

For Immediate Release

The situation in the Gaza Strip - Report from Caritas Jerusalem

If you wish to really understand what is taking place in the Gaza Strip, please open your Bible and read the Lamentations of Jeremiah. This is what we are all living. People are CRYING, HUNGRY, THIRSTY and DESPERATE. – Fr. Manuel Musallam – Parish Priest- Latin Convent, Gaza

"There is no doubt that Israel has not taken the precautions required of it in international law to protect the civilian population and infrastructure [in Gaza]" – Swiss Foreign Min. Statement – 7/4/06

"A force of Israeli tanks and armoured vehicles has begun re-occupying an area of northern Gaza – Three Palestinians killed yesterday" - BBC Report – July 6 2006

(Jerusalem – July 6, 2006) – The current situation in the Gaza Strip is descending precipitously into a serious humanitarian disaster. Caritas Jerusalem operates a medical center in the Gaza Strip as well as a mobile medical clinic. Our medical center also engages in numerous local and regional health campaigns to help build the health capacity of families and children in Gaza through project activities conducted in schools and community based organizations. We also undertake social and educational assistance programs as well as programs and direct assistance for catastrophic medical care cases in Gaza.

Our program manager is in daily contact with our team in the Gaza Strip to follow up on the ongoing situation. Our medical center in Gaza is working full time and is presenting all services to the community without any charge at the moment.

Our medical director, Dr. Bandaly, who is a native of Gaza, says that he has never seen Gaza in such a bad situation. Homes have no electricity or water. Luckily, the medical center has its own generator which they are using sparingly only for serious emergency situations and they have some stored water. The medical clinic is providing drinking water for the patients, the medical team and neighbors. Without this stored water, there is no other readily available clean water source for the medical clinic, except for bottled water. For our basic needs in the medical center, we are very well equipped. We have basic medicines, as we were just resupplied, thank God, prior to the beginning of this recent escalation.

Due to the main power station in Gaza being bombed, this has seriously disrupted electrical supplies in Gaza. With the electricity cut, ordinary people will not be able to get water pumped from wells and this is a very hot time of year in Gaza. Cutting the power will have serious and far reaching consequences especially for the sick, old, small children, and babies. With no power, they cannot store food easily. Now that the signs of military activities are pending, people are really afraid. Children are really terrified.

The main hospital in Gaza, Al Shifa, is operating on generator power, but they cannot keep this up for long. This is good, but sick people still need transportation, and with no diesel fuel or gasoline, there are no buses or taxis for transportation. The situation is really terrible and it is the innocent, the old, the sick and small children who are suffering the most. Our medical director also said that within two more days they estimate that they will be walking to and from work as there is apparently no more gasoline or diesel fuel in all Gaza for transportation. This is a serious situation.

Dr. Bandaly, concerned of an invasion into the Gaza Strip, is asking for urgent first aid kits that will be distributed around Gaza in case regular citizens are forced to address medical emergencies on their own. They want to position these resources around so, God forbid, if need be, people will be able to do something to help injured people because if a ground offensive takes place in Gaza, the whole region will be under curfew and the injured will have to be treated in their own home regions. Doctors and ambulances will not be able to reach them.

Our medical clinic is, thank God, fully operational. While they do not have regular power, they are still working full time and in full force. Thankfully, our staff are still coming to work as they are being paid their regular salaries unlike the Palestinian governmental sector who is without financial support for their governmental employees going on five months.

Dr. Bandaly also pointed out that with the wage crisis in the Palestinian Authority, his clients have no money to pay for anything. "When the situation was better, we requested nominal co-payments for our services and for medicines that we provided. These co-payments were very minimal, but today people have no means to pay. We are providing our medical treatment free. We must continue to reach out in ministry to the sick. People really feel humiliated, tired, desperate, alone and forgotten."

Food is a big problem. The people in Gaza like all other people need access to good quality balanced food to live healthy lives. Our medical director said: "In Gaza, we have lots of anemic women and malnourished children. He added: "There is no milk, meat, cheese, yogurt or anything that requires

refrigeration. This is a terrible situation. We do not know what to do." The food that is available also cannot just be eaten alone. To cook rice or hummus or to make bread, you need water and a means to cook the food. This was highlighted by the people at the World Food Programme who pointed out those basic foodstuffs like flour or hummus cannot be consumed without the ability to add water and cook them.

Note: We understand that food is presently available in Gaza if the people only have money to buy it. With the commitments to provide cash, we can get food to hungry people right away. We can handle the administrative details of bank transfers and other details to ensure accountability, but with solid commitments, we can direct the assistance to needy people right now through our Caritas team in Gaza.

Caritas Jerusalem also operates a mobile medical clinic in Gaza. This clinic targets a number of highly marginalized areas in the Amore, Imm Sadar, Magazi Bridge, Al Shati Camp and near Rafah in some villages and in Breij Camp. We are focusing on these locations, targeting two to three villages in each area. We are seeking to provide them with a minimum of medical coverage. These areas are very poor and the people living there are under very serious humanitarian situations of deficiency. While the Israelis have left Gaza and this has allowed for greater internal mobility, one must remember that transportation is not free. By bringing the medical care to them, we help them save money. We also offer medicine at heavily subsidized prices. For example, our mobile clinic will provide a prescription to a person for less than 1 Euro. Often people can afford either the medicine or the transportation, but not both. So bringing the medical care to them makes a huge difference. For those who cannot pay anything, we give it to them free.

For almost a week, our mobile medical clinic has stopped working because the areas where we have been targeting are near those which are currently the target of potential military activity. Due to the constant bombardments in Gaza, it is not safe to operate a vehicle like our mobile clinic. These areas are isolated areas which very few people go to. That is why we are targeting them because the need is so great. Our medical professionals in Gaza have told us "lets wait and see what happens for the next couple of days before we start the mobile medical clinic back up again."

Fr. Manuel Musallam is the parish priest at the Latin Convent in Gaza. He relayed the following concerning the situation there.

"The people in Gaza are suffering unbelievably. They are hungry, thirsty, have no electricity, no clean water and they are suffering constant bombardments and sonic booms from low flying aircraft.

They are suffering from hunger. They need food. Even if there is food for sale, people have no money to buy food. The price of food, of course, has doubled and tripled in the situation. They have no income, no opportunities to get food from outside and no opportunities to secure money inside Gaza. No work. No livelihood. No future. They have no hope and many very poor people are aimlessly wandering around trying to beg for something from others who also have nothing. It is heart breaking to see.

We need food. We only need bread and water. Children and babies are hungry. Unfortunately, we are seeing sickness increase and to add insult to injury, people cannot afford to pay for transportation to hospital. This is not only hard suffering for now, but this fact will have long reverberations for the future. The sicknesses we have now will degrade the future generation.

Children are afraid. They are going on one week with no electricity. No light at night. No oil or candles. Some can't even buy matches. These children are seeing the exodus of their entities.

Children are suffering from the sonic booms. Many have been violently thrown from their beds at night. Many arms and legs are broken due to this fact. These planes fly low over Gaza and then reach the speed of sound. This shakes the ground and creates shock waves like an earthquake that can cause a person to be thrown from their bed. I myself weigh 120 kilos and was almost thrown from my bed due to the shock wave produced by a low flying airplane that made a sonic boom. It is terrifying. It is worse than a film. It is real. It is like someone picked up your house and shook it.

We are now going into the seventh day without water. We cannot drink water from the ground here as it is salty and not hygienic. People can only buy water to drink. With no electricity to pump the water from wells, no fuel to boil, we are all thirsty. Thirsty children are crying, afraid and desperate. Of course, those who are sick in hospital are suffering an unimaginable horror. There is no electricity to operate life saving machines and the simplest of treatments is not able to be undertaken.

These actions are war crimes. When I cry as a priest, I beg you; we do not need pity. We only need justice. If you don't give justice, there will be no peace. Peace is the farthest thing away from the mind of anyone, Christian or Moslem, in Gaza at this time.

Every minute, a minimum of two bombardments hits Gaza from the sea, air or land. I have an employee who lives in Bet Hanoun. He told me he has not slept in one week. Gaza cannot sleep.

I sent the Sisters of the Baby Jesus to Jabalia Camp to check on some poor families. They returned to me crying at the unspeakable horror they saw. The cries of hungry children, the sullen faces of broken men and women who are just sitting in their hungry emptiness with no light, hope or love. Christians must work to stop this silly war. I am against fanaticism and violence, but these actions guarantee an increase in support for Hamas.

I demand that those outside of Gaza must care for us here in Gaza, Muslims and Christians. There are no differences here in religion. A hungry child is a hungry child. A sick person is a sick person. Our Lord demanded through St. John that you remember us in our affliction. We are now in a serious affliction. (End of the comments from Fr. Musallam)

Caritas Jerusalem has issued an appeal for financial support for the project "Emergency Support for Palestine." This €1.16 million Euro appeal was just launched in May 2006 and contributions to the program are still being received at this time with initial commitments already received from Caritas Australia (€29,135), Caritas Belgium (€50,000), Caritas Canada (€56,543), Caritas Japan (€15,666) and Caritas Spain (€200,000). A significant portion of this project will be directed to assistance for the Gaza Strip region, which is suffering an acute crisis at this time. This program offers assistance for food provision, medical cases, education assistance, direct relief and assistance to create work for the jobless. We are coordinating our assistance in Gaza through our medical clinic, the parish priest and the Near East Council of Churches and other partners in the area.

Caritas Jerusalem urges all parties to reject violence and make every effort to restore some sense of calm and orderliness that is needed to reenter negotiations for peace. Killing, aggression, hostage taking and efforts to harm a civilian population are wrong and must be condemned in the strongest terms with a view to end them immediately.

Please contact your religious leaders and or elected representatives and demand from them that the situation in Palestine not be allowed to spiral out of control and descend into a deeper abyss of despair, hopelessness and violence than already exists. The region of Gaza particularly needs to see an end to violence.

To send financial assistance, please contact us or transfer funds to:

Bank Name: Arab Bank
Swift Code: ARABPS22110
Account #: 457793/0/590 ----EURO
Account #: 457793/0/510 ----US \$
Account #: 457793/0/570 ----NIS
Credit Account: Caritas Jerusalem
Branch No.: 9110
At Arab Bank in Al-Ram
P.O. Box 2445, Al-Ram Jerusalem

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