

# Steffen Jensen

## Situationen i Gaza: Problemet mere mangel på arbejde end på mad

GAZA (01.06.2010):

**TRANSLATION from DANISH:**

<http://www.steffen-jensen.dk/dan/blogartikler/134--mere-mangel-pa-arbejde-end-pa-mad/>

### **The situation in Gaza:**

**The problem is more a shortage of work than a shortage of food**



Judging from the media, the situation in Gaza is desperate, everything is about to collapse, and the community is on the brink or at the level of a third world country.

Israel's closure of the border to the Gaza Strip has continued for three years, ever since the Palestinian coalition government collapsed, and Hamas, during the subsequent civil war, sent Fatah packing. The Palestinian society's immediate downfall has been prophesied numerous times in the media. People have nothing to eat, we

sometimes know. The UN must from time to time to stop food distribution, either because their stocks are running low, or because they cannot get diesel for their trucks, and therefore cannot carry food in. And so on.

Yesterday I drove into the Gaza Strip. I don't do this as often as before, when it involved a quick entry by car in the morning and a quick exit by late afternoon. No it is such a slow procedure, that when I finally get down here, I end up staying for almost a week. The Israelis often also close the Gaza Strip to all foreign journalists, so that no one can get in or out (once in) for several days or weeks. That's why there can be a long period between my visits.

This time, I had expected to see real suffering, because with all the fuss in recent days about bringing tons of humanitarian relief in - so much that people actually sacrificed their lives for it - there certainly had to really be a deep, desperate situation in the Gaza Strip. No food. Long lines in front of UN food stocks. Hungry children with food bowls.

But this was not the picture that greeted me.

When I drove through Gaza city yesterday morning, I was immediately surprised that there are

almost as many traffic jams as there always have been. Isn't there a shortage of fuel? Apparently not. No one is saving it. Gasoline is not even rationed.

Many shops were closed yesterday; Hamas has declared a general strike in protest against Israel's brutal and deadly attack on the Turkish flotilla with pro-Palestinian activists on board. It was thus difficult to estimate how many products were on the shelves. Therefore I went over to the Shati refugee camp, also known as Beach Camp. Here is one of Gaza's many vegetable markets that sell much more than just fruits and vegetables.

I will not say whether in better times there was a larger product range than yesterday, but there was certainly no shortage of vegetables, fruits or any other ordinary, basic foods. Tomatoes, cucumbers, corn, watermelons, potatoes - mountains of these items in the many stalls.

I must admit I was a little surprised. Because when I call down here to my Palestinian friends, they tell me about all the problems and deficiencies, so I expected that the crisis would be little more obvious.

And the first woman we interviewed in the market confirms this strange, contradictory, negative mindset:



"We have nothing," she said. We need everything! Food, drinks ... everything! "

It didn't disturb her in the least that she stood between the mountains of vegetables, fruit, eggs, poultry and fish, while she spun this doomsday scenario.

Another woman, Ifka Abu Nahal, who originally comes from a rural district, is more in contact with reality. She says that the crucial problem is the overconsumption of water, which is leading to the sinking of the groundwater table. This means that the saltwater of the Mediterranean is forced in, thus polluting the groundwater, which is already too saline. This makes it unpleasant to drink, and will eventually destroy the agricultural soil.

She also says that the poor economy is the greatest problem.

"There is a great deal of unemployment. There's no work to be got in the Gaza Strip. This means that many people do not have on income, but are instead

forced to live on handouts from their relatives. So they can't afford to buy the goods that are actually available. They can stand there and look at the meat, but are not able to buy it," she explains.

One thing that will really surprise many people is that only the vegetables here are grown in the Gaza Strip. With the exception of watermelons, all the fruit comes from nowhere else but from . . . Israel!

Yousuf al-Assad Yazgy owns a fruit and vegetable outlet here in the market. All his fruit is imported from Israel.

"Not all fruit and all vegetables come from Israel. Ours do. They come from Israel. But in the Gaza Strip there is not very much fruit cultivated - mostly tomatoes, potatoes and vegetables. So here with me are the vegetables and watermelons from Gaza. All the fruit comes across the border from Israel," he explains, but also says that there can be long periods when the border is closed, during which, therefore, fruit does not come in.

Another supply route is the smuggling tunnels down in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, under the border to Egypt. A very large part of the goods in the retail establishments here in Gaza come from Egypt and are smuggled in.

On the way out of the Shati camp we stop at a small grocery store. Not any fancy, expensive business. Just a small, humble local store. The proprietor Sun Mohammed Abu Nada says they would not be able to do business if it were not for contraband goods from Egypt.

He takes us on a brief tour of the shelves and shows everything that comes from Egypt. It turns out to be much more than half of the goods: 75-80 per cent, I would estimate. Several other products - including long-life UHT milk - come from Israel, but are also smuggled through tunnels from Egypt.



This detour via the Sinai desert and the smugglers' tunnels naturally does not make the goods any cheaper, a fact which does not escape the notice of Muhammed Abu Nada.

The products are more expensive, he says. Many people cannot afford to buy them, or only to buy certain things sometimes. But all the while even such a small, poor-looking grocery store on the outskirts of a refugee camp still has so many relatively expensive smuggled goods on the shelves, it shows,

nevertheless, that at least many of the customers must be able to afford to buy them. Otherwise, the merchant of course could not even afford to invest in unsold inventory.

I have not written this story to maintain that there are no problems in the Gaza Strip, because that would be untrue. There are problems. Many problems indeed. But it is not lack of food that primarily concerns people down here. The biggest problem is the lack of jobs and a sustainable domestic economy.

There is a shortage of construction materials, cement, and everything in the construction and public works area. However, this shortage has given rise to a whole new industry. Poor

Palestinians dig through the many lots and ruins of houses and factory buildings destroyed in the war. Here they find all sorts of things that can be reused. Even many of the stones and much of the concrete can be used.

But there is a shortage of real work and actual Palestinian development, which their brothers on the West Bank are currently experiencing with help from the West, and which could do much to improve the situation in the Gaza Strip. And this economic development must come from within. There will never again be a situation where almost 150,000 workers from the Gaza Strip can travel into Israel every day, and bring money back to help the local economy (something that Israel was actually once criticized for). That was stopped by the wave of terrorism and suicide bombers in the 1990s and the beginning of the decade after 2000.

But in order to start this kind of economic development with the help of the West, Israeli cooperation is needed. And that means that the Hamas government must soften its total and inflexible rejection of negotiations with Israel, not to mention recognition of that country's right to exist. There is a perception, even though there is still a very long way to go, that among certain circles in Hamas, there are tendencies to show greater flexibility.

In order to cultivate this tendency among the Islamists, it is probably also necessary for us in the West to soften our total rejection of the idea of having contacts with Hamas. Even though our own Danish diplomats in the region, like other EU diplomats, do not want to have contacts with Hamas, a dialog is necessary.

If no calming of the situation whatsoever starts, there is a risk that the even more militant and fanatic jihadist groups, which already are growing in the Gaza Strip, will begin to pressure Hamas from the side, and force that organization to eliminate any possibilities for political compromises, and instead protect its Islamist credentials.

Update 8:00 p.m. (Gaza time)

The Israeli army announced here this evening, that it has loaded the emergency assistance to Gaza from the six Turkish activist ships onto 20 trucks, in order to drive it into the Gaza Strip. The cargo consists, among other things, of "various types of medicine (past their expiration date), clothing, carpets, hospital equipment and toys."

Apparently, the Israelis have not been willing to accept that building and construction materials, including cement which was also on board, be sent along.

However, the Israelis can save themselves the trouble. Hamas has announced that they will not accept any emergency assistance from the ships, and have blocked Israel's attempt to deliver the emergency help.