

**Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs****UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF: ONLY A JUST AND LASTING PEACE CAN END HUMAN SUFFERING IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE**

(New York/Geneva/Jerusalem, 17 February 2008): John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, today travelled to the town of Sderot in west Negev, Israel, an area severely affected by the rocket attacks launched from the Gaza Strip. During his visit, Mr. Holmes was able to see for himself the impact of violence on the daily lives of Israeli families.

Upon his arrival in Sderot, Mr. Holmes met with the city's Mayor, who briefed him on the difficulties faced by local civilians as a result of almost daily rocket attacks. According to local officials, the seven years of violence have taken a significant toll on the city and lives of its residents. Numerous houses have been hit and damaged since 2001, commercial activities have considerably slowed, and as many as 12 percent of some 22,000 Sderot residents have chosen to leave the town. Moreover, some 1,200 elementary school children have to travel daily to schools outside of the city.

"There are no military targets in this city. These victims here are innocent civilians. There is no time to lose in putting an end to this vicious circle of violence. More violence will not bring peace to the people of Sderot. But cutting back on fuel and electricity supplies to Gaza is unlikely to stop the rockets either. It can only be achieved through political negotiations aimed at a comprehensive just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, who at the end of the day have to live together," said Mr. Holmes.

Later, the Emergency Relief Coordinator visited Hadar school, an educational institution for mentally and physically disabled children, and Hossen emergency and rehabilitation centre for the community, where he learned about the psychological impact of the recurrent attacks on children and adults. He also visited a house that was hit by a rocket two days ago and talked to the family.

"The people of Sderot and the surrounding area have had to live with these unacceptable and indiscriminate rocket attacks for seven years now. There is no doubt about the physical and psychological suffering these attacks are causing. I condemn them utterly and call on those responsible to stop them now without conditions," said Mr. Holmes.

Mr. Holmes also travelled to Tel Aviv, where he met the head of the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) of the Israeli Ministry of Defence. During the meeting, Mr. Holmes expressed his concerns over the severe humanitarian consequences of the massive reduction in humanitarian and other goods entering Gaza and the rigid closure regime inside the West Bank, including the toll that such measures have on the ability of humanitarian actors to deliver assistance. He sought assurances about increasing the quantities of materials getting into Gaza, without jeopardizing Israel's security, in particular for a large number of frozen humanitarian and development projects, and proposed more reliable and predictable mechanisms for delivery of vital spare parts and supplies in areas such as medical equipment and water and sanitation systems.

From Tel Aviv, Mr. Holmes travelled to Ramallah in the West Bank, where he discussed with representatives of a group of Palestinian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which providing assistance throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, how humanitarian efforts could be further strengthened and ways in which the United Nations could support the NGOs in their work.

Mr. Holmes will conclude his mission to the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel on Monday, 18 February, when he will meet with senior representatives of the Israeli and Palestinian authorities.

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