

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF:
THE SITUATION IN GAZA IS "GRIM AND MISERABLE"

(New York/Geneva/Jerusalem, 15 February 2008): John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator expressed shock at the living conditions in the Gaza Strip and deplored the current restrictions on the flow of humanitarian aid and commercial goods in and out of the area.

"I have been shocked by the grim and miserable things that I have seen and heard today, which are the result of current restrictions and the limitations on the number of goods that are being allowed into Gaza," said Mr. Holmes during a day-long visit to the Gaza Strip. "Around 80 percent of the population is dependant on food aid from international organizations. Poverty and unemployment are increasing and the private sector has more or less collapsed. Only ten percent of the amount of goods that entered Gaza a year ago are being permitted to enter now," he said.

Mr. Holmes visited Gaza to assess the impact on the civilian population of the closure of key crossings for commercial and humanitarian goods. He visited the sewage lagoons at Beit Lahiya, where he witnessed the precarious state of the waste water system and the growing problems of supplying people living in Gaza with fresh water. While at the Shifa hospital in Gaza City, Mr. Holmes heard from the director about the potentially disastrous effects of the crossing closures on the dialysis and neo-natal wards, both of which rely on consistent supplies of fuel and electricity and spare parts for life saving medical equipment.

Mr. Holmes travelled to the Karni crossing, the major transport route into Gaza that has been closed for all exports and the majority of imports since June 2007. While at Karni, he met the manager of the Karni Industrial Zone to discuss how the United Nations could best support the re-opening of Karni and all other commercial crossings into Gaza.

"What's essential to alleviate this situation is the opening of crossings to allow a lot more humanitarian and non-humanitarian goods to enter Gaza so people can lead better lives and have a minimum of human dignity," Mr. Holmes said. "These are points I will be making to the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority later in my trip," he added.

Later, Mr. Holmes was briefed by United Nations staff, including officials from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) about strengthening humanitarian programmes to better address the impact of the closures.

On Saturday, 16 February, Mr. Holmes will travel to the West Bank to assess the impact of the restrictions on the movement of people, goods and services on the lives of Palestinians living there. He will visit the Augusta Victoria hospital as well as Bethlehem and Hebron.

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