

UN: Starvation Threatens The Palestinians

by Dean Andromidas

The Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip faces starvation unless international aid is mobilized by the end of March. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the largest aid provider in the region, announced on Feb. 10 that an emergency appeal issued last December has gone totally unanswered by all traditional government donors. The principal reason is the expected war against Iraq, and the fact that governments have been forced to focus on preparing for the humanitarian catastrophe which, it is feared, will result.

The UNRWA announcement underscores the criminal situation which now exists in the Palestinian Authority, where Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his generals are doing as they please against the Palestinian population, as the world debates the drive for a new Iraq war. UNRWA warns that two-thirds of the 3 million Palestinians living under brutal occupation face starvation.

In an official statement released on Feb. 10, UNRWA Commissioner General Peter Hansen warned, "We are scraping the bottom of every barrel and stretching every dollar we have, but without immediate donations our emergency operations are going to grind to a halt. The cutbacks come at a time when the uncertain regional situation makes it ever more imperative that we maintain a lifeline to the refugees in the territories. And yet the paradox is that our emergency funding for the year may be threatened because donors are holding back to see what is needed in Iraq. The uncertainty on the political front in the West Bank and Gaza means that this is no time to allow humanitarian efforts to stall. . . . The tensions are too high and the need too great."

Two-Thirds Are in Extreme Poverty

In December, UNRWA made an appeal for \$94 million to fund emergency programs, particularly food, shelter, and health care. The massive destruction being caused by Israeli military operations, closures, and curfews has all but destroyed the Palestinian economy and infrastructure. Over the last two years of the conflict, UNRWA has been forced to expand its operations, to meet the dire needs of the population. For example, in the Gaza Strip, it provided food for only 11,000 people two years ago, but now supplies no less than 750,000 people, more than half of the Gaza Strip's population. Now the assistance should double again, because the current

high level of malnutrition is now comparable to that of war-torn Congo.

Already UNRWA has been forced to cut the size of the ration packages it gives to 120,000 refugee families in Gaza, while in the West Bank, 1,600 emergency staff are to be laid off and the payment of refugee hospitalization is being stopped. Pointing to the Israeli military's brutal demolition of houses, the release warns, "Urgent humanitarian operations, including the rehousing of refugees made homeless by Israel's military, will have to be cancelled just as demolition operations are escalating. In Rafah in the south of the Gaza Strip, 79 shelters were completely destroyed in January alone. Supplies of food, tents, and cash to those made homeless cannot continue unless donations are forthcoming."

The UNRWA release states that despite its efforts to help alleviate some of the "worst effects of the violence, curfews, and closures on the West Bank and Gaza Strip . . . two-thirds of the population is living in dire poverty, thousands have been made homeless by demolitions or injured by fighting, and malnutrition rates for children have reached crisis levels."

The \$94 million aid program calls for the following:

Emergency food aid: Latest figures show that 22% of Palestinian children are suffering from acute chronic malnutrition. Four out of five children suffer from deficiencies in the intake of iron and zinc, causing anemia and weakening the immune system. UNRWA wants to launch its largest-ever food security program to cover two-thirds of all refugees in the occupied Palestinian territory—220,000 families. This is a total of 1.1 million people, or one-third of the entire population. But even this program is only designed to provide 1,600 calories a day. The vast majority of these refugees are unemployed, with no sources of outside income.

Emergency job creation: The current level of unemployment stands at over 50%—some say 70%—because of the closures, which are "the root cause of Palestinian poverty and malnutrition." UNRWA hopes to provide 1 million man days of work at \$12 a day for skilled workers, including teachers, medical personnel, and laborers.

Emergency shelters: There are now 5,500 refugees whose homes have been destroyed by the Israeli military. This is in addition to the 400 houses destroyed in the Jenin refugee camp alone.

Emergency health program: Israeli military operations have created a health emergency, creating a demand for healthcare which has increased by 60%. UNRWA wants to increase its medical staff by 300 people and fund purchases of extra medicines and health supplies and the establishment of mobile clinics.

Emergency education program: The Palestinian educational system, which had been among the best in the region, has been crippled. Students have lost at least one month of school in the past year, and universities have been closed since the beginning of the current term. Because of the continuous military operations, house-to-house searches in the middle of



During UNRWA Commissioner General Peter Hansen's January inspection visit to Rafah in the West Bank, he saw the widespread destruction of even large, multiple-family buildings, and visited families needing food aid—now more than half of the entire Palestinian population.

the night, and curfews that can last many days at a time, Palestinian children are suffering from tremendous stress and the effects of violence. This has led to a collapse of test scores, among other problems. UNRWA needs funds to enroll 40,000 children in Gaza alone, hire an additional 190 teachers, and establish special education programs.

Emergency relief and social assistance: To deal with the thousands of victims from the conflict, UNRWA wants to be able to provide cash payments to those who have lost their homes and jobs, and provide shelters for the disabled. UNRWA hopes to supply school clothes, shoes, bags, and stationery for 70,000 children from impoverished families.

Israel Took Palestine's Taxes

The \$94 million UNRWA needs is a small sum when one realizes that the Israeli government, in Roman Empire style, is holding close to \$500 million it collects in taxes on goods that are imported and must come through Israeli ports and entry points. These taxes are the primary source of Palestinian revenues and Israel illegally refuses to turn these funds over to the Palestinian Authority.

The real crime is that UNRWA is being forced to come to the aid of the Palestinians in the face of the Class A war crimes being perpetrated by Sharon and his generals. Israel has now re-occupied almost the entire West Bank, and those areas it does not fully occupy, Israel has under total siege, controlling every person or commodity that enters or leaves. Under the Geneva Conventions, Israel, as the occupying

power, is responsible for the well-being of the civilian population, including providing food. Israel is forcing this responsibility on international humanitarian organizations, while claiming to call itself a "democratic state in the Western tradition." It is currently committing war crimes comparable to those committed by Yugoslavia, for which its former President Slobodan Milosevic is on trial in The Hague.

The tolerance for these war crimes has reached the point where Israeli military officers freely describe to government television interviewers, how they are conducting a campaign of collective punishment—a Class A war crime—against the Palestinian civilian population. An Israeli lieutenant colonel involved in the military operation currently targeting Hebron, told Israel's Channel One TV, "Using tanks was meant to create a new order here, so they understand our intentions. . . . The economic burden [on the residents] is not an accident or coincidental, but part of a long-term process. . . . This is meant to apply pressure on the residents of the city to regurgitate the terrorists."

This same phrase was used in an interview on the same channel a few days before, and was the object of a formal complaint to the Judge Advocate General by the Gush Shalom organization, charging that this constitutes collective punishment.

The United States could force these war crimes to stop. Yet the U.S. Congress on Feb. 12 passed Resolution 61 by a vote of 411-2, praising Israel's "dedication to democratic ideals" and pledging American support for a "secure Israel."