

**Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs****UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF WITNESSES THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF CLOSURES IN THE WEST BANK**

(New York/Geneva/Jerusalem, 16 February 2008): John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, today visited the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. While there, Mr. Holmes gained insight into the many difficulties that Palestinian residents in the West Bank face in obtaining vital services and job opportunities. He also assessed the impact that the restrictions on movement of people and goods, caused by numerous physical closures and strict permit regulations, have on the daily lives of civilians in the West Bank.

Mr. Holmes visited the Augusta Victoria Hospital, where he was briefed by the Chief Executive Coordinator for Hospitals in East Jerusalem about the increasing difficulties that West Bank patients face in getting to hospitals that provide critical life-saving treatment such as radiotherapy, dialysis and paediatric oncology. The two officials also discussed the difficulties that health workers who hold West Bank identity cards - about 70 percent of the medical staff - continue to face in reaching their places of work due to the existing permit regime.

Mr. Holmes also stopped in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Abu Dis to view the Barrier that divides Palestinians from Palestinians. Neighbourhood residents, who used to be able to reach their hospitals by car within 10 minutes, now often need an hour or more to do so, as they have to travel through Bethlehem to clear the checkpoints in Gilo.

Afterwards, Mr. Holmes crossed the Gilo checkpoint and stopped at the Patriarch Road viewpoint near Bethlehem, where he saw for himself the enclaves created by the Barrier. He also examined the implications that further Barrier construction would have for the daily life of Palestinians, including limitations on obtaining vital services, on economic activity in Jerusalem, on access to agricultural land and on further urban and agricultural development in the West Bank areas not under Palestinian control (Area C).

"It is clear that the route of the Barrier, the expanding settlements and the closure regime and associated controls are severely damaging the social and economic structures of the West Bank and contributing to increased aid reliance, poverty and unemployment. The promised relaxation of the closures is urgently needed, as a minimum first step towards the kind of economic development which can underpin successful peace negotiations," said Mr. Holmes.

From Bethlehem, Mr. Holmes continued to Hebron, where he met with the Governor, members of the municipality and representatives of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, who briefed him on the consequences of the lack of access on socio-economic activity in the area, and the division in the city arising from the Israeli settlements there. Mr. Holmes also met with Palestinians from Hebron's Old City, who shared their concerns about the disruptions to their daily lives, including large-scale closures of the central market area.

On Sunday, 17 February, Mr. Holmes will travel to Sderot in the northern Negev in Israel, where he will meet with the city's Mayor and visit the area recently hit by rocket attacks. Later, Mr. Holmes will travel to Tel Aviv to meet with Head of the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) of Israel's Ministry of Defence. Upon his return to the West Bank, he will meet with representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing humanitarian aid throughout the occupied Palestinian territory.

For further information, please call: Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 917 892 1679; Elisabeth Byrs, OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570; Judith Harel, OCHA-Jerusalem, mobile + 972 (0)54 66 00 528; Khulood Badawi, OCHA-Jerusalem, mobile + 972 (0) 54-448-4632; Christopher Gunness, UNRWA-Jerusalem, mobile + 972 (0) 54-240-2659. OCHA press releases are available at <http://ochaonline.un.org> or www.reliefweb.int.