

Caritas Seeks to Stave off Palestinian Hunger

Vatican City, 12 June 2006 – Caritas Jerusalem is appealing urgently for nearly 1.5 million US dollars to help Palestinians scrape by as salaries at the Palestinian Authority, which provides jobs for more than 150,000 people, go unpaid since Hamas won the January elections, prompting Israel and international donors to withhold funds destined for the new government.

Those government employees directly or indirectly support a quarter of the entire Palestinian population of 1.3 million people.

Israel froze VAT and customs taxes owed to the Palestinian Authority when Hamas, which has been labelled a terrorist organisation by the United States and other countries, was elected to power and continued to refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist. Hamas will also not lay down its weapons in what it says is an armed struggle for liberation of its still-occupied territories in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Other international organisations and donors also halted direct funding of the Palestinian Authority.

Food Shortages

Citing security concerns, Israel has also tightened restrictions on transport to and from the Palestinian territories, especially the Gaza Strip. Throughout January and February, Palestinians in Gaza didn't even have enough bread to eat, as grain was blocked at the Karni crossing and flour mills shut down. Many people haven't eaten meat in months, and even cheaper poultry remains inaccessible as prices soar due to mass cullings to prevent the spread of avian influenza.

About 40 per cent of children in Gaza already suffer from malnutrition because of the area's absolute poverty. Fresh milk and baby formula have also practically disappeared, with the only available option the less nutritious powdered milk.

Although transport of goods into the Gaza Strip has increased in recent weeks, exports for the most part are still blocked at the Karni crossing, where fresh fruits and vegetables, one of the main sources of income for Palestinians, have been left to rot.

According to a March 8 report from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the economic losses to date for 2006 stood at 17 million US dollars. According to the World Bank, if the current restrictions on movement and withholding of Palestinian tax revenues continue, the Palestinian economy could shrink by 30 per cent in 2006.

Building a Divide

Meanwhile, Israel has made progress on the construction of its security wall around Jerusalem, closing entry points for West Bank Palestinians at eight of twelve crossings. Residents of Israel and others with the necessary permits will still be able to access the eight restricted crossings. But for the 60,000 Palestinians who cross into Israel every day, for work or access to health

care, the additional closings mean at best a longer commute, at worst, that a serious illness goes untreated. Some people just cannot get to work.

Israel eventually plans to limit the number of crossings into Jerusalem from the West Bank to just one.

The U.N.'s OCHA recently scaled up its request for humanitarian assistance by 80 per cent, to 385 million US dollars. The agency stated money is needed to keep hospitals and schools, which are heavily funded by the PA, in operation. OCHA will also provide direct assistance to the destitute.

What Caritas is Doing

The Caritas Jerusalem project will run for nine months, providing food, clothing, household supplies, and covering the utilities expenses and rents for people in the most desperate of circumstances. Caritas will also help those who can no longer pay school or university fees to continue their educations, one of the only means to escape poverty.

Caritas will also ensure that people who cannot afford urgent medical treatment, especially when it is not available in the Palestinian territories, are allowed to access health services. Caritas, through its own network of medical facilities, will also care for those who can no longer pay for treatment.

In addition, Caritas will launch a job creation scheme, employing people in painting or maintenance work for school and medical buildings. In some cases, Caritas hopes to be able to create long-term employment for people living in a situation where few jobs are to be had.

Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 162 Catholic relief, development, and social service organisations present in over 200 countries and territories.

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