

The Arab Organisation of Human Rights in the UK

المنظمة العربية لحقوق الإنسان في بريطانيا



Special report

Egyptian government infected by mad Israeli wall disease



“They went underground to try to break the immoral blockade.”



Will these walls fall down, just like the Berlin Wall?



The first part of article 1 (paragraph 2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 states that:

“All peoples may, in quest of their own goals, freely use their natural wealth and resources, without breaching any obligations arising of international economic cooperation based on the principle of mutual benefit and the international law, and in no case should a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.”



Stop the construction of the Steel Wall of Shame



The Egyptian government began instilling the wall of steel at a depth of 20 - 30 metres



Steel plates for the construction of the wall of shame



A set of photos taken during the process of drilling for the construction of the steel wall on the border with the Gaza Strip



Corresponding Map Key

Crossing	
Military fence	
Rafah Wall	
1949 Armistice Line	
Israel's security zone according to the Oslo agreement - 1994	
First Israeli buffer zone	
Second Israeli buffer zone	
Palestinian urban area	

A map showing the Gaza Strip siege and borders

The UK-based Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR) confirms that the Egyptian government have started to build a steel wall along the Philadelphia route and that approximately 5.4 kilometres have already been completed under Franco-American-Israeli supervision. This extraordinary wall has no justification whatsoever and will deepen the humanitarian crisis affecting more than 80% of the population of the Gaza Strip who live below the poverty line.

The AOHR believes that the Egyptian border at Rafah has become a centre for foreign intelligence services which are supervising the construction of the steel wall and the surveillance equipment that is going to be used to monitor the border with Gaza. Foreign intelligence agents will guide and train their Egyptian counterparts in order to tighten the blockade against the Palestinians of Gaza.

We have a right to ask who is going to benefit from this wall, and under what pretext it is being built. After World War II, the Berlin Wall was built as a physical symbol of the so-called cold war between capitalist and communist regimes. That war ended when the Berlin Wall was pulled down in 1989. In Northern Ireland a wall was built to separate Catholic and Protestant areas to minimise opportunities for civil unrest; in the West Bank the Israeli apartheid wall has been built to seize more land from Palestinians and ostensibly to preserve the identity of Israel as a Jewish state. But what reason does Egypt have for building the steel wall? What threat do the people of Gaza pose to Egypt? They are unarmed and in the grip of a humanitarian catastrophe; they share with Egypt an ancient civilization. And does Egypt's national security begin and end at the Rafah crossing?

This wall of shame is a crime against humanity as its only "benefit" will be to strengthen the suffocating blockade in place against the Palestinians in Gaza, aiming to break their will and impose agendas which are hostile to the Palestinians' rights of freedom and self-determination.

The people of Gaza have only resorted to digging tunnels across the border with Egypt following the imposition of the immoral siege which closed all points of entry linking the Strip to the outside world. A thriving economy has developed and the tunnels have become what has been described as the "lifeline" for Gaza, facilitating the entry of basic foodstuffs and medicines, fuel and even livestock. The Egyptians – no doubt on the instructions of the US and Israeli governments – spray the tunnels with poisonous gas every week, pump water down them and bomb them in collaboration with the Israeli Air Force in attempts to close them down. Many Palestinians have been killed as a result, but such is the desperation caused by the siege that new tunnels are opened to replace those destroyed.

Britain's Arab Organization for Human Rights notes with great concern what the Egyptian government is doing on the borders with the Gaza Strip and calls for the following:

- 1- Demonstrations in front of Egyptian embassies around the world to let the Egyptian government know the depth of feeling against what it is doing.
- 2- The Egyptian people should let their government know that they do not support these measures, and insist that the Egyptian government stops the wall's construction immediately.
- 3- The Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference have to intervene to prevent the Egyptian government from building the steel wall, based on their joint decisions to lift the siege on the Gaza Strip.
- 4- Efforts should be made to bring the Egyptian government before the International Court of Human Rights to stop this immoral wall.

Introduction

The Gaza Strip is a narrow territory along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, between Israel and Egypt. It is a maximum of 41km long and between 6 and 12km wide. With a population of about a million and a half people, it is one of the most densely populated areas of the world.

The first wall around Gaza appeared in 1994 when the land border with Israel was marked by a security fence and zone. At sea, Israel placed obstacles and barriers in the way of Palestinian fishermen, and reduced the limit for fishing from 180km to 82km, damaging the viability of the fishermen's livelihoods. After the Oslo agreements of 1993, that distance was reduced even further so catches got smaller. On June 18th, 2005 Israel began to build a sea barrier at the border with Gaza. Part of it is made of steel while the rest is a floating fence stretching for 950 metres into the Mediterranean; the first 150 metres of the barrier consists of concrete poles on the seabed, while the remaining 800 metres is a "floating barrier" 1.8 metres deep.

After the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Egypt and Israel imposed a tight blockade on the territory; this was tightened after Hamas took full control of the Strip in June 2007. The blockade includes fuel and electricity as well as food and medicine, and prevents deep-sea fishing; the borders between Gaza Strip and Israel are sealed, as is the Rafah crossing to Egypt, the only outlet to the outside world for Gaza's residents through Egypt. In reaction to this, on 23rd January 2008, thousands of Palestinians stormed the Rafah crossing and crossed into Egypt to buy essential supplies of food and fuel. It was estimated that 750,000 Palestinians made this effort, and that all returned, making a lie of claims that Palestinians are a security threat to Egypt. The deteriorating situation in Gaza prompted the UN humanitarian coordinator, Maxwell Gaylard, to describe the blockade as "an attack on human dignity."

Border closure

Gaza is connected to the outside world through six border crossings; five connect it with Israel (Kerem Shalom, Sufa, Karni and Beit Hanoun-Erez) and the other, Rafah, connects it with Egypt. The Israelis have physical or political control over all of the crossing points. There is an almost-total paralysis of the movement of individuals across the borders, with aid workers and, in certain cases, extremely sick people, almost all of whom still face humiliating procedures on entry and exit. Some even face blackmail attempts to get them to cooperate with the Israeli intelligence services.

Israel only allows extremely limited quantities of humanitarian aid, and basic food supplies through the blockade, as result of which there are severe shortages of almost everything. Egyptian border controls match those of the Israelis, in a clear example of cooperation aimed at strangling the people of Gaza.

The effects of the border closure and blockade are many:

- The death of a Palestinian each day because she or he has been prevented from travelling to get essential medical treatment.
- A monthly trade deficit estimated at \$45m.
- 140,000 workers have lost their jobs. Unemployment levels stand at 65%.
- 80% of the people of Gaza live under the official poverty line of \$2 a day.
- \$650 is the average annual income of Palestinians in Gaza.
- Many goods held at border crossings due to the closures have passed their "use by" date and are thus wasted.
- Most Gaza Strip residents suffer food insecurity due to high prices as a result of the severe shortages.
- 77 million litres of raw sewage are pumped daily into the sea because building materials cannot be imported to repair the treatment centres.
- 60% of Gaza's children suffer from malnutrition and anaemia.
- Ten water wells are no longer functioning; that number is set to increase.
- Wells which are functional are operating at only 60% of their capacity.
- The power plants depend on enough fuel supplies and spare parts getting through. Neither are guaranteed.
- Medical equipment suffers from regular power cuts.
- Fertilizer shortages affect the agricultural sector.
- The flour stock is only enough for ten to fifteen days.

- The chlorine stock, needed to purify water, is diminishing.
- 40% of basic medicines have run out completely, as have 80% of medical disposables.

Going underground:

Along the border with Rafah, there is a network of around 400 tunnels, each between 300-1200 metres long and 18-30 metres deep, with 10-15 people working in each one. All kinds of food and medical supplies are brought into Gaza in this way, including live animals and fuel; some tunnels are specially equipped to take hazardous material. The government in Gaza monitors the tunnels very carefully to make sure that illegal goods are not imported. However, all of these goods are priced about five times more than they should be, because of the short supply. Thus, the average family cannot buy what it needs. Apart from the efforts to stop the tunnels noted above, the Egyptians have arrested hundreds of tunnel workers and no one knows their fate.

War on Gaza

The blockade against Gaza Strip did not bring the Palestinians to their knees, and so Israel launched a large military offensive on December 27th, 2008, using the vast arsenal at its disposal along with internationally prohibited munitions in its land, sea and air operations. The Israeli aggression caused massive destruction of property and lives. More than 1,400 Palestinians were killed, one-third of them children, and mostly civilians; 5,400 others were wounded, many of whom are now permanently disabled; 22,000 buildings were either completely or partially destroyed; thousands who lost their homes remain homeless a year later. Economic losses are estimated at \$1.9 billion. The munitions used by Israel have left a high level of toxic substances in the soil, which may have a dangerous long term effect on the health of Gaza's residents, especially children; so concludes a report by an independent group of scientists and doctors based in Italy. According to *Defence News* magazine, 3,500 phosphorous shells were dropped on Gaza during the war, burning people and causing environmental pollution that has medium and long-term health consequences on the population; this is because they exploded in the air spreading their chemicals over a wide range, especially aluminium and mercury, which can enter the human body and reach organs and foetuses, causing deformities.

The killing and destruction, just like the blockade, took place in front of the entire world with nobody taking steps to stop it partly, we believe, because other countries also wanted the Israelis to succeed in bringing down the Hamas-led government in Gaza, bringing the civilian population to its knees in the process. However, the three-week offensive failed in these goals despite the massive destruction it caused, and so the tunnels and tightening the blockade on the border with Egypt were back on the agenda.

The border of Gaza and Egypt is regarded with importance for many foreign intelligence services, and the US government has allocated \$50 million for sophisticated surveillance there; France is intending to launch a spy satellite called Helios 2B charged with watching the Gaza Strip. These countries also have security forces stationed in the Sinai desert where they provide logistical support and information to Egypt in order to tighten control over the border with Gaza. Egyptian and US forces have been spotted conducting joint patrols on the border in the search for smuggling entry points.

The Steel Wall

The Egyptian government-controlled media has denied that it is building a steel wall on the Gaza border. It is known, however, that more than half of the 10km long border is now covered by this wall. The American-made wall is going to be 20-30 metres deep and made of steel plates 18 metres long and 50cm thick. Sensors will alert officers about any attempt to breach the wall, which is being built under the supervision of American and French intelligence officers.

The aim of the wall is to destroy the tunnel network that is considered to be the lifeline for the people of Gaza. The planners hope that this “wall of shame” may actually succeed in doing what the Israeli war against Gaza could not do, by bringing the people to their knees.

The Egyptian government – which is a key ally of America in the Middle east, remember – tortures, kills and harasses its own people, so it cannot be expected to show mercy to the Palestinians, despite its public pronouncements of support. It is up to the international community to put pressure on Israel and the US to end the inhumane, illegal and immoral collective punishment of Gaza’s population. Only then will any pretence for this wall of shame be stripped away and life can get back to normal.