



Humanitarian agencies salute the work of Human Rights Defenders in Hebron on the occasion of International Human Rights Day

Jerusalem, 10 December 2015

On the occasion of Human Rights Day, the UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Aid and Development Activities, Robert Piper and a group of UN and NGO leaders visited Hebron this week to see first-hand the situation of human rights defenders in Hebron, as well as the obstacles to Palestinian children's right to an education in a safe environment.

During the visit, the delegation, which included representatives of Action Aid, Diakonia, OCHA, OHCHR, UNICEF and UNRWA, spent time in the Israeli-controlled areas of Hebron (H2). The delegation was briefed by organizations providing a 'protective presence' for Palestinians. As part of their work, these organizations monitor and document access at checkpoints and accompany children to and from schools in areas where they are subject to frequent settler harassment and violence.

James Heenan of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recalled that human rights defenders have the right to pursue peaceful activities to protect the rights of others, and in turn to be protected in doing so. "The fact that these very people have themselves become a target is alarming," he said.

The visit also took them to Qurtuba school, where protective presence actors accompany some 100 children through check points to and from school every day. At the school, teachers reported that students these days are unable to concentrate and show signs of psychosocial distress and that they are terrified walking through checkpoints to and from school. Felipe Sanchez, Director of UNRWA Operations West Bank, confirmed this, saying "UNRWA teachers, social workers and mental health counsellors across the West Bank are reporting extremely high levels of stress and trauma. If no action is taken an entire generation of children and youth will be lost. Their future must be restored."

In the current wave of violence, Hebron city has had the highest number of Palestinian casualties in a single locality in the oPt, and increased movement restrictions have affected

access to services and places of work throughout the city. Of particular concern is the impact of the violence and the restrictions on the access of children to school due to checkpoints. 4,200 children pass through checkpoints on their way to and from school in Hebron every day. In this context, the reliance on protective presence actors has only become more acute.

During this period, obstruction by settlers and Israeli Security Forces of international organizations and local groups attempting to provide a protective presence and documenting human rights violations has also increased. Staff of these organizations have been subjected to physical attacks, arrest, threats by settlers and anonymous death threats. Three of the four organizations providing protective presence have even been obliged to temporarily pull out of H2 at times in October as a result of the threats. Since 3 November, the implementation of a closed military zone in H2 has further prevented these organizations from doing their vital work.

“Human rights defenders play a vital role in promoting human rights,” said Mr. Piper after the visit. “Protective presence organizations are on the front line of this work in the occupied Palestinian territory, embodying the support of the world community to the people of Hebron and defending the rights of Palestinian children, not least to a safe journey to and from school. They must be allowed to continue their work without violence, threats or retaliation.”

END

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Human Rights Day

Human Rights Day is observed every year on 10 December. It commemorates the day on which, in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). In 1950, the Assembly passed resolution 423 (V), inviting all States and interested organizations to observe 10 December of each year as Human Rights Day.

This year's Human Rights Day is devoted to the launch of a year-long campaign for the 50th anniversary of the two International Covenants on Human Rights: the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966.

The two Covenants, together with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, form the International Bill of Human Rights, setting out the civil, political, cultural, economic, and social rights that are the birth right of all human beings.

"Our Rights. Our Freedoms. Always." aims to promote and raise awareness of the two Covenants on their 50th anniversary. The year-long campaign revolves around the theme of rights and freedoms -- freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear -- which underpin the International Bill of Human Rights are as relevant today as they were when the Covenants were adopted 50 years ago. For more this year's theme and the year-long campaign, see the [website of the UN Human Rights office](#).