

The Gaza time bomb is ticking

Palestine

By Jan Egeland
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To help defuse the ticking time bomb, we need immediate action on three fronts: humanitarian, economic and political

WHILE the world's gaze remains focused on Lebanon, less than 200 kilometres south in Gaza, a human time bomb is ticking away. Some 1.4 million people in Gaza — more than half of them children — are packed inside one of the world's most densely populated areas with no freedom of movement and no place to run, no place to hide. With access virtually cut off since late June, poverty, unemployment, shortages and desperation in Gaza are mounting. Sadly, what is most needed in Gaza today is precisely what is most lacking: hope.

Earlier in September, 35 nations, joined by the UN, Red Cross movement and non-governmental organisations, met in Stockholm to help restore some small measure of hope for the people of Gaza. Donor nations pledged an additional \$116 million for urgent humanitarian needs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, with half of that going towards the UN's \$384 million appeal. While we commend donors for this step forward, the people of Gaza need much more — and soon. The UN's humanitarian appeal is still 42 per cent unfunded despite warnings of a rapidly worsening situation that could push many families in Gaza over the brink.

Since the Israeli operation 'Summer Rain' began in late June in response to the kidnapping of an Israeli Defence Force (IDF) soldier, one Israeli soldier has been killed. During that same time, 235 Palestinians have been killed, 46 of whom were children. Every loss of life must be deplored. But there can be no doubt that the response, measured in the loss of civilian lives, is disproportionate.

For Palestinians and Israelis alike, the consequences of this summer's fighting are as lethal as they are corrosive to prospects for peace in this troubled region.

Air, sea and land access has been virtually cut off in Gaza. Movement of goods and people has come to a near stand-still. Power and water supplies, crippled by an Israeli Defence Force strike on the main power plant, are erratic and insufficient. Key civilian infrastructure has been crippled. Gaza today remains reliant on external sources of food and commercial supplies. Health conditions are deteriorating as supplies of clean water remain in short supply. As the Palestinian economy continues in a free fall, we can expect humanitarian conditions to worsen further.

Imagine you are a mother or father in Gaza. You cannot leave this small territory, and you cannot import or export goods. Your children live in constant fear of violence. Shortages of basic provisions, including water, increase the possibility of communicable disease outbreaks and add further strain to daily life.

Every day, up to 185 artillery shells rain down on your territory. Every night, you see rockets shot off indiscriminately into Israel by militant groups. You know that when retaliation comes, you and your family may not be spared the effects.

Now imagine you live in Israel every night, the rockets come crashing down.

the world's great cultures and religions. To help defuse the ticking time bomb in Gaza, we need immediate action on three fronts: humanitarian, economic and political.

First, civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected by all parties. We call upon the Israeli government as the occupying power, the Palestinian Authority, and all armed groups to uphold their responsibilities under international law.

Along with a cessation of hostilities, there must also be freedom of movement for civilians and humanitarian workers. For the population of Gaza, the perception of being trapped, of living in a cage, is intolerable, and fuels further desperation and despair. The Agreement on Movement and Access of November 15, 2005 must now be fully implemented.

Freedom of movement is also essential for aid workers to reach those in need throughout Gaza and the West Bank.

The Karni Crossing, the main crossing point between Israel and Gaza, should be made a no-conflict, protected zone, open to the flow of essential goods for the Palestinian population. An independent third-party could be appointed to monitor this zone in order to

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address Israel's legitimate security concerns. With the majority of Gaza's population dependent on external aid for basic survival, unimpeded humanitarian access a matter of life or death.

On the economic front, we call on Israeli authorities to release the approximately \$500 million in Palestinian tax and customs revenues they have withheld. These funds are urgently needed to meet humanitarian and economic needs.

But money alone is not the answer, of course, nor are humanitarian plasters on an open wound. In the end, only a return to the peace process and a durable, two-state political solution can bring hope and healing to this troubled area. The need is urgent. The time is now. It is a matter of solidarity, and a matter of security for us all. COURTESY THE ASIAN AGE

Now imagine you live in Israel every night, the rockets come crashing down. Armed groups continually undermine the very idea of your country, your daily life and your existence.

We believe it is in neither side's interest to have violence prevail in Gaza and the West Bank, situated at the crossroads of so many of

security for us all. COURTESY THE ASIAN AGE

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