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## The Human Catastrophe of Gaza is a Time Bomb

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While global attention is still centered on Lebanon, less than 200 km to the south, Gaza constitutes a time bomb. Some 1.4 million people, mostly children, are piled up in one of the most densely populated regions of the world, with no freedom of movement, no place to run, and no space to hide. Virtually without external access since June, Gaza is experiencing a rise in poverty, unemployment, penury, and despair. Sadly, that which Gaza most needs today is precisely what it lacks the most: hope.

Earlier in September, 35 countries, to which were joined the UN, the Red Cross movement and NGOs, met in Stockholm to contribute to the restoration of some small measure of hope for the Gaza population. Donor countries announced a supplementary 116 million dollars for urgent humanitarian needs in the occupied Palestinian

territories, half of which was in response to the appeal for 384 million dollars from the UN. While we must congratulate the donors on their constructive initiative, the Gaza population needs much more, and quickly. The UN's humanitarian appeal still requires 42% of the funds requested in spite of the warnings about a situation that is deteriorating rapidly, susceptible to destabilizing many families.

Since the Israeli operation "Summer Rain" began end-June in response to the kidnapping of an Israeli Defense Forces soldier, one Israeli soldier has been killed. During the same period, 235 Palestinians have been killed, including 46 children. Every loss of human life must be deplored. But there is no doubt that the response, measured in terms of civilian victims, is disproportionate. For the Palestinians, as for the Israelis, the consequences of the confrontations of the summer are devastating, just as they are pernicious to the perspectives for peace in this troubled region.

Access by air, sea, and land has been virtually cut off for Gaza. The movements of goods and peoples have practically ceased. Supplies of electricity and water, interrupted by Israeli Defense Forces attacks on electric power stations, is irregular and insignificant. Civilian infrastructures have been affected. Gaza today remains dependent on outside sources for its food and commercial supplies. Hygienic conditions are deteriorating, while access to potable water is inadequate. With a Palestinian economy in continuous freefall, we must expect a more severe deterioration in sanitary conditions.

Imagine: You are a mother or a father in Gaza, living in a space inferior to a quarter of that of greater London (1,620 sq. km) with a population the size of Leeds (1.49 million inhabitants). You cannot leave this territory, nor import nor export products. Your children live in continuous fear of violence. Shortages of essential goods, including water, increase the propagation of contagious illnesses and reinforce the problems of daily life. Every day, as many as 185 artillery shells strike your territory. Every night, you witness blind rocket attacks on Israel by militant groups. You know that when the reprisals come, you and your family will not be spared their effects.

Now, imagine that you live in Israel, where every night the rockets fall. Armed groups undermine your country, your daily life and your

existence. We think it is not in either party's interest for violence to prevail in Gaza and the West Bank, situated at the crossroads of all the great world cultures and religions. To help disarm the Gaza time bomb, we need action on three fronts: humanitarian, economic, and political. In the first place, civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected by all parties. We ask the Israeli government in its capacity as occupying power, the Palestinian Authority, and all armed groups to acquit themselves of their responsibilities in the eyes of international law.

A cessation of hostilities must be accompanied by freedom of movement for civilians and humanitarian workers. For the Gaza population, the perception of being trapped, confined, of living in a cage is intolerable and feeds the feeling of despair. The November 15, 2005, agreement on movement and access must be wholly carried out.

Freedom of movement is also essential to allow humanitarian personnel to reach those in need in Gaza and the West Bank. The Karni passage, the main passageway between Israel and Gaza, must be transformed into a no-conflict, protected zone, open to the flow of products essential for the Palestinian population. An independent third party could be designated to maintain surveillance of this zone in response to Israel's security expectations. With the majority of Gaza's population dependent on outside aid for its basic survival, restricting humanitarian access becomes a matter of life and death. On the economic front, we ask Israel to free up the roughly 500 million dollars of income from taxes and duties that it retains.

These funds are indispensable to respond in all urgency to humanitarian and economic needs. But money alone is certainly not the answer, any more than are "humanitarian Band-Aids on open wounds." In the end, only a return to the peace process and a durable two state solution can bring hope and healing to this troubled region. The need is urgent. The time is now. It's a question of solidarity and a question of security for all of us.

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