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Israel Denies Palestinians Access To Their Own Land And Waters

By Stephen Lendman
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Throughout 43 years of occupation, Israel has waged war on Palestinians' human rights and civil liberties, a new UN report providing more evidence that keeps mounting exponentially, adding clarity about an out-of-control rogue state operating lawlessly.

On August 10, Haaretz writer Akiva Eldar cited it in an article headlined, "UN report: IDF barring Gazans' access to farms, fishing zones," saying:

"Over the last 10 years, the (IDF has) increasingly restricted Palestinian access to farmland on the Gazan side of the Israeli-Gaza border as well as (offshore waters) along the Gaza beach, a United Nations report (just) revealed."

Prepared jointly by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the World Food Program (WFP), it's titled "Between the Fence and a Hard Place," explaining Israel's draconian/illegal restrictions on the pretext of "preventing attacks by Palestinian armed factions." In fact, only Israel poses a regional threat. A global one as well, what Palestinians and Israel's neighbors have known for decades.

Despite the Green Line, Oslo Accords, the so-called 2005 "disengagement," ongoing siege, the continued theft of West Bank and East Jerusalem land and more, Israel imposes punitive restrictions on Gazans, including under the 1994 Jericho Agreement. It established a 1,000 meter-wide "security perimeter" in the Territory, Palestinian police enforcing "special security measures" to prevent entry into Israel without permission.

A separate provision allowed a 20 nautical mile area off Gaza's coast for fishing, recreation, and other economic activities. Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), in theory, share joint enforcement authority, but, in fact, Israel has sole control.

Since September 2000, the start of the second Intifada, Israel took over more repressively than ever. Palestinians have been denied all rights in their own territory under vague and restrictive rules, including use of their own land and waters. As a result, Gazans have been irreparably harmed.

Defining the Restricted Areas and Affected Populations

Israel's precise access parameters "are uncertain," including boundaries, conditions allowing or denying entry, and consequences if against Israeli restrictions. Moreover, in the past decade, the IDF hardened measures in place.

Up to November 2008, a 300 meter prohibition was imposed. After Cast Lead, however, it expanded to a 1,000 - 1,500 meters, putting valuable farmland and residential areas off limits as follows:

-- a "no-go zone" up to 500 meters inside the Green Line. Those entering may be shot on sight. Israeli incursions regularly occur, destroying property found, including crops; and

-- a "high risk" zone up to 1,500 meters within the Line. "Opening fire at people accessing this area, as well as land leveling and property destruction, are common and widespread practices....carried out irregularly and unpredictably."

Affected Gazans reported even worse harshness, affecting areas up to 3,000 meters inside the Line. Omitting these from UN calculations, the combined "no go/high risk" prohibitions cover about 62.6 square km or about 17% of Gaza (95% of which is arable land), off limits to Palestinians who own it. In total, they're denied access to 35% of the Territory's cultivable farmland, a major blow to its agriculture.

In addition, under the 2002 Bertini Commitment, Israel tightened coastal water restrictions from 20 nautical miles (NM) offshore to 12, but, in fact, even harsher limits were imposed. Some areas were entirely closed, others allowed open only part of the year. In mid-2006, restrictions applied beyond six NM, and after Cast Lead beyond three and in some areas only one. As a result, Gazans are gradually losing all rights to their coastal waters, those entering restricted areas risking life and loss of property.

"Overall, Palestinians are totally prevented from accessing 85 percent of the sea areas on which they are entitled to carry out maritime activities, including fishing, according to the 1994 Gaza-Jericho Agreement." About 113,000 people are affected (7.5% of Gaza's population), including those owning land and other property in restricted areas.

Many fisherman have also been harmed, Gaza's Ministry of Agriculture reporting at yearend 2009 that only 3,500 were registered, down from 10,000 in September 2000 when restrictions began. The number of people directly affected by land and fishing limits is about 178,000 or 12% of the population.

The Resulting Crisis

The UN report cites Israel's "systematic lack of respect for (Gazans') basic rights, as enshrined in international humanitarian and human rights law."

Worse still, are its enforcement methods, including:

-- arbitrarily opening fire on anyone entering restricted areas, at times with warning shots, others with intent to kill, incidents happening daily. "The Fishermen's Syndicate reported that in (Q 1 2010)," 48 live firings on fishermen occurred, an average of four a week. A small percentage caused death or injury, but the risk is always present.

In the 19 month period from January 2009 through July 2010, 22 civilian deaths (including six children) and 146 injuries were reported (including 27 children).

Legal Implications

International law is clear and unequivocal, civilians at all times to be treated as protected persons during conflicts and occupation. The principle of distinction puts combatants and others in separate categories.

Targeting civilians is absolutely prohibited, regardless of circumstances, and when launching attacks, care must be taken to avoid harming them and their property. Yet Israel consistently and egregiously defiles the law, acting willfully in violation with impunity, besides its draconian military laws and medieval siege, not covered in the UN report.

Yet they're crucial to understand the severity of conditions, causing sustained, extreme, unrelenting humanitarian harm in a climate of uncertainty. Palestinians never know if they, their neighborhoods, or loved ones will be attacked. Fishermen are always endangered, and anyone collecting rubble or scrap metal in restricted areas may be shot, killed or injured, including women and children.

Worse still is the lack of clarity for demarcated areas, besides Israel changing them regularly without notice. In addition, at least once, misleading information was provided, the Israeli air force (in May 2009) dropping thousands of leaflets warning Gazans not to enter areas closer than 300 meters from the Green Line when, in fact, restrictions were up to 1,500 and in some areas 3,000.

"The lack of clarity, (arbitrary modifications), and unpredictability associated with this access regime makes it highly arbitrary, thus significantly increasing the level of risk to thousands of civilians who depend on access....for their livelihoods."

Destruction of Land and Property

Most occurred since September 2000, areas over 300 meters especially since 2006. As a result, "most (affected) agricultural land has been gradually abandoned and structures never reconstructed."

Since late 2008, regular land, crops and property destruction has been "carried out more less regularly" during weekly IDF incursions, typically by four to 10 tanks, bulldozers and jeeps, accompanied by helicopters, drones, and live fire. From January through May 2010, 72 recorded incidents occurred, averaging over three a week, Gazans never knowing where or when they'll strike, or who may be affected.

They're also targeted by remotely-controlled weapon stations, deployed in

secured pillboxes every several hundred meters along the Green Line. Each contains machine guns able to hit targets up to 1.5 km away. According to Haaretz, "the procedure to authorize opening fire is complex, but takes less than two minutes" to complete. An assault is then initiated by pressing a button. Live fire guided by relayed field images and ground sensors follows, as well as more from aircraft and drones.

Attacks are also made by tanks and other weapons, in all cases against nonviolent civilians in violation of international law. After years of occupation and conflict, the toll is horrific, ordinary people up against the world's fourth most powerful military acting lawlessly against noncombatants.

In economic terms alone, the UN conservatively estimated a \$308 million cost over the past five years (excluding Cast Lead) affecting:

- nearly 4,500 acres of land planted with fruit trees;
- another 1,500 acres of greenhouses;
- 1,000 residential structures;
- over 300 water wells;
- Gaza's water purification system and sole power plant;
- six factories; and
- the toll on fishermen, their boats and equipment.

Impact on Gazans' Livelihood

Affected Gazans have been impoverished and denied essentials under siege, besides living in fear and threatened almost daily with aggressive assaults. In economic terms, the loss of livelihoods and property alone has been devastating, affecting fruit trees, greenhouses, water wells, sheep and chicken farms, other farmland, fishing boats and equipment, factories, schools, hospitals, mosques, homes, and other structures.

An estimated 75,000 annual metric tons of produce alone has been lost, increasing as Israel destroys more land, farmers losing a third or more of their income. Fayyadh Al-Sumeiri's situation is typical. In 2003, the IDF leveled his small farm. Another plot with olive trees was destroyed in late 2008. He replaced it with wheat, rented some additional land, but both areas were again bulldozed during Cast Lead plus an irrigation network.

Lost income impoverished him and his family, plunging him into debt, Al-Sumeiri saying:

"Every day I pass by shops and see people that I owe money to, and I lower my head. I don't know what to do because I have no income. Everything we earned was from the land and every meter we planted was destroyed. Every day I pray that I will be able to return to my land and bring it back to the state it was in."

Thousands of other Gazan farmers tell similar stories, the siege, war, occupation, and regular incursions suffocating them slowly. It's slow-motion genocide ongoing for years, affecting the entire population, 1.5 million people trapped in the world's largest open-air prison.

Coping Under Siege

Under dire conditions, humanitarian aid has helped but not enough "to make a substantial difference in the lives of the affected population." As a result, strategies to generate alternate income have been used, farmers, for example, trying crop diversification or open-air planting after greenhouses were destroyed. Others sold assets or rely on the tunnel economy. Yet income generated is meager compared to earlier, including by fishermen, restricted on where they can go so their catch is smaller, less lucrative, and over-fished shallower waters are being depleted, compromising them further.

Other coping methods involve buying less, including essentials harming health and well-being, but with little income there's no choice. The quantity and quality of food consumed has dropped. As a result, health problems have increased, including higher incidences of anemia, diabetes, high blood pressure, and other illnesses. Overall, the quality of life in all respects has steadily eroded since fall 2000, especially under siege.

Impact on Education

Seven educational institutions were identified within 1,500 meters of the Green Line, affecting around 250 teachers, administrative and maintenance staff serving about 4,400 students from elementary school to vocational training. Cast Lead entirely destroyed another school in the restricted area

plus others, including college facilities, throughout the Strip.

Overall, "The safety of students and staff attending these institutions, the quality of education provided and the level of educational achievement have been seriously undermined by their frequent exposure to Israeli fire...." As a result, schools have incurred significant damage, remain vulnerable, and have diverted scarce funds for recurrent repair needs.

Students and staff say classes are often interrupted by nearby assaults, yet believe children are safer in school than if evacuated elsewhere, exposing them to conflict in the open. In addition, a shortage of facilities forces most schools to run on double schedules - shifts reducing overall class time, restricting the number of new students, and providing less education on very restricted budgets because everything needed is in short supply, compounded by traumatized students, their concentration and performance affected.

"A consistent message to emerge was that frequent exposure to life threatening situations, along with the systematic destruction of livelihoods, severely eroded people's basic sense of physical and economic security. This erosion is perceived as a key cause behind the recurrence of an array of negative symptoms" observed in students, families and communities, including:

- increased adult depression;
- frequent childrens' bedwetting;
- lower school performance;
- higher dropout rates;
- changes in nutrition habits;
- greater domestic violence, symptomatic of adult men losing their role as breadwinners; and
- weakening social networks because dangerous conditions keep people close to home, fewer family visits resulting.

Impact on Utility Infrastructure

Israeli restrictions have significantly impeded maintenance, repair and upgrading of wastewater and electricity infrastructure, harming all Gazans under siege. Located east of Jabalia up to 200 meters from the Green Line, the North Gaza Emergency Sewage Treatment Plant is the Strip's largest facility, able to handle the sewage for more than 500,000 people. Currently, IDF restrictions impede staff access, allow only daylight operations, and inadequate fuel and electricity compromise operations further.

Only recently did Israel approve "in principle" the relocation of a Khan Yunis facility, reaching up to 400 meters from the Line. Negotiations continue to allow required material imports as well as worker access to the site, Israeli bureaucratic restrictions so far preventing them.

For the past three years, a new Gaza City wastewater treatment plant, to replace an existing lower capacity one, has been stalled because of Israeli bureaucratic delays. As a result, around 80 million liters of untreated and partially-treated sewage is dumped daily into the Mediterranean Sea, contaminating Gaza's coastal areas and most drinking water.

"The (serious) public health concerns of the inability to properly treat the current volume of sewage produced in the Gaza Strip are significant," affecting the entire population, a topic addressed in previous articles accessed through the following links:

<http://sjlendman.blogspot.com/2010/08/palestinians-denied-access-to-water.html>

<http://sjlendman.blogspot.com/2010/08/gazas-poisoned-water.html>

As a result, less than 10% of Gaza's aquifer drinking water is safe, the rest toxic, exposing those consuming it to serious health risks, including anemia, diarrhea, parasitic skin and other infections, and infant mortality.

In addition, an electricity crisis exists, also addressed in a previous article accessed through the following link:

<http://sjlendman.blogspot.com/2010/07/gazas-electricity-crisis.html>

"Overall, access restrictions to infrastructure delivering electricity from Israel into (Gaza) have compounded an already precarious situation caused by the steady decline in electricity produced by" the Strip's only facility. It's severely impeded by Israel's materials and spare parts ban, preventing proper maintenance and rehabilitation unless lifted.

UN findings reveal the impact of Israeli restrictions, exacerbated by Gaza's siege. Israel's "lethal" enforcement has "resulted in a severe 'protection crisis,' characterized by a systematic lack of respect for the most basic rights afforded to civilian populations under international law."

The entire Strip is impacted, especially Gazans close to the Green Line, fishermen confined to shallow coastal waters, as well as women, children, the elderly and infirm. Everyone needs help more than ever, mostly by lifting the siege, increasing humanitarian aid, ending Israeli incursions, and giving the population a chance to rebuild and restore their lives, livelihoods, and dignity. It's what Israel won't allow and world leaders still tolerate, violating their obligation under international law and Security Council Resolution 1860.

It called for "an immediate and durable ceasefire (leading) to a full Israeli withdrawal, unimpeded provision through Gaza of food, fuel and medical treatment, and intensified" efforts for peace. Yet it's been unsuccessful because Israel ignores it and enforcement pressure's not applied.

As a result, Gazans suffer grievously, the entire population harmed by an out-of-control rogue state, bogusly claiming security concerns to commit slow-motion genocide, the world community complicit by indifference. Strong measures for change are needed, what only mass outrage and intensified BDS pressure can achieve.

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