**Send Aid to Gaza**

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The long agony of the occupied Palestinian people especially now in Gaza is unfortunately most likely to be magnified multifold when the imminent Israeli land and sea assault on Gaza City unfolds, adding to the sustained air bombing which has already taken a heavy toll. What is to be done and how can Pakistan help? The immediate objective is to try to staunch the bleeding, by calling for a cease-fire. (Perhaps the return of hostages and exchange of prisoners can be part of such an understanding). Acceptance by Israel of a Palestinian state remains the key to a long-term solution.
These are likely to be the main objectives of the forthcoming meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), called for by its current Chair, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in Jeddah on Wednesday 18th October. The urgent open-ended extraordinary meeting of the Executive Committee at the ministerial level has been convened to address the escalating military situation in Gaza and its environs as well as the deteriorating conditions that endanger the lives of civilians and the overall security and stability of the region, the OIC said in a statement on its website.
In the meantime, it is incumbent on countries and people supportive, or sympathetic, to the plight of Palestinians in Gaza to send them the assistance required, according to their capabilities, apart from support from the political and international level.
In this respect, the primary challenge facing sending humanitarian assistance, including for UN agencies, is gaining access to Gaza. In the last such crisis in 2014, a limited humanitarian corridor was eventually permitted to the UN from Jordan. But now Israel has blocked the main inland entry points and has even threatened any flow through the Rafah/Egypt crossing point with shelling. Shelling three days ago has led to a closure of this sole entry and exit point, marooning on the Gaza side those few foreign nationals who have permits to cross into Egypt. Egypt has taken the stand that it will only open this border point for outflows if Israel permits entry of relief assistance thus pressuring the mainly Western countries whose nationals are trying to leave Gaza, to support this proposal. On their part, Western countries, to try to assuage criticism, by Muslim countries and their sizable Muslim minorities, of their all-out support for Israel, and for humanitarian reasons, are calling for safe zones in Gaza, and pledging relief supplies. Consequently, they will support, effectively one hopes and in a timely way, the reluctant concurrence by Israel of opening Rafah for assistance flows.
Pakistan’s support of the Palestinian cause has been there from its historical beginning as reflected in the eloquent advocacy in the UN by our first Foreign Minister Chaudhry Zafarullah Khan. Statement by the Foreign Office Spokesperson and by our Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani, most recently, on Sunday 15th October have forcibly reiterated our support for the Palestinian cause, it’s just resolution through their right of self-determination and for the Palestinians in Gaza. The Foreign Minister equated Israeli airstrikes on Gaza and the siege of the territory, with conducting genocide against the people of Palestine.
The needs in Gaza are huge for all commodities and not limited to food, shelter, fuel, water, and medical supplies. Pakistan has a solid track record and institutional base in the Cabinet Division for sending humanitarian assistance abroad to where it is most needed. Our medical teams and assistance have gone to Yemen after its 1982 earthquake; and humanitarian supplies, including tents and medicines to Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Japan, and India in earlier days. Consequent to the international assistance we received in response to the October 2005 Earthquake disaster it was decided that for reciprocal assistance we develop a more focused ability within the NDMA and the Cabinet Division to send relief supplies, self-contained medical teams and natural disaster rescue teams and we have lived up to that.
It may be recalled that President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi had promised the WHO Director-General to allow its medical shipment into Al Arish for the Egyptian Red Crescent to send to Gaza. Hopefully, that will extend to relief supplies from friendly countries.
It would be difficult to get medical teams accepted into Gaza but certainly, we should prioritise the assistance that we can send given our own capabilities. We already have a list of medical and surgical requirements from the Palestinian Ministry of Health, provided by WHO, and we should work on that, adding on IV infusions, water purification tablets and tents though the main tents can be supplied in bigger quantities by the UN agencies.
For logistics we should use. as usual, one and then a second PAF C-130 flight, both capable of 20 tonnes loads. Fortunately, Al Arish airport is near Rafah and already has been used by the WHO, Turkey, and the UAE to send relief supplies for Gaza, though they remain stockpiled there awaiting the opening of Rafah.
This will require overall coordination by our Foreign Office with the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad and detailed coordination, by our able Ambassador in Cairo, with the Egyptian Foreign Ministry and Aviation authorities, and with the Egyptian Red Crescent who will collect and send relief supplies into Gaza. Our equally experienced and competent Ambassadors in New York, Geneva, and Amman can coordinate with UN HQ in New York, relevant operational UN Agencies, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), the WHO, UNICEF, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) both on the overall political side and to gain access to Palestinian authorities’ own assessments of their urgent requirements.
Our standard and understandable practice has been for the Government to coordinate all aspects of relief supplies sent abroad. This time given the magnitude of the requirements, which will increase as Israel’s kinetic offensive intensifies, we should ask the public to raise relief funds and for the large pharmaceutical and surgical goods industries to donate their products. The Islamic Development Bank which in 2014 provided 5 million dollars for relief for Gaza can also source some medical supplies from Pakistan.