

Gaza Needs Our Help

by Liz Walters, IHM

During three summers, I was able to serve on Michigan Peace Teams to the Gaza Strip, first with Mary Ann Ford, IHM, in 2003 and 2004, then with two Mercy Sisters and four diocesan priests in 2005. Three summers of lived experience in Gaza, continued interactions with friends there, steadfast presence at the gates of Gaza during February and March 2009, and on-going research lead me to write and submit this article.

The Jewish Fast for Gaza

One of the remarkable things that happen in a crisis is that the finest human and communal spirit rises in response. The Jewish Fast for Gaza is an example. Rabbis from across the United States are organizing a monthly fast for Gaza. Muslims, Christians and other people of conscience are joining this fast

- to call for a lifting of the blockade that prevents the entry of civilian goods and services into Gaza;
- to provide humanitarian and developmental aid to the people of Gaza;
- to call upon Israel, the U.S. and the international community to engage in negotiations without pre-conditions with all relevant Palestinian parties - including Hamas - in order to end the blockade;
- to encourage the American government to vigorously engage both Israelis and Palestinians toward a just and peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Upcoming fast days are Sept. 17, Oct. 15, Nov. 19, and Dec. 17. It's a wonderful opportunity to work for justice and to be in solidarity with our Gazan family.¹

Solidarity is sorely needed. The crisis Gaza faces is very serious. Here is a brief look at Gaza in its glory and Gaza today.

Gaza – From Bridge to the World to the World's Largest Prison

Gaza's history can be traced back to antiquity when it was a bridge for desert and maritime trade networks. The ancient super-powers controlling the trade routes highly valued Gaza because it provided the link to empires in Egypt, Damascus, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Rome and beyond.²

Today, Gaza's prominence is of the opposite kind. Instead of being a bridge to the world it is now the world's largest open-air prison. The questions of the day are how did this happen and why? The answers are the tragedy.

On Jan. 25, 2006 Hamas scored a landslide victory in the Palestinian Authority legislative elections and the democratic electoral process was praised far and wide. However Israel

¹ See <http://www.fastforgaza.net/>

² Passia 2009. "Gaza." www.passia.org.

and the United States regard Hamas as a terrorist group. Using this justification, Israel subjected the Gaza Strip to an increasingly intolerable blockade.³

The 2006 election set the stage for a bitter power struggle between Hamas and Fatah. In June 2007, when Hamas defeated Fatah, Israel imposed a total blockade of Gaza. Gaza remains sealed.

What does the world's largest prison look like?

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, Israeli gunboats block access to the Mediterranean; Israeli warplanes, drones, helicopters, tanks, gun towers and electrified fences block access to land borders or air space. Israel has sealed Gaza off from all but sporadic humanitarian aid and has strictly limited movement into and out of the territory. Egypt has largely complied with the blockade, though it occasionally opens the Rafah Crossing into Egypt to allow aid in and students and medical emergencies out.

Friends in Gaza tell us that the blockade means that they have access only to unsanitary drinking water because they are prevented from getting purification agents. It means that they suffer malnutrition and anemia because Israel limits the types of foodstuffs it will allow to enter the Gaza Strip. It means that they have been without heating, cooking and transportation fuel for more than two years.

The International Committee of the Red Cross notes that one of the gravest consequences of the blockade is soaring unemployment, which has reached 49.9 percent. Restrictions on imports and exports of goods imposed since June 2007 have shut down 96 percent of industrial operations in Gaza, with the loss of about 70,000 jobs. This has also had a severe impact on the capacity to export products to Israel and the West Bank or to anywhere else in the world.⁴

Moreover, the blockade has crippled rebuilding efforts in the impoverished territory of 1.5 million people, which was devastated during Israel's bombing and invasion of Gaza from Dec. 27, 2008 to Jan. 18, 2009. In that assault, 1,434 Gazans and 13 Israelis were killed and more than 5000 Gazans were wounded.⁵ In addition, there was massive destruction. According to United Nations reports 14,000 buildings were either totally destroyed or partially damaged.⁶ Gazans must be asking, "How are 14,000 homes, schools, businesses, and government buildings to be rebuilt when the only way supplies come into Gaza are through tunnels?"

Harvard Professor Sara Roy of Middle East Studies also asks some poignant questions.

³ Rashid Khalidi. "What You Don't Know About Gaza." The New York Times, January 7, 2009.

⁴ ICRI Report. "Gaza: 1.5 Million People Trapped in Despair."

⁵ Palestine Center for Human Rights. Published Report on March 13, 2009.

⁶ Earth Times. "Gaza." <http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/263054,hamas-to-begin-removing-gazawar-rubble-next-week.html>

How can keeping food and medicine from the people of Gaza protect the people of Israel? How can the impoverishment and suffering of Gaza's children – more than 50 percent of the population – benefit anyone?⁷

In truth, under international law, fuel and food cannot be withheld or wielded as reward or punishment. In addition, collective punishment is outlawed by the Geneva Conventions.

Gaza needs our help to ensure that Israel lifts its blockade of the Gaza Strip. Please pray for an end to the blockade, join the fast, and share your concerns with elected representatives.

⁷ Sara Roy, "If Gaza Falls," London Review of Books. January 1, 2009.