

**Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs****UN EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR ENDS MIDDLE EAST MISSION**

(New York/Geneva/Jerusalem, 18 February 2008): John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, today concluded a five-day visit to the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel with a series of meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials in Jerusalem and Ramallah to discuss the situation in Gaza and the closure regime in the West Bank.

In Jerusalem, Mr. Holmes met the Director of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, in Ramallah, he held meetings with the Chief of Staff of the Palestinian President and with the Palestinian Prime Minister. He also held a meeting with United Nations humanitarian partners to discuss the strengthening of aid coordination.

“Medical services in Gaza are deteriorating, private industry has more or less collapsed, and there are real worries about education,” Mr. Holmes said today at a press conference in Jerusalem. “After eight months of very serious restrictions on the movement of goods, the political and security crisis in and around Gaza has increasingly severe humanitarian consequences,” he added.

“There is increasing dependence on international aid, which has risen very sharply over the last eight months. Seventy-three percent of the population relies on food aid, and concerns are mounting about nutrition, particularly among children. The quality and quantity of water are declining, with some areas having water only for a few hours a day or even a week. Moreover, due to deterioration of the sewage system, some 40 million litres of sewage are pumped daily into the Mediterranean Sea,” he said.

Mr. Holmes also pointed to the cumulative effect of the overall deterioration of living conditions in Gaza, calling them an affront to the dignity of the people there. While strongly condemning the firing of rockets from Gaza, he called again for Gaza crossings to be open for humanitarian supplies and imports as well as exports of commercial goods, and for the end of the policy which penalises the whole population for the actions and decisions of a very small minority.

In the West Bank, severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods, from the combination of the Barrier, continuing expansion of settlements and closures, have seriously affected people’s daily lives, and fragmented communities as well as impeded economic activity. He called for the lifting of the closures regime in ways which would not jeopardise Israel’s legitimate security concerns.

Mr. Holmes concluded that it was hard to see the deteriorating situation in both Gaza and the West Bank, and the reinforced despair and sense of humiliation of the Palestinians, as a good basis for the rapid peace settlement so badly needed. He called for the current gulf between the reality on the ground and the aims of the negotiations to be bridged urgently.

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