

Israel agrees to steps to ease humanitarian situation in Palestinian areas, UN envoy says

22 August – The Government of Israel had definitely turned a corner and had taken steps to address certain issues of "access" to avert a humanitarian disaster in the West Bank and Gaza, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Personal Humanitarian Envoy said today.

Speaking at a press briefing at UN Headquarters in New York on her recent eight-day visit to the Middle East, Catherine Bertini said that in her meetings with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders – including Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, as well as Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat – both sides had agreed that the humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza was serious. Left unattended, it would continue to deteriorate.

Already, Ms. Bertini noted, the unemployment rate was 65 per cent in the West Bank and 70 per cent in Gaza. Poverty and malnutrition were rampant and infrastructure was disrupted. Health was deteriorating as a result of breakdowns in providing services, such as deliveries of vaccinations. The harvest and fishery industries, meanwhile, were disrupted, and there was a greater than usual shortage of water.

"There was no disagreement about the cause of the situation - access," Ms. Bertini stressed. People didn't have access to jobs or services. The movement of people, goods and money were at a standstill. There was also no disagreement about the fact that the restrictions were created by the actions of Israel's army in the course of its duty to protect the lives of its people.

Israel's Government, however, had come to realize that those actions were eroding the daily lives of the people, she said, and had taken measures to ease the humanitarian situation created by the lack of access.

Ms. Bertini said that Israel had agreed to limit checkpoint stops for ambulances to no more than 30 minutes, and special systems would be put in place to ease the security burden on pregnant women and the seriously ill.

Seasoned soldiers and veterans would be placed at borders, she added, while access to water would be facilitated. Meanwhile, the previously agreed 12-mile limit on fishing rights would be respected and access would be granted to farmers for harvesting of crops – particularly during the all-important olive harvest coming up in October.

The Israeli Government had also expressed new support for the work of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Ms. Bertini said.