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## Gaza's humanitarian catastrophe

While Israel says there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza, in reality there is a catastrophe

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Passengers exchanged satirical remarks when they heard the news in the taxi they were riding Sunday morning; that the Israeli government decided for the first time since imposing a blockade on Gaza to allow the passage of new items. These include mayonnaise, ketchup, shoelaces, buttons, needles, safety pins and sewing thread. Israel's decision was the butt of many jokes made by passengers heading from the town of Deir Al-Balah to Gaza City. Until Sunday morning, these goods were considered a threat to Israel's security. Lifting the ban is "an expression of Israel's desire to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinians living in Gaza," according to Israeli Army spokesman General Eitan Ben Eliyahu.

At a coffee shop in Al-Remal district in Gaza City, one young man sarcastically declared: "If it took them more than three and a half years to allow sewing thread and buttons through, it will probably take seven years before they allow clothes in. As for cement, we can forget it."

International economy expert Omar Shaaban, who heads the PAL-Think Institute for Strategic Studies, warned of the dangers of Israel's decision. "When the people in the US and UK hear that Israel has finally allowed ketchup and mayonnaise, which are luxury items, they assume that all other goods are available in Gaza. This is deception."

Shaaban told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that, "some 8,000 commodities were being imported into Gaza before the siege. This number has dropped to a few dozen, which demonstrates the tragic conditions the blockade has caused."

Shaaban points to another fallacy in Israel's claim that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza. "What is the scientific definition of a humanitarian crisis?" he inquired. "Is it defined in terms of food shortages only? There are other health, social, psychological and security factors that should be taken into consideration." He noted that prior to the siege, Gaza did not see significant food shortages, contrary to the image Israel is trying to portray that Gaza was always deprived. Gaza had always managed, and sometimes prospered, Shaaban explained. "The blockade aimed to intentionally debilitate Gaza," he argued. "While many goods are being smuggled through the tunnels, the majority of Palestinians cannot afford them because they are impoverished."

According to a report by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 50 per cent of the children in Gaza suffer from anemia and malnutrition. Also, one million Palestinians depend on humanitarian relief for sustenance; 80 per cent of Gaza residents live below the poverty line; and employment has reached 65 per cent, especially among the youth and university graduates. Average income per day per person is only \$2.

The blockade has also depleted stocks of 88 types of vital medications, such as those for mental health, blood disease, liver disease, and formula for infants. There is also a shortage of 120 types of medical supply, including catheters, materials needed for chemotherapy, and surgical thread. The report revealed that 90 per cent of potable water in the Gaza Strip is unsuitable for human consumption, and the sole power station in Gaza has lost 60 per cent of its capacity, resulting in power outages averaging 10 hours every day.

Palestinian economist Hamed Gad asserted that the siege has almost completely obliterated all industry in the Gaza Strip. Gad told the *Weekly* that out of 3,900 functioning factories before the blockade, only a handful is still operating because of shortages in raw material. He added that the few factories still in business rely on materials smuggled in via the tunnels.

At the same time, Gad continued, a large number of Gaza residents relied on agriculture for their livelihood, a sector that has been destroyed by the blockade because of shortages in fertilisers, insecticides and supplies such as nylon, hoses and seeds. This situation encourages the spread of agricultural diseases that threaten crops harvested in some areas. Gad further stated that the average income has dropped by more than 50 per cent in the Gaza Strip compared to figures from 1999, when it reached \$1,750 per annum. Today, it stands at \$850 annually.

Prices in the Gaza Strip are also higher than the average prices in Israel, although the average share of an individual in Israel of GDP is \$21,000 -- 24 times more than the figure in Gaza. Exports from Gaza have come to a complete halt and imports have

dropped to less than \$700 million, 70 per cent of which are smuggled from Egypt through the tunnels.

According to the Petrol Station Association, daily fuel needs in Gaza amount to 350,000 litres of solar fuel, 120,000 litres of petrol, 350 tonnes of natural gas and 350,000 litres of industrial fuel for the power station. But as a result of the blockade, solar imports have dropped by 74 per cent, petrol by 79 per cent, natural gas for domestic use by 71 per cent.

Meanwhile, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that Israel did not meet its commitment to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon that it will allow construction material in needed for two projects that the UN is supervising. OCHA stated that Israel has allowed in only 17 per cent of the needed construction material for these two projects, despite the fact that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak personally assured Ban that they would allow in any material needed for the projects.

OCHA also revealed that Tel Aviv did not follow through on its promise to French President Nicolas Sarkozy to permit the passage of construction material needed to rebuild Al-Quds Hospital, destroyed during the 2008-2009 war on Gaza when it was attacked by Israeli tanks positioned in the western part of Gaza City. Sarkozy twice telephoned Netanyahu personally to request passage of the materials.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Filippo Grandi stated that conditions in Gaza were intolerable, noting that 1.5 million people -- one million of whom are registered refugees -- are paying the price of the blockade. In a interview with the Palestinian newspaper *Al-Quds*, Grandi said that Israel is not responding to calls from the UN to end the siege, adding that Tel Aviv should at least allow enough construction material through to rebuild what was demolished during Israel's last war on the Gaza Strip, and the years prior to that. He criticised Israel for rejecting this "minor request".

"The blockade on the Gaza Strip is unacceptable and the policy of sporadically allowing a sack of flour here and some equipment there after a long and complicated process is unacceptable," asserted Grandi. "One and a half million people cannot live like this." He continued that while the tunnels alleviate some of the effects of the blockade imposed by Israel, it is "an illegal economy" which will have dangerous implications on the stability and security of the region.

According to Ziyad Zaza, deputy prime minister and economy minister of the dismissed cabinet in Gaza, the list of goods that Israel have recently allowed into Gaza is a joke that mocks the people and skews reality. Zaza told the *Weekly* that Israel is distorting and fabricating reality in an attempt to divert attention away from the harsh siege on Gaza. He called for an end to the siege once and for all, and for allowing the passage of goods -- especially cement, steel, primary materials for industry, agriculture -- and permitting imports and exports between Gaza and the world.

Zaza urged the world not to allow Israel to continue the blockade, underlining that through such "ludicrous" decisions as that to allow thread and needles, Tel Aviv is attempting to avoid anger from around the world along with pressure to end the siege. He insisted that the economic siege must be lifted and all border crossings reopened. He underlined that Israel's attempts to deceive the world would not succeed because the suffering caused by the blockade could not be concealed.