

Stop the War – Speech on Gaza

Brighton, 13 March 2009

Introduction

I've just come back from what was my fourth visit to Palestine, and I want to give you a quick update on the ongoing political, economic and humanitarian situation as I witnessed it there.

But in trying to find the right words to use, I'm struck by the fact that **we are running out of words that describe the full horror of the situation** faced by most Palestinians today.

Each time we come back from the region, we say, that's it – it can't get any worse.

And yet each time we go back – and we find that, terribly, it can get worse, and it continues to do so.

The settlements are still expanding relentlessly, in spite of the international agreements Israel has made, most recently at Annapolis, to halt them.

The house demolitions not only continue, but accelerate – most recently, a groups of 88 homes in Silwan, in East Jerusalem, are at risk because they were built without permits – well of course they were, because the Israelis are not giving out any more permits to Palestinians to build more homes.

The apartheid wall is now starting its deadly journey up the eastern side of the region, transforming villages into open air prisons, and turning the West Bank into a series of disconnected Bantustans, and splitting in half communities, farms, families.

The number of checkpoints is growing, and the colonisation of East Jerusalem continues.

And now, of course, as well, the people of Gaza have the aftermath of a truly terrible military onslaught to cope with – but they are still denied the tools and materials they need to rebuild their homes.

Israel continues to prohibit the entry into the region of things like cement and glass, so people continue to sit in the rubble of what was once their homes, waiting for aid that they aren't allowed access to, because the Israeli officials still refuse to open the border crossings. **And they do it with impunity.**

And yet even more shocking than all of these “facts on the ground” is the one overwhelming fact – **that official British government and EU policy is actually exacerbating that suffering.**

I think we should be very clear that what is happening in Palestine now is **an immense and grotesque crime against humanity – and that it is completely scandalous that our Government is standing by and letting it happen.**

Gaza

As the Israeli military onslaught on Gaza unfolded minute by minute on our television screens towards the end of December, we had to wait days before we got even the most timid words of criticism from this government. I don't know about you, but I remember thinking at the end of each bulletin – well there's got to be some condemnation now – surely they've got to say something. Yet nothing, for days.

And even then, when it finally came, the greater criticism was reserved for the Hamas militants, firing their makeshift rockets out of the despair of their imprisonment by Israel – not for the F16 bombers, carpet bombing one of the most densely populated places on earth.

Let me be clear: I am also deeply critical of the militants – they are to be condemned for their actions, and brought to justice. But to suggest that there is symmetry between their actions, and those of the Israeli military, is to be blind to the decades of occupation, the years of subjugation, humiliation, and desperation borne by a people who are being systematically denied many of their most fundamental human rights.

And then we had the **donors conference** in Sharm-el-Sheik a few weeks ago. And plenty of aid was pledged. But what use is pledging more aid, if it will simply join the thousands of tonnes which are already piled up on the border, awaiting the whim of the Israelis to let it in?

And where was the serious condemnation of that? Where was the action to put serious pressure on the Israelis to lift the siege, and allow aid and shelter and medicines in?

When I was in Gaza, I was told that the region needs around 750 truck loads of goods every single day just to meet basic needs. At the moment, on a good day, Gazans are lucky to see 30.

(Explain difficulty of entry – Erez crossing – devastation – initially not caused by war)

As John Ging, the Director of Operations at the UN Relief and Works Agency, put it, with characteristic directness, when I met him at the UN HQ in Gaza “The inhumanity and illegality of the situation is that the goods are there to distribute – it’s just a question of opening the gates.”

And yet because of the complicity and cowardice of our government, and the governments of the EU and the US, those gates remain closed.

And that is illegal under international law, and immoral according to any moral compass.

We should demand that Israel lifts the siege, and insist that Israel pays compensation for the enormous destruction it has wrought.

We've estimated that over 50 million euros worth of EU aid has been spent on infrastructure projects in Gaza over the past 10 years. Much of that has now been bombed out of existence.

I can't put it any better than Mustafa Barghouti, an independent Palestinian politician, who, when we met him, commented:

“Why are EU taxpayers so happy to pay to repair what US taxpayers have paid to destroy?”

Why indeed?

And it's not as if the international community doesn't have levers to put pressure on Israel, if it chooses to use them.

As well as a ban on arms exports, we could stop importing Israeli weapons, withholding from the authorities some of the international finance that has allowed Israel to become the fourth largest arms exporter in the world.

The EU could suspend its Association Agreement with Israel, under which Israeli goods enjoy preferential access to EU markets.

Indeed, the law requires that it should be suspended, since it contains an explicit human rights clause – of which the EU is terribly proud, because it so clearly demonstrates their much vaunted commitment to human rights – and yet the EU member state governments never, ever countenance even the suggestion that Israel's privileges be suspended.

To the contrary, they are actually planning the upgrading of EU-Israel relations.

And so you understand why **words like injustice, and hypocrisy, and double-standards seem so utterly and completely inadequate to describe the grotesque policies** of the UK government and their EU counterparts.

After so many years of those double-standards and that hypocrisy, many Palestinians have understandably lost confidence that the rule of law will ever be applied to their grievances.

Accountability Mechanism

Following Israel's deadly war on Gaza, it's more urgent than ever that the international community demonstrates **its commitment to an effective and credible accountability mechanism**

The setting up of **an independent and comprehensive international investigation into breaches of international law** during the three week war is an essential first step. Issues that it would need to have cover include whether either side deliberately attacked civilians; whether they acted according to the principle of proportionality; whether prohibited weapons were used; and whether ambulances were attacked, and the treatment and evacuation of the wounded delayed.

All of this, and much more, has been documented. You've heard about the appalling human costs. About the killing of over 1,440 people, the injuring of over 5000 more. The fact that nearly half the casualties were women and children. With Gaza's borders effectively sealed, and no proper shelters or warning system, the civilian population had nowhere to go, no safe haven during the operation.

Those numbers are shocking enough. But to give an indication of the proportion of people affected, the scale of the impact, then if you work it out according to a US population – it would be the equivalent of 247,000 people killed, and nearly a million injured.

Tens of thousands remain without adequate food or water or shelter. Over 80% in Gaza below poverty line and dependent on food aid. **People's lives were devastated – and then the means to rebuild them were also deliberately destroyed.**

So one of the things an independent investigation must also address is what appears to have been **the deliberate targeting of Gaza's industrial areas**. Not just tanks and bulldozers, but dynamite was used to destroy enterprises like flour mills, a cement packing operation, even an ice-cream factory.

And this happened in the very last days and hours of the war, even as a cease-fire was being negotiated. Where tanks and bulldozers had failed to fully destroy the contents of buildings, fires were set alight to do the job instead.

And I spoke to a family who owned that cement-packing factory, and they explained how they had invested everything they had in that factory, and in trying to develop a domestic economic base for Gaza. I met the owner's son, a partner in the factory, standing in the ruins, and he told me that not only had the factory been destroyed – so had any hope for a stable and peaceful future in the region.

95% of Gaza's local industry has been forced to close because of lack of raw materials and export opportunities.

Educational establishments have been similarly targeted. The American International School of Gaza seems an unlikely catalyst to unite al-Qaeda-affiliated extremists and Israeli authorities, but in one respect, at least, it has: both of them have been intent on destroying it.

When the Israeli Defence Force brought the school crashing to the ground in January, it was not the first time it had been attacked. Groups affiliated to al-Qaeda had done their best several times before. For them, the school was anathema because it offered Palestinian children an international education, and was based on mixed-sex teaching. That much, perhaps, is not surprising. But why would Israel so carefully target both this school, and many others in Gaza?

The only answer appears to be that a well-educated, articulate, confident generation of young Palestinians is perceived to be a threat. Yet surely the opposite is true. John Ging told us that one

of the UN's priorities in Gaza is to provide human rights education to Palestinian children – including educating them about the illegality of firing rockets over the border.

But, ironically, the text books for the new curriculum can't be printed, because the Israeli authorities are blocking the entry into Gaza of the paper that's needed to print them on. Paper is on the list of banned items in Gaza.

Over 100 students who have secured places to study abroad or in West Bank remain stranded in Gaza. The mother of Azahar, 24 year old student who plans to study architectural conservation in Germany said "how hard it is to watch your child's dreams shatter before your eyes."

Political settlement

Finally, most importantly and most urgently, the international community has a real opportunity to support peace in the region by supporting an emerging process of dialogue and reconciliation between the different Palestinian factions.

Because the greatest sign of hope while I was there was a meeting with Mustafa Barghouti, who told us about a crucial meeting held in Cairo a few weeks ago, at which both Hamas and Fatah agreed to put aside their internal struggles, **and to work together towards the establishment of a government of national unity.**

And it will be vital that this time the EU supports it.

Many of you might remember that we've been here before.

In fact the last time I was speaking about Palestine here in Brighton - I was checking my notes, it was in May 2007 – I'd just come back from another delegation visit to the region, and was talking about how we'd incurred the anger of the Israeli authorities and of EU ministers for **having had the temerity to challenge the official EU position of boycotting the recently established Government of National Unity**, and – against the advice of both the Council and Commission – had been holding direct talks not only with the Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, but also with a number of his Ministers, including those nominated by Hamas, as well as Fatah members, and indeed independents.

The EU, along with the rest of the Quartet, refused to recognise that new Government.

That was in spite of the fact that Hamas had won an overwhelming victory in elections which the EU itself had pronounced free and fair.

That was in spite of the fact that Hamas then agreed to form a Government of National Unity.

And in spite of the fact that the Unity Government itself made clear it accepted the conditions the Quartet had stipulated: to renounce violence, and to respect previous political agreements made by the PLO, which include recognition of Israel.

And the international community's failure to recognise that government, our failure to support it, to continue channelling finance through it, was instrumental in its collapse, and in the chaos and conflict that followed.

Conclusion

So this is an historic moment. As Israel puts in place one of the most extreme right-wing governments in recent years, and as the settlements and separation wall continue to grow, the prospects of a 2-state solution are fast receding.

The political programme and principles of a new unity government is more important than whether or not Hamas is a member of it. In other words, if the Palestinians are able to put together a government of genuine unity, based on tolerance and pluralism, as well as commitment to previous peace process agreements that include the recognition of Israel, then it is the responsibility of the international community to recognise it.

It was precisely the failure of the EU and US to recognise the last unity government which precipitated much of the chaos and conflict which followed in both the West Bank and Gaza. **We cannot afford to make the same mistake again.**

Just a few final thoughts. We need to make this campaign for justice for the Palestinians as big as the South Africa anti/apartheid campaign. We need popular movements promoting sanctions and

disinvestments. **We need to make common cause with those brave Israelis who are speaking out against their government, and who are working in partnership with the Palestinians.**

And we need to be saying to this government, loud and clear

- That we reject entirely the policy of collective punishment which continues to be inflicted on the Palestinian people
- That we demand an end to the illegal Israeli occupation
- An end to military and financial support to Israel
- And justice, finally, for the Palestinians