

## Health and human rights in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza

Palestine is split geographically into the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Gaza is the most densely populated area on earth: after first being crippled by blockade of its borders since 2007, Gaza is currently being bombed by the Israeli armed forces.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Gaza, the West Bank does not threaten Israel with missiles, but nevertheless suffers widespread erosions of human rights which we witnessed on a fact-finding tour in November, 2008.

Restriction of movement due to the separation barrier and checkpoints, combined with the need for travel permits, delay access to hospitals for both patients and health workers. We saw 33-week-old triplets delayed for over 5 h while awaiting permits and finally transferred without their parents, and heard of hospital workers' commuting times increasing from 30 min to more than 2.5 h after the closure to them of nearby checkpoints. At the medical schools we heard of the immense difficulties staff and students face as a result of the paralysing restrictions on travel between institutions in the Occupied Territories.

The total blockade of Gaza meant our entry there was denied, as it has been for humanitarian workers and essential food, energy, and medical supplies since the closure of the border in early November. We heard from Physicians for Human Rights—Israel, of the reduction in exit permits being granted for treatment outside Gaza, and of the practice of denying exit to some patients unless they collaborate with the security service in intelligence gathering.<sup>2</sup>

We saw how the Palestinians' opportunities to make a living are being eroded, both by illegal Israeli settlements on their farmland and by discrimination against their industry.

Violence continues at all levels: we spoke with schoolchildren, injured in stone-throwing attacks by Israeli children occurring while Israeli soldiers looked on. Children as young as 12 years are prosecuted in the Israeli military courts. The most common charge against children in the military courts is for stone-throwing, which under military law carries a maximum penalty of 20 years.<sup>3</sup>

Our experience in the West Bank caused us grave concerns, which have been realised more rapidly and devastatingly than any of us could have anticipated, in the current disproportionate attacks by Israeli forces on Gaza. Our personal insight into this includes the attack by the Israeli navy on the boat *Dignity* when underway to provide emergency health care to Gaza, and which was carrying a member of our tour group.<sup>4</sup>

This report is for our colleagues around the world who might be unaware of the deliberate erosion of human rights in both the West Bank and Gaza. We suggest that, in view of the failure of other measures to influence those in power, serious consideration be given to targeted academic and trade boycotts.

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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- 1 Falk R. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967. <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/9a798adb322aff38525617b006d88d7/061f1f4fbdecffe5852574d60065b4ba!OpenDocument> (accessed Dec 8, 2008).
- 2 Physicians for Human Rights—Israel. Holding health to ransom: GSS interrogation and extortion of Palestinian patients at Erez crossing. [http://www.phr.org.il/phr/files/articlefile\\_1217866249125.pdf](http://www.phr.org.il/phr/files/articlefile_1217866249125.pdf) (accessed Jan 5, 2009).

- 3 Defence for Children International. Palestinian child political prisoners: semi annual report 2007. <http://www.dci-pal.org/english/display.cfm?DocId=605&CategoryId=2> (accessed Dec 8, 2008).
- 4 Tran M. Israel accused of ramming Gaza aid boat. *The Guardian* Dec 30, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/30/israel-gaza-aid-ship> (accessed Jan 4, 2009).



Published Online  
January 9, 2009  
DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60013-1

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