

Palestinian food situation critical

A special guest contribution by Mr. Hanna Siniora, editor of the Jerusalem Arabic newspaper Al-Fajr.

Since bombs began raining down on Baghdad on Jan. 17, Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and some areas of East Jerusalem have been effectively under house arrest in the strictest curfew since the Israeli occupation began in 1967. Untold damage in food supplies, agriculture, and medical services is reported, as well as escalation in numbers of human rights violations.

The newly organized Coordinating Committee of International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in a press conference Jan. 24, charged that the situation as of that date was already critical and appeared to be worsening as the days passed.

The ad hoc committee, as well as residents all over the Occupied Territories reachable by phone, confirm that definite shortages in foodstuffs exist in the Occupied Territories. Some areas, such as Nablus, report a shortage in staple items such as flour, sugar, salt, baby milk, and vegetables.

Since the imposition of the curfew, in some areas even days before the war in the Gulf broke out, there has been no means of re-stocking stores. This means that when the curfew is lifted in towns and refugee camps for a few hours to allow residents to purchase food, the stores are jammed with customers, but no food is available for purchase.

All Palestinian factories are shut down under the curfew and thus no new canned goods, dairy products, and the like are being produced. With the Occupied Territories declared a closed military area, no Israeli-manufactured goods are reaching the market either.

Curfew imposes unemployment

The problem is further compounded by the fact that a good percentage of manpower in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are day laborers, dependent on a daily wage to feed their families. Many have not been to work now in two weeks, meaning their income in some cases is completely gone. Local charitable societies are closed during the curfew, and the families are turning for help to international NGOs based in Jerusalem whom they can reach by phone.

UNRWA [U.N. Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] began emergency distribution of food to some of its refugee camps several days after the crisis started, and said it expected more supplies in the coming few days.

The Palestinian agricultural sector is also reported to be at a standstill. Farmers are not being allowed to tend their crops which are dying in the fields and livestock have no feed. The ad hoc committee warned that if the situation persisted, "this season's harvest will be completely lost" and the animals "face starvation."

Najat, a Nablus resident, speaking to *Al-Fajr*, reported that residents old enough to remember the days before the Israeli occupation claim they have never witnessed a stricter curfew. "For the first time, Ittihad hospital now lacks food and medical personnel," she said. She said that the available hospital staff are now on 24-hour shifts.

She told *Al-Fajr* that the Israeli soldiers are harassing

lating into a global storm. Otherwise it could take the form of an as yet unknown kind of 'regional war' with global consequences, of something that will later be called a 'sub-world war.' Before 'Desert Storm' causes a chain reaction of landslides accompanied by a tornado of devastation and an inundation of ecological disasters, it must be not just localized but stopped."

Jan. 31. Sovetskaya Rossiya accused the United States of "gunboat diplomacy" and genocide, with a commentary charging that "every bomb that falls over the peaceful people of Iraq is destroying the myth of the just character of this war. Every bomb confirms that we are facing in the Gulf a massacre, a genocide against the Iraqi people. . . . We do not question the necessity to free Kuwait. But after Aug. 2, rather than looking for a political solution, only the demand for the unconditional capitulation of the enemy has been dictated."

Soviet hardware

Jan. 8. The BBC reported that the Soviet government had formally protested the detention in the Red Sea, by U.S. and Spanish naval vessels, of a Soviet ship carrying military spare parts, which the Soviets insisted were for Jordan, not Iraq.

Jan. 17. TASS announced that Soviet military forces in southern Russia were on a high state of alert, because of the war in the Persian Gulf.

Jan. 26. The French weekly *Le Point* featured an intelligence leak: "You don't know that one piece of information, more than any others, preoccupies Western authorities. American observation satellites have detected 400 Soviet trucks on route toward Iraq across Iran. It is thought that they are filled with ammunition. And people are asking themselves: Does this move come from Gorbachov or from the Soviet Army, which could have taken the initiative by itself?"

ambulances sent by the Red Crescent Society and preventing them from reaching their destinations. No one dares to break curfew, she said, except in dire emergencies.

Najat says that Israeli troops are constantly patrolling the streets and warning residents that they will risk their lives if they step outdoors. She said that one youth, Ra'ed al-Sakhleh, was shot in the hand while standing in front of his home. He was taken to Rafidia hospital, treated, and later arrested by the Israeli Army. She said she personally knew of four other young people who have been arrested.

The NGO committee reported in its Jerusalem press conference that Palestinians outside their homes face severe penalties. "On Jan. 22, the maximum fine for breaking curfew was raised to 30,000 Israeli shekels (\$15,000) and the maximum prison sentence to five years," read a press release.

Abdullah, a resident of the Gaza Strip, told *Al-Fajr* that when soliders lifted the curfew for two hours, only women were permitted to go into the streets. The stores, most of which are operated by men, were therefore not opened and women were unable to buy anything. He reported no meat or vegetables in the market.

The ad hoc committee told the press that "the majority of the Palestinian population has limited access to first aid and health care facilities" as a result of the curfew. This has placed many in life-threatening situations, they maintain.

Dr. Mustapha Barghouthi of the Palestine Union of Medical Relief Committees said that this is particularly serious for residents who have chronic heart disease and need daily attention and medication, and for women giving birth.

Najat told *Al-Fajr* that women are delivering their babies at home and there are reports of labor being prolonged to 36 hours in some cases as a result.

Crisis in medical care

Dr. Barghouthi told the journalists that the most serious issues in medical care, from the NGO's perspective, was the Israeli Army's failure to distribute adequate gas masks to the population of the Occupied Territories.

Abdullah reported from Gaza that only residents with telephones in their homes were able to phone for UNRWA ambulances. He said the soldiers have been announcing that anyone caught leaving their home would be "shot down." Pharmacies lack medicines, he said.

In terms of human rights violations under curfew, the NGOs said that they have been alerted to the following: "opening fire without warning, widespread beatings, frequent tear-gassings including the shooting of tear gas cannisters into homes under curfew, arbitrary arrests, and exorbitant fines."

A press release read: "Our information suggests that there has been an alarming rise in the degree and number of human rights violations during the curfew." The ad hoc committee reports that all of their sources say the Israeli Army has told the population that anyone leaving his home "does so at his own risk."

The press release adds, in conclusion, "It is unreasonable to argue any longer, as the Israeli authorities do, that public order must be maintained in the Occupied Territories by prolonging the curfew. This curfew has been imposed on a defenseless civilian population who are not at war and who are not provided with any means of protection against war."

What others see from Moscow's military

On Jan. 9, a European expert on Soviet military affairs observed to *EIR*, "The Soviet military is pulling the rug out from everybody in the Gulf." The strenuous Soviet protests about the interception of Soviet ships in the Red Sea were "some sort of extraordinary signal" of Soviet intentions to slow down the U.S. confrontation with Iraq. But while Bush is fixated on the Gulf crisis to the exclusion of any other issue, most particularly the dramatic crisis erupting within the Soviet Empire itself, the Russian military would be making it clear that it does not intend to give up its historical influence with the Arabs.

Jan. 15. Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis, as reported on Polish radio by Lithuania's Foreign Minister Algirdas Saudargas, pleaded with the West not to start a war in the Gulf, since the war would be used by the Soviet Union as a cover for the Soviet military to come down on Lithuania.

He said that Landsbergis believed "the Russians want the Americans to go to war in the Gulf now. It's a trap. Gorbachov is not in control. He's a puppet of the Russian generals."

Jan. 26. General Lacaze, former head of the French Army, told *Le Figaro* that the Soviet military "sees in this war an interesting laboratory to test the comportment of Soviet military material," especially as 90% of the Iraqi military arsenal is of Soviet origin. There are still Soviet military advisers in Iraq, he added, and "One may also ask if the U.S.S.R. has really respected the embargo on the sending of spare parts." Lacaze concluded, "The generals of the Red Army, supported by conservative circles, have besides made no secret of their pro-Iraq proclivities and of their distances vis-à-vis the United States. Clearly, the Red Army, for which Iraq has always been a traditional ally, is politically reluctant in the face of the official Soviet policy of benevolent neutrality toward the United States."