

Blockade: The siege of Gaza

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In early December the security situation had improved enough in Bethlehem for busloads of tourists to come back to visit the birthplace of Jesus and other holy sights in Israel and the West Bank. That was about the only the good news from the Middle East. In the Gaza Strip, the standoff continued between the Israeli government and the Palestinians.

Israel started blockading Gaza following Hamas's takeover of the area in 2007. Though Israel no longer occupies Gaza, it controls its borders, airspace and coastline—and so controls imports. Early last month, Israel tightened the blockade against the 1.5 million people in Gaza, where over half are children and unemployment stands at 45 percent. One United Nations official described conditions as the worst ever in the territory.

Israel was promising some easing of restrictions at a time when supplies of food, medicine and fuel were running low. Electricity in most parts was off 16 hours a day. Sewage can't be processed, and so is dumped into the sea. Commerce has come to a complete standstill. It was feared that once fuel supplies ran out, hospital generators in Gaza would go silent, cutting off life-support machines.

Israel has defended the tightened blockade as a response to Palestinians' continued rocket fire on Israeli towns. Some analysts think the Israeli government has a larger aim: to punish the entire Gazan population for supporting the Hamas Party and encourage them to turn against Hamas. But the blockade is likely to have the opposite effect— to solidify support for Hamas. And denying humanitarian aid and punishing an entire population for the sins of a few violates international law and the Geneva Convention.

Desperate people will take desperate actions, yet the rocket attacks by Palestinian militants have contributed to the cycle of violence without doing anything to advance peace or achieve justice for the Palestinian people. Only the leaders of Hamas have the power to stop the militant Palestinian groups that sponsor these attacks.

The Gazan situation underscores the desperate need for a peace process to be revived, with the U.S. actively involved. A coalition of American Christian leaders, Protestant and Catholic, petitioned President-elect Barack Obama in early December to make the search for peace in the Middle East a priority of his administration, with the goal of establishing a viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel. The leaders realize that the U.S. must lead in pressing regional leaders to find some way to move toward what majorities in both Israel and the Palestinian territories have said they want—a durable peace. A viable peace process is long overdue.