

OCHA

occupied Palestinian territory

humanitarian

UPDATE

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Overview

With the endorsement by the Palestinian Legislative Council of Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas's government on April 29 by 51 votes to 18, the long awaited "Roadmap" was announced one day later.

The Quartet representatives confirmed this to be the final version of the plan and that it is applicable and non-negotiable. The Roadmap seeks progress through reciprocal steps by the two parties in the political, security, economic, humanitarian and institution building fields under the auspices of the Quartet.

The Humanitarian index of the Roadmap directly calls upon the GoI to take measures to improve the humanitarian situation and refers specifically to the Bertini mission that visited the oPt in August 2002 (see below). The Bertini mission secured specific commitments from the GoI in terms of facilitating access to humanitarian supplies and personnel as a means to alleviating the situation and the Roadmap requests these commitments are met in full. It is important to emphasise that the commitments are to a degree subjective and do not replace the obligations on the GoI as the occupying power as set down under International Humanitarian Law.

Against the guarded optimism surrounding the release of the Roadmap, the situation in Gaza continues to deteriorate with a continuing stream of fatalities including women and children, demolition of homes and a tight internal closure reinforcing the external closure that has now been in place for over two years. Two suicide attacks occurred last week with the first occurring at Kafr Sabah railway station on April 24 that left an Israeli security guard dead while on 30 April three Israelis were killed in a bar in Tel Aviv.

GAZA

Continuing casualties

In one of the largest incursions into southern Gaza since September 2000, about 50 IDF tanks, APCs, jeeps and bulldozers moved from the border fence with Egypt on April 19 into the centre of Rafah refugee camp. Electricity and telephone lines were brought down, water and sewage points damaged while IDF snipers took up positions on buildings in Block K. Fierce clashes erupted with Palestinians reportedly using anti-tank missiles and explosive devices. During the incursion which lasted over 5 hours the IDF blew up two houses in Block K which according to the IDF concealed a tunnel, with the original blasts demolishing a further eleven homes in the densely populated area. Five Palestinians were killed aged 15 to 28 with a further 33 persons shot and wounded. A member of the IDF was killed during the incursion into the camp and three others were injured.

On 1 May, the day after the release of the Roadmap, the IDF entered the densely populated Shijia neighbourhood of Gaza City. Local reports state Israeli tanks backed by helicopters surrounded and later demolished the home of a Hamas member. In fierce clashes 13 Palestinians died including a two-year old struck by a bullet in the head, and a 13 year old boy.

In the southern end of Gaza, the IDF once again returned to Rafah in the search for smuggler tunnels demolishing a further four homes adjacent to the Egyptian border. Many homes in southern Rafah have been destroyed or vacated because of structural damage caused by repeated incursions that makes it impossible for continued occupancy.

The Secretary-General issued a statement on 1 May expressing concern about these Israeli military incursions into Gaza City and the Rafah refugee camp. He stressed that: "such actions, including the house demolitions, are contrary to international humanitarian law". He believes that they contradict the international community's efforts to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, following yesterday's presentation of the Roadmap to the parties.

FLECHETTE DARTS

The Israeli Supreme Court of Justice rejected on 27 April a petition submitted by PCHR and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel which demanded an absolute prohibition on the use of flechette tank shells, which are being used with increasing frequency by Israeli occupying forces in the oPt, particularly in the Gaza Strip. The court said that it would not intervene in the army's choice of weapons because use of flechettes was not banned outright in international law.

According to Human Rights Watch, "the Israeli Army doesn't use them in the West Bank because of potential risks to civilians. It makes no sense to keep using them in Gaza, one of the most densely-populated areas on earth." The Gaza Strip has a population density of some 3,273 persons per square kilometer -- eleven times that of the West Bank.

Flechettes are razor-sharp 3.75mm darts released from canisters that explode in mid-air and spray thousands in an arc some 300 meters long and 90 meters wide. Their wide "kill radius" renders flechettes particularly deadly. Their use in heavily populated areas contravenes two basic principles of the laws of war. The first is the prohibition against indiscriminate attacks, which means that forces cannot use weapons or mount attacks that do not or cannot distinguish between civilians and military objectives. The second is the requirement to take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize harm to civilians when choosing method and means of attack.

In response to the raids, the United States urged the Israeli military on Thursday to exercise restraint. "We deeply regret the civilian casualties that occurred today in Gaza," State Department spokeswoman Jo-Anne Prokopowicz said. We urge the Israeli government to take all appropriate precautions to prevent the death or injury of innocent civilians and damage to civilian and humanitarian infrastructure. This includes exercising restraint in undertaking operations in civilian areas."

Closure

Full closure was imposed on Gaza from April 16 to coincide with the start of the Passover holiday. One day earlier a Palestinian man had entered Karni crossing and killed two Israeli workers in a grenade attack. While external closure for the majority of Palestinian residents has been in place since October 2000, additional closures measures in Gaza were particularly harsh. Both the Beach Road and Abu Houli checkpoint were sealed effectively cutting off the central and southern areas from Gaza City and the north, thus preventing people from reaching hospitals, schools and work.

After five days of total internal closure, the road and checkpoint re-opened periodically, but opening and closing times were not clearly announced with the IDF frequently deploying tanks on the Beach road. Restricted movement resumed on April 24, nine days after the initial imposition of the curfew.

Karni crossing which serves as the main entry point to Gaza for food and supplies only re-opened on April 27 thus denying access to the World Food Programme and UNRWA service providers for 11 days. No alternative route for humanitarian assistance was offered by the Gol.

While the Erez Industrial zone employing over 3500 Palestinians has been re-opened, the border crossing into Israel still remains closed for Palestinians thus denying some 14,000 labourer's and nearly 1500 businessmen and traders access to work places inside Israel. The World Bank estimates that in Gaza the income dependency rate now stands at 18 persons so with 15,500 being denied access to employment and thus income, this will have direct implications for a further 279,000 individuals.

West Bank

Nablus: Eight Villages

A cluster of eight villages to the north west of Nablus – 'Asira Shamaliya, Burqa, Sabastiya, Beit Imrin, Yasid , An Naqoura, Ijnissinya and Nusf Jubeil have been experiencing significant access difficulties on account of the tight closure of roads by earth mounds, roadblocks and trenches in the vicinity of these locations. All side roads connecting these villages to the main road to Nablus are now closed, directly affecting over 20,000 people.

The only access route to Nablus involves travelling through checkpoints at Shave Shamoron settlement / IDF base and Beit Iba both of which close at 18.00. In addition, access through Beit Iba is only possible for Nablus ID-holders or those with "special permission". As a result of these restrictions, the majority of the residents of the eight villages use an "illegal" dirt road from Ijnissinya to Nablus which has frequently led to the confiscation of ID cards and even detention of those seeking to travel.

Health facilities are very limited with one private clinic in Sabastiya, with the nearest secondary care facilities only being found in Nablus and Jenin. The PRCS is able to offer an ambulance service and conducts an average of four daily transportations through Beit Iba /Shave Shamoron. After 18.00 permission is generally not forthcoming to access Beit Iba, besides which this checkpoint along with Shave Shamoron is considered among the most dangerous in the West Bank. As a result, the only other checkpoint allowing access to Nablus is Huwwara, to the south east of the city. While Huwwara also closes at 18.00, access can usually be facilitated by the PRCS in coordination with the ICRC.

Al Mawasi-Toufah Checkpoint

Access to Al Mawasi enclave via Toufah checkpoint in Khan Younis for international agencies is now possible, although it is far from unconditional, with prior coordination required with the DCL and remains arbitrary. For Palestinian residents of Al Mawasi however the situation remains extremely difficult. Men under the age of 40 and women under the age of 35 entry or exit is not permitted, except in medical emergencies (see box).

AL-MAWASI ACCESS

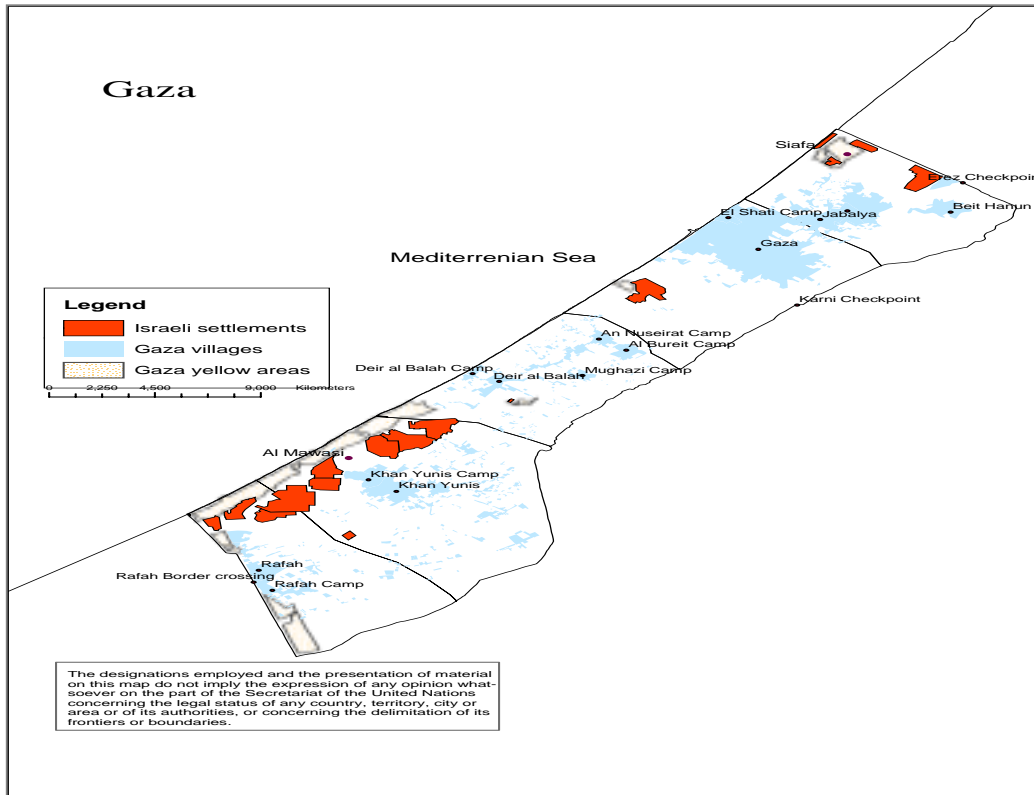
Ms Ragda is four months pregnant and has had two previous miscarriages thus necessitating monthly visits to a doctor in Khan Younis. She is under the required female age limit of 35 to move in and out of Al Mawasi and possessed the relevant papers from her doctor to allow her to leave via the IDF checkpoint at Toufah on April 27. But four days later when interviewed by OCHA staff she was still waiting to try and re-enter Al Mawasi to rejoin her family by the same checkpoint through which she had left. On April 30 she tried on seven separate occasions to pass through the checkpoint and was denied entry. Each time she explained to the soldiers she had been allowed to leave without any problems, she was a resident of Al Mawasi, pregnant and been in Khan Younis to see her doctor. None of these reasons were sufficient to allow her to pass. She was finally granted entrance 5 days later.

Dugit-Alei Sinai settlements

Prior to September 2000, over 100 Palestinian families used to live in the area between the Israeli settlements of Dugit and Alei Sinai in the north of Gaza. Now, only 36 families remain. In October 2002, the IDF built an electric fence to connect the two settlements that effectively created a Palestinian enclave that has no access to the coast. Entry and exit is only possible through a single "security" gate on the road leading to El Atara and Beit Lahia.

Of the 3800 dunums that originally belonged to the community only 400 dunums (less than 11%) remain cultivated as over the last two years the IDF has levelled or occupied most of the land on security grounds. More than 30 houses have been destroyed with 40 remaining; 28 wells have been destroyed leaving only 12 water sources to irrigate the lands. The repercussions on the local economy have been catastrophic. Restrictions imposed by the IDF only allow for one ton of produce to leave the enclave daily, meaning the majority of fruit and vegetables produced by the community are left to rot in the fields.

As with Al Mawasi, it is difficult to understand that these enclaves pose a serious security threat given that both are surrounded by a heavily militarised Israeli presence from army and settlers. In both cases, the closure is strangling the local economy and so leading to population displacement away from the settlement-dominated Gaza coast.



Humanitarian Monitoring Report

As referred to in the Road Map above, the Gol undertook a number of pledges during the visit of Ms. Catherine Bertini that have subsequently become known as the “Bertini Commitments”. These were delivered in the context of health, water, international organisations and fishing rights and were accompanied by quantifiable benchmarks. Since the adoption of the commitments, OCHA on the basis of information supplied by a number of sources including UN agencies, the PRCS and international NGOs has been monitoring the implementation of the commitments with monthly matrices submitted to the Task Force on Project Implementation (TFPI), to be taken up with the IDF.

OCHA has recently undertaken an analysis of the information available for January to March 2003 and has observed the following trends:

- consistent delays continue to be experienced by ambulances at checkpoints especially in the Nablus area;
- critical case patients still face denial of access at checkpoints on a regular basis;
- during military incursions, PRCS ambulances and staff have regularly come under fire in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention;
- a favourable response has been encountered from international NGOs to the recent de-centralisation of the DCL system throughout the West Bank;
- UNRWA staff continue to experience particular access difficulties;

- improved access to Al Mawasi has been evident since March, although conditional; and
- a failure to extend the fishing zone in Gaza up to 12 nautical miles.
- In future, the Humanitarian Monitoring Report will be distributed on a monthly basis to all interested agencies, and will also be available along with other OCHA material on www.reliefweb.int/hic-opt
- For information on closures and curfews, these continue to be monitored through the HIC and can be found under www.reliefweb.int/hic-opt