point so we arrived (and returned) via the Rafah Crossing in Egypt. This necessitates an arduous 6-hour coach journey and is an unbelievably slow and overly-bureaucratic procedure. It took us three hours to clear all the paperwork, etc. from Egypt but only 10 minutes into Gaza! There was some doubt initially as to whether we could enter Gaza because of the IDF bombing which had occurred two days previously (*October 27th/28th*) but the ceasefire held and we were able to cross.



Rafah Crossing

UNRWA- United Nations Relief and Works Agency

The two Deputy Directors told us that much had got worse since our previous visit, with the exception of partial reconstruction. There was restoration and rebuilding happening in the private sector, which we witnessed, largely as a result of the necessary materiel coming in through the tunnels. But the built environment is still badly damaged and rubble and detritus abounds everywhere.



The irony is that UNRWA has to import **all** its materiel for schools, housing, hospitals etc. - with the attendant bureaucratic delays, inordinate paperwork and extra cost (**15% more**) - from Israel. Additionally, all projects, design, timescale, materiel etc. have to be cleared with Israel, including details about drivers, vehicles, numberplates, mobile phones etc. Unavoidable vehicle or driver problems cause lengthy Israeli delays. For example, there is an urgent need for at least **10,000** new houses for Gazans displaced by IDF incursions and very little expectation that the construction will be allowed by Israel any time soon.



War Damage



The Agency, understandably, has to use official channels and cannot use “tunnel” products. Consequently, UNRWA (*i.e. the world’s taxpayers*) is penalised by Israel but HAMAS benefits from its taxation of the hugely-increased flow of “exports” coming through the tunnels which are both quicker and cheaper.

CROSSINGS

Effectively, all the crossings except **Kerem Shalom** are closed and “exports” to the West Bank ceased in May of this year. This means that about 60% of Gaza-based trade is removed from the businesses struggling to survive.

Israel has banned the transfer of money from Gaza to Israeli bank accounts so that there is a real shortage of cash in the Strip. Accordingly, banknotes have to be smuggled in by any and various vehicles or using dubious middlemen. Hardly conducive to legitimate trading! Not content with that petty restriction, Israel has now banned electronic transfers between banks in the West Bank and Gaza or Israel and even between company offices. This has the effect of preventing Gazan businessmen from purchasing in Israel, a further unjustified interference by Israeli authorities. Apparently, even President Obama and Hilary Clinton have remonstrated with Netanyahu about this but, after a token cessation, the process has been reinstated.

FISHING

There are some 3,000 fishermen in Gaza and they are restricted by the IDF from operating beyond 3 nautical miles offshore. That means limited catches of under-sized fish from the most polluted part of the Mediterranean. Now they even have to resort to attempting to fish from the beach.



FOOD

As I indicated in my last report, some 600,000 are fed daily by UNRWA of which about **300,000 are in abject poverty**. In 2001, **10%** of the population was reliant on food aid, it is now **60%**.



The photograph shows the **3 month ration for 7 adults** - to which must be added three sacks of flour - but budget cuts will force even this paltry ration to be halved from January 2012. It will mean also that half the refugee population in Gaza will be without **any food** in 2012. (*1.1 million refugees in a population of 1.54 million*) The blockade adds at least \$3 million to UNRWA's annual costs.

UNEMPLOYMENT

75% amongst 17-25 year olds and about 45% amongst the adult population. The UNRWA Job Creation Programme has been cut by 30%, with more in the pipeline. That has resulted in JCP options in agriculture, fishing, health and rubbish disposal all being stopped.



Training

EDUCATION (1)

DFID funds a number of educational projects and is well-regarded. However 12 schools are planned, costing £20 million of UK taxpayers' money, and UNRWA is wholly unsighted on start dates and materiel imports, which, as usual, are dependent on sanction by Israeli authorities. We were told that UNRWA tries to "front-load" the import of necessary

construction supplies so that there are not delays but, invariably, Israel finds some excuse to hold up an important component just at the key moment.



And it is still the case that **100 schools are needed urgently** to provide for an increasing child population and, to date, **only 12 have been built**. All the three schools that we visited were using ships' cargo containers as classrooms to provide extra teaching space and you can imagine the heat in high summer.

EDUCATION (2)

We visited two universities and had the chance to hear some students talk about their hopes, fears and reactions. All were high articulate - in fluent English - very bright and in despair about their futures. Freedom of movement is restricted by Israel so that foreign university placements are out of the question. Unemployment is 75% of the graduate age group. Cultural and religious pressures make career options for girls very difficult, even supposing there were jobs available for them.



Sadly, they did not think that they could change attitudes and simply wanted to get out of Gaza at all costs.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Gaza is knee-deep in rubbish, from building rubble to plastic bottles. Some enterprising people set up a scheme to re-cycle the plastic, paper etc. but, as soon as it became a successful operation, Israel stopped taking the processed waste - for "security reasons" - the constant undefined excuse for cessation. As mentioned earlier, the UNRWA waste and litter removal has been stopped for lack of funds.

Potable water and sewage treatment remain huge problems. **95% of water is of wholly unacceptable quality**, high in nitrates and salt, the only aquifer that supplies Gaza is severely contaminated - and getting worse! - and the costs of treating it grow daily. The situation is exacerbated unfairly by the fact that for every **80** gallons used by Palestinians, **300** gallons are taken by Israelis. New retrieval, desalination and treatment facilities are needed desperately but all is constantly delayed by the Israeli blockade.



The Drained Lagoon



Up until 2007, there was a lagoon of raw untreated sewage some **30 million litres** in size which needed disposal. Only after a serious flooding accident to an adjacent village, causing 30+ deaths and the ruin of hundreds of houses, did Israel allow the necessary equipment through to resolve the problem. Eventual remedial work, however, was destroyed by the IDF in 2008 and they have only just completed the rebuilding. Unsurprisingly, Gazans fear that Israel will damage it again, given any excuse to do so. **80,000 litres of raw sewage are discharged daily into the Mediterranean.**

NGOs

We had discussions with various representatives of local and international NGOs, such as *Oxfam*, *Save the Children* and the like. The latter were largely foreign managers, the former local residents. They represented most that is good and humanitarian in Gaza and they were more sad than angry at current events. Clearly, they are frustrated by Israel's constant determination to maintain the blockade and to make life impossible for Gazans. But, like the students, they were as critical of the West for expressing support for Palestine but always deferring to the USA when it comes to the crunch. UNESCO membership is a case in point. People simply do not understand how Palestine's long-overdue bid for statehood, beginning with a huge supportive vote for UNESCO, can provoke the hypocritical response from Western States that it does. I had no answer as to why the UK abstained and France voted in favour. I still don't.

BUSINESS

We had a very productive and informative dinner with six prominent businessmen. All were Gaza-born, although one was also a UK citizen and another US. They were at the end of their tether over the Israeli blockade. The CEO of Pepsi-Cola told us that he had lost 50% of his trade with the West Bank.



They suggested that Israel was trying to force Gaza into Egypt's sphere of influence, something deeply opposed by locals, as their historic and ethnic links are with the West Bank and Jerusalem. As one put it, *"If Israel really wants peaceful co-existence with its neighbours, it must stop the blockade and do business with us all - politically as well as economically. Everyone assumes - wrongly - that Palestinians want rid of Israel when actually it is Israel that wants rid of Palestine."*

They were also of the view - shared by me - that the prisoner deal with HAMAS was deliberately designed by the Israeli Government to cause maximum embarrassment to FATAH following President Abbas's triumph at the UN.

PRISONERS

We met about a dozen of the newly-released prisoners. There are still **5000** in Israeli gaols. This was a very tense meeting, with at least one participant carrying a loaded pistol! Most of them had been in gaol for terms varying between 20-30 years - a lifetime sentence. Of course, they are no angels and I pressed them for details of their offences which were described as *"heroic actions against the enemy"* i.e. violence, murder and destruction of property.

However, their treatment, before trial and during their imprisonment, appears to me to be disgraceful and well outside the Geneva Convention. Severe torture during interrogation, dubious evidence and representation at their trials, regular violence against them in prison, sleep deprivation, hot/cold rooms, head-bagging, lack of proper medical care and refusal to allow family contact were some of the charges laid against their Israeli custodians. Torture until death during interrogation apparently is acceptable to Israeli courts. And a sinister unit called METZAR(?) regularly takes over sections of a gaol for up to 12 hours at a time to implement unrecorded beatings and other violent procedures. As to their veracity, I am not in a position to judge, but if there is a scintilla of truth in the prisoner allegations, they must be investigated and relayed to the international community. Only in that way can the truth be established and if necessary, legal action taken against the perpetrators.

PLC

The chief objective of our delegation was a visit to and detailed exchange of views with members of the **Palestine Legislative Council**. This was at the Parliament's Headquarters and comprised representatives of all the political parties. As before, I felt that the HAMAS MPs were much more far-sighted than FATAH which, in Gaza, is in a minority.



The various party spokesmen, and their supporters were highly critical of the failure of Western Governments and EU Member States to take action against Israel's illegal blockade of Gaza, its continuing contraventions of UN Resolutions, its treatment of Palestinian prisoners and the wholly illegal construction of new settlements.

They fail to comprehend how other aspirant states in the world can have their causes supported but, because of some countries' collective guilt over Israel, fear of or support for the USA or sheer refusal to acknowledge Israel's intransigence over peace negotiations, Palestine is always the guilty party and forgotten or ignored.

SUMMARY

1. The blockade is illegal, inhuman and designed to bleed the life out of Gaza. **It must be lifted.**
2. Israel, the USA, the ineffective Quartet and EU **must** include HAMAS in any negotiations. They are too influential and powerful to ignore and they are not going away.
3. Even in this most difficult economic climate, UNRWA funding for the poorest, sickest and most-deprived citizens of Gaza must be restored or alternatives found. Otherwise people will starve next year, children will not be educated and violent unrest, inevitably, will ensue.
4. Pressure must be exerted on Israel to make her realise that what she is doing in Palestine generally, and Gaza specifically, is not only illegal under international law but is also inhumane.
5. There is incomprehension and dismay at the continual failure by Western nations to support Palestine in its campaign for nationhood, exacerbated by the complete refusal of Israel, supported by the US Congress, to negotiate on equal terms or to cease the construction of new settlements on Palestinian land.

The core question is really quite simple. How much longer can Israel continue to get away with it? Given her reliance on a fickle and uncritical US Administration and the purblind support of the US Congress, when will anyone stand up to her?

With our historic and economic links to Palestine and the Arab world, and our traditions of justice and fair play, why does Britain not take up the challenge? Given a proper lead, most of Europe would follow and it would begin to resolve this intractable issue once and for all.

Paul Atkins

