

Jill Evans MEP Report from visit to Palestine and Israel, 27-31 October 2006

Last week, from the comfort of my own home, I watched on television one of the most serious attacks by Israeli forces on Gaza for several months. Hours before, I had been in Gaza to see the situation at first hand. The start of the Israeli bombing cut short our visit. Just as we were about to visit the Jabalya refugee camp we were told by the Palestinian soldiers travelling around with us that we'd have to leave immediately. But I saw enough to recognise that Gaza has been turned into a giant prison camp full of despair and suffering.

Since returning home I have tried to follow events on television but there has been little coverage, especially considering that more than 60 Palestinians were killed in a week.

I visited Israel and Palestine with eleven other MEPs to monitor the current situation. Major changes have taken place since my last visit in November 2005. Israel's decision to illegally stop the transfer of Palestinian tax and customs revenue to the new government in Palestine and the closure of the Gaza crossing point has created an economic and humanitarian crisis.

When we arrived in Jerusalem on 27th October our first meeting was with the European Commission and consular representatives to get background information. Israel had illegally stopped the transfer of £600 million of customs dues on Palestinian own goods – two thirds of the Palestinian budget. Withholding this money has created massive financial crisis.

The European Union (EU) decided this year not to channel aid through the Palestinian government. Instead it set up a Temporary International Mechanism (TIM) to administer funding. Direct allowances are being given to the poorest – about 35,000 people, mostly women. This has led to terrible scenes of people queuing on the streets to get meagre handouts. While emergency measures are needed in an emergency situation, creating dependence on EU payments is not helping the Palestinians to govern themselves nor rebuild their economy. 66% of families live below the poverty line.

On Saturday 28th we met members of the Palestinian Legislative Council from all parties. We were reminded that of their 132 MPs, democratically elected in January, forty one have been abducted by Israel. They are in prison, including members of the government and the speaker of the Council. None of them had been charged nor put on trial.

Negotiations were still underway in Palestine on forming a “unity government” between the parties to negotiate with Israel and the international community. A document outlining a national minimum programme had been drawn up. All parties agreed on the need for this unity government and the need to make progress very quickly.

The other proposal that had unanimous support was the call for an international peace conference. With the fortieth anniversary of the Israeli occupation of Palestine

approaching next June, it is essential that the international community stops turning a blind eye and takes action to resolve the crisis.

The need for urgent action was also highlighted by our meeting with the union of Public Sector workers. 165,000 government employees have not been paid for seven months. Health and education workers were receiving just 15% of their salary through TIM, but the other workers got nothing and had taken strike action. The Palestinian public sector was on the edge of collapse. This had a knock-on effect: fifty private firms had closed and the social impacts were enormous. Schools had closed and hospitals were under threat. The workers themselves were totally reliant on relatives, local donations and selling their belongings on the streets. Banks had stopped all loans because they were already owed millions with little prospect of repayment.

Everywhere we went we saw different aspects of the same crisis. The Israeli wall had stolen 14,000 hectares of Palestinian land and isolated 50 of their groundwater wells. One million olive trees had been uprooted by Israel to make way for the wall. We met Palestinian farmers in Jerusalem who were unable to harvest their olives because they were prevented by soldiers or actually came under attack from Israeli settlers. Olives comprise 25% of the total agricultural income. In two weeks time the agricultural produce in Gaza – tomatoes, flowers and capsicums - would be ready for export. But there is no means of getting it out because Israel has closed all the borders. Once again the produce will rot by the roadside and the farmers will get no income. It is no surprise that poverty has increased by 70% and unemployment is up by 40%. Palestinian trade has practically been brought to a halt. We saw the remains of factories near the Erez crossing which were destroyed by Israeli helicopter gunships just last week. In June Israel bombed Gaza's power station which supplied half of Gaza's electricity. Since May, Israeli forces have killed over 300 Palestinians.

Touring Wadi Nisnas in Haifa on Sunday brought home the consequences of military aggression. We saw the damage done to houses and areas where houses had been completely destroyed. Fifty Hizbullah rockets hit Haifa during the recent conflict and most found their targets although fortunately none had hit any of the petrochemical industries located in Haifa. Thirty nine people in Israel were killed by rockets, 46% of them Arabs. Yet only 30% of the emergency government fund was allocated to Arab areas where there were fewer bomb shelters.

Speaking to local residents and peace activists, we heard of the terror and learned that three days after the war started 1,500 people had marched on the streets for peace. One woman whose house had been destroyed by a rocket in the first week told of how she only survived by relying on friends and family. Despite her own distress she couldn't get out of her mind the scenes of destruction she saw on television from Lebanon where the people had nothing. She counted herself fortunate.

Any doubt that Gaza is under siege was dispelled by the experience of crossing the Erez border point from Israel into Gaza on Monday, October 30th. You have to pass through Israel to get into Palestine because the Palestinian airports have been closed by Israel.

Although we made proper applications to the Israeli authorities and had been given their permission to cross, we were still kept waiting over an hour for our passports to be checked and each of us to be questioned. Crossing the border involves passing through a series of metal turnstiles and automated gates and x-ray machines, more suitable for cattle than people. But in comparison to the treatment of the Palestinian people, our experience was straightforward. While we waited for our passes in the almost deserted crossing point, a woman arrived with a toddler and young baby, only to be told that she would have to wait there at least four hours for her pass. There was no problem with her application but it would take that long. This kind of intimidation is completely unacceptable.

At Shifa Hospital in Gaza we met the Palestinian Minister of Health together with medical staff working under the most difficult conditions. Since the money had been stopped in April this year, vaccination, school health programmes and pregnancy care had also stopped. After the bombing of the power plant in June the hospital had relied on borrowed emergency generators. Interrupted current flows had resulted in damage to equipment like renal dialysis machines and several were unusable. The minister estimated that over seventy children – mostly leukaemia sufferers - had died as a result of the siege. The highly dedicated staff worked around the clock, despite only receiving a fraction of their salaries. There was real fear that diseases like polio, which had been eradicated, could return.

The occupation and siege had caused physical and psychological scarring. In the words of one of the surgeons “...the whole Palestinian population had been condemned to a slow death”.

The most horrific evidence was shown us of previously unseen injuries caused, they believe, by Dense Inert Metal Explosive (DIME) weapons which are being developed in the United States. These weapons cause burning and serious internal injuries. In the space of just two months the doctors had performed 51 amputations compared with two or three a month previously. Although the Israeli Defence Force denies the use of the weapons, samples taken by an Italian television crew for testing showed that it is possible.

The appointment, while we were in Palestine, of Avigdor Lieberman as deputy prime minister of Israel does nothing to suggest that there is political will for dialogue with the Palestinians. He has called for an “ethnically pure” Israel purged of its Arab citizens.

The British government talks about helping build the institutions of a future Palestinian state. Those institutions are being destroyed as you read this article. No-one is stepping in to prevent Israel from continuing its aggression and the abuse of the human rights of the Palestinian people. That is why I have joined other MEPs (statement enclosed) in calling on the European Union to review its trade agreement with Israel until Israel respects international agreements and United Nations resolutions. And if the unlawful killings of Palestinian civilians continue the imposition of EU sanctions will have to be considered.