



UN EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR BEGINS A FIVE-DAY VISIT TO THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY AND ISRAEL

(New York/Geneva/Jerusalem, 14 February 2008): John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, today arrived in Ramallah in the West Bank to begin a five-day visit to the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. During his mission, Mr. Holmes plans to assess the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Sderot. "I come here in solidarity with the people of this region, who have suffered great misery and insecurity. Many people in Gaza are facing grave humanitarian consequences. In the West Bank, the regime of closures is damaging economic life and hitting ordinary people. In Sderot, whole communities are living in fear of rocket barrages. I have come here to see for myself what is happening on both sides," said Mr. Holmes.

Mr. Holmes met Mr. Robert H. Serry, the UN Secretary-General's Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Palestinian Authority, to discuss concerns about the violence and restrictions in Gaza and the West Bank, and violence against civilians in Sderot. Mr. Holmes also held consultations with the Minister of Planning of the Palestinian Authority, Dr. Samir Al Abdullah. Later, Mr. Holmes traveled to Jerusalem. On Friday, 15 February, Mr. Holmes will travel to the Gaza Strip to assess the extent to which the closure of key access routes has affected the lives and livelihoods of the civilians living there. He will visit the Erez and Karni crossings, two critical transport routes that have been severely restricted despite being major transport gateways for the delivery of humanitarian aid as well as commercial goods into Gaza. He will meet with the Head of the Industrial Zone of Karni, Mr. Wadee Al Masri. Mr. Holmes will also visit the Shifa hospital, whose ability to provide adequate medical care has suffered from reduced fuel, electricity, medicine and supplies. During the day, Mr. Holmes will meet officials from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other humanitarian actors. He will also meet representatives of human rights groups, aid organizations and members of the local business community.

For years, Palestinian populations in the West Bank and Gaza as well as Israeli populations in Sderot and western Negev have struggled with violence and economic restrictions. In Gaza, where close to 80 percent of the population receives humanitarian aid, the almost total lockdown of transport routes into the Gaza Strip has impeded the entry and distribution of humanitarian assistance to the beneficiaries and prevented commercial goods from reaching the Gazan markets or leaving Gaza. In the West Bank, severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods have deeply affected commercial activity. The resulting economic stagnation has put nearly half of the population below the poverty line. Civilians in Sderot and western Negev in Israel live in constant fear for their lives, as rockets and mortars continue to be fired from Gaza.