

FAO GLOBAL INFORMATION AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEM ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

SPECIAL ALERT

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PLACE: WEST BANK AND GAZA STRIP

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RAPIDLY DETERIORATING FOOD SITUATION IN WEST BANK AND GAZA STRIP

The food and overall humanitarian situation of the Palestinian populations in many areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGS) has deteriorated alarmingly. The closure of the borders between Israel and the occupied territories for the past 18 months, and the confinement of families to their homes have had serious humanitarian consequences: tens of thousands of Palestinians who earn a living for themselves and their families by working in Israel are now unemployed and without an income; farmers cannot freely tend their crops and livestock; fishermen in Gaza cannot pursue their means of livelihood; traders who buy and sell farm produce (which is highly perishable) cannot freely perform this important function, leading to the collapse of food markets; and households' economic and physical access to food has become exceedingly difficult. The total blockade of the WBGS has paralysed the Palestinian economy, which is so vulnerably dependent on Israel and already severely weakened by frequent border closures, to such an extent that it is now in a deep recession, with millions of people severely impoverished and extremely food insecure. The World Bank has estimated that over the past 18 months, the proportion of the population of WBGS living in poverty, under less than US\$2 a day, has risen to 50 percent up from 20 percent before the blockade. Malnutrition is on the increase, reflected in recent estimates of a 10.4 percent increase in the incidence of low birth weights and a 52 percent increase in the stillbirth rate in the West Bank. Humanitarian agencies operating in the territories report that many homes are now without water and electricity, and what little food they have is rotting.

Of serious concern is the ongoing large-scale destruction of important Palestinian infrastructure, including farm assets such as stores, irrigation systems, greenhouses, watering facilities, orchards, and even removal of topsoil from an estimated 8 000 hectares of land.

By severely restricting Palestinian access to international markets, Israel has become virtually the sole supplier of food to the WBGS, accounting for over 95 percent of the latter's total agricultural imports and almost 100 percent of its exports. Thus, border closures have extreme consequences for the food security of the Palestinian people. Other measures have included confiscation of agricultural land and water resources. It is estimated that freshwater resources available to the WBGS population amounts to 112 cubic metres/caput/year compared to 377 for Israel.

Since November 2001, FAO has had plans to field a mission to the WBGS to assess the food and nutrition situation but this has not been possible due to the prevailing adverse security conditions. Nevertheless, all available information points to a major catastrophe underway in the WBGS.

This report is prepared on the responsibility of the FAO Secretariat with information from official and unofficial sources. Since conditions may change rapidly, please contact Office of the Chief, ESCG, FAO, (Telex 610181 FAO I; Fax: 0039-06-5705-4495, E-Mail (INTERNET): GIEWS1@FAO.ORG) for further information if required.

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