

UNICEF Press Centre

News Note

The members of the Inter Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs issued the following statement today. UNICEF is a member of the committee.

Statement on the humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories

10 April 2002

The heads of the major international humanitarian assistance agencies, United Nations, and non-governmental organizations * meeting in Rome took the unprecedented step of collectively expressing their deep dismay and outrage over the military actions in the occupied Palestinian territories and the consequences of such actions in exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Recent events have demonstrated continuing disregard for the protection of civilians. There are increasing and worrying incidences of the flagrant disrespect of international law and the security of humanitarian personnel.

The increased demand for emergency medical assistance is precipitating a medical crisis. The destruction of houses is leaving thousands homeless and without adequate shelter or protection. The imposition of a punitive curfew regime and the closure of communities to the outside have resulted in unreasonable restrictions on access to water and electricity, while providing little opportunity to replenish basic supplies of food and medicine. The destruction of physical infrastructure in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the weakening of institutions are placing the long-term future in jeopardy. This is a humanitarian crisis without precedent in its destructive impact on the Palestinian people and their institutions. The likely long-term consequences of this crisis for stability and durable peace are a cause for major concern.

We strongly deplore the restrictions on humanitarian access in the occupied Palestinian territories. The obstructions placed on humanitarian workers have led to unnecessary suffering and, in some cases, death. In particular, the detention of medical workers and ambulances has prevented access to the wounded, in gross violation of basic humanitarian principles.

Suicide bombings targeting Israeli civilians are morally repugnant and we condemn them. However, self-defense against such acts does not free Israel of its obligations under international humanitarian law or justify derogation from internationally recognised human rights. We strongly condemn the disproportionate use of force against civilian populations. We call for full respect of international humanitarian law, with assurances for the protection of civilians, and insist on the necessity of full freedom of movement of humanitarian workers.

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* The following agencies and organizations are represented in this statement: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund; United Nations Children's Fund; United Nations High Commission for Refugees; World Food Programme; World Health Organization; the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons; International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; International Organization for Migration; InterAction; the International Council on Voluntary Agencies; the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response.