

“In Conversation with John Ging” Head of UNWRA

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This morning (November 30th) John Ging, the Head of the United Nation’s Relief and Works Agency (), hosted a discussion on the current crisis in the Gaza Strip. The closed seminar, which was co-hosted and organised by Oliver McTernan, Director of Forward Thinking and Dr Daud Abdullah Director of the Middle East Monitor, was attended by a small group of prominent individuals with a deep interest and commitment to the situation in the region. Those in attendance included Clare Short (MP), Jeremy Bowen (BBC), a representative of the Malaysian High Commissioner, a representative from Medical Aid for Palestine (MAP), Interpal, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and several members of the press.

The main focus of the discussion was the siege on Gaza and what needs to be done to alleviate the suffering of the 1.4 million Gazans trapped in the region.

Policy makers must go to Gaza and see the situation for themselves

John Ging started by giving an overview of the situation in Gaza. According to Ging, one of the main problems at the moment is simply that *“the truth is not getting out.”* What is happening on the ground is not being reported widely enough or accurately enough. Throughout the meeting one of Ging’s main action points was to suggest that people, particularly high profile policy makers, go to Gaza to see the situation for themselves. He stood firm by his



conviction that if members of Parliament and Congress and governments around the world could see first hand what was going on in Gaza, they would be forced to implement a change in their policies in the region. *“I am convinced that they will be compelled to do more if they see the situation for themselves”*, he stated. It is



not enough to just sit around a Foreign Ministry table and discuss the situation. The Ministers must first go out and see the situation with their own eyes and then go back and have their meeting, he argued. This is particularly important in the case of EU member states, he said and for the members of the Quartet.

Find the Truth

The truth of the situation in Gaza is self evidence for anyone with the courage to find the truth, he said. But, Ging lamented, the truth has been the main casualty in this conflict. The two areas that he feels have been the most misrepresented are the nature of the Gazan people themselves and the context producing the siege.

Ging felt that there was a major misunderstanding of the essential character of the people of Gaza. He felt that the people of Gaza had been mischaracterised in their both their nature and their orientation and were thus misrepresented. He said that Gazans are overwhelmingly and unjustly portrayed as terrorists, or at least sympathetic to terrorists, either because they voted for a terrorist regime or if they did not vote for them directly then because they are not now

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actively rebelling against a terrorist regime. This is in spite of the fact that it was the international community who had pushed for a vote in the first place and had not made any objections to any of the groups running for election at the



time. People need to see for themselves the sheer scale of the misrepresentation laid against the Gazan people he said. He called the situation that the people in Gaza live through on a daily basis *“insane.”* *“My God they have been tested”* he said. *“It is humbling for us to see how stoic and resilient they are. They only seek their human rights. They are not consumed with hatred, anger or retribution. They are simply appealing for their most basic human rights and freedom.”* Those who do have a destructive agenda, he pointed out, are a small, small minority and that is the reality of the state of the people in Gaza.

The damage to Gazan infrastructure

The most problematic aspect in Gaza right now is undoubtedly the siege itself. He pointed out the many ways in which the blockade has affected the daily lives of the Palestinian people. He pointed to the way in which the siege has left Gaza frozen in time. Since the blockade started two and a half years ago nothing constructive has been done. Nothing built and nothing rebuilt, even following the destruction wrought by the military incursion in December 08/January 09. He described



the vast destruction of the basic infrastructure in Gaza, including over 50,000 homes having been destroyed or damaged. He pointed to the destruction of educational infrastructure, such as the American-International school, which was completely destroyed by Israeli jet fire with absolutely no justification.

Business infrastructure has also been affected. He pointed out that in the last three days of the last conflict last January Israeli bulldozers were sent in to destroy factories including a factory for biscuits, a juice factory and a cement factory. The infrastructure of democracy has also been



attacked, including the Foreign Ministry, the Finance Ministry, and parliamentary buildings, all destroyed. Despite the time that has passed since these institutions were shattered nothing has been rebuilt and not even one bag of cement has been allowed in.

The psychological impact of the siege on the children of Gaza

One of Ging's major concerns is the psychological impact that the siege is having on the mindset of the younger generation. Half of the 1.4 million population in Gaza are children. That is around 750,000 children, all of whom are growing up in an atmosphere of suffering and violence. UNWRA is in a struggle for these children's minds, he said. They are doing their best to educate these young people, with the support of their parents and local communities but the good work that they are trying to do is constantly being challenged by the suffering that they see all around them and the increasing calls to resist the occupation.



He expressed his concern at the worrying statistics on mental health coming out of the area. He estimated that *"most of the children are traumatised."* Horror upon hearing the sonic boom of Israeli jets, not sleeping and bedwetting are all just a few of the ever increasing problems typically suffered by Gazan children now.

The impact of the siege

The direness of the situation in Gaza must not be underestimated. While other countries may certainly rank higher in terms of more desperate food shortages, droughts and so on, Gaza is still suffering far too much. Ging pointed out that people often call Gaza a prison, but this analogy does not go far enough, he argued. After all, in a British prison, for example, at least the

convict can expect a certain standard of care, three square meals a day and so on. Not so for



the innocent people of Gaza who are guilty of no crimes. He pointed out the bizarreness of the siege in that, having asked for permission from the Israeli authorities to take in school desks and having been granted permission, UNWRA were allowed to take in the trucks with the wooden desk tops but were not allowed to take in the trucks with the metal desk legs. Children in Gaza attend school on a rota basis as a result of a lack of resources and incomprehensible siege restrictions such as this. The public worldwide have been fed a line of rhetoric that they have largely swallowed which is that the siege is in place as a security measure against a people who allow terrorists in their midst's. However, Ging pointed out the absurdity of this line of argument when he pointed out that such a line of thinking would never have been able to justify a siege on London after the 7/7 bombings! If not London, then why Gaza?

During the Q and A session that followed his talk a lot of very interesting points were raised. Points discussed included the difficulties of getting aid into the region, (including the 12 tons of aid that was left rotting in Egypt as a result of the Israeli restrictions); the frustration around the lack of unity within the Palestinian leadership; the role that Obama is and should play in the peace process, and the importance of raising the public and political awareness level of the real situation on the ground.

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UNWRA's role in the region is commendable but extremely difficult. As Ging said, **“our hands are tied behind our backs, our legs are tied together, we are blindfolded and then told to get on with it.”** However, Ging and UNWRA continue to work tirelessly to ease the humanitarian crisis that the Gazans have found themselves in through no fault of their own. Some extremely useful points came out of the meeting and it was decided that the momentum initiated in this meeting should be followed up by another session in a few weeks where once again the focus will be on the situation in Gaza and hopefully, the way forward.

