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Subject: [iraqcampaign] [iraqisolidaritycampaign] Palestinian agricultural losses top US \$1 billion

Palestinian agricultural losses top US \$1 billion IRIN



An ongoing economic boycott and intermittent border closures have created humanitarian problems for Gaza's residents, including a deteriorating agricultural sector, the United Nations and the Palestinian Authority (PA) said.

The PA's Minister of Agriculture, Mohammed al-Agha, told IRIN that "Israel's security measures had cost Palestinian farmers thousands of acres of farmland and nearly US \$1.2 billion since the start of the second intifada [Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation] in September 2000." Israel says it was necessary to clear land to prevent cross-border terrorist attacks.

UN spokesperson Marie Okabe told reporters in New York recently that "Gaza's food security remains an issue of serious concern. Furthermore, Gaza's agricultural markets continue to suffer from access restrictions."

Earlier, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan described oPt as being in a "very desperate and serious situation."

Okabe said that the WFP [the UN's World Food Programme] was distributing food to 220,000 of the most vulnerable people among Gaza's non-refugee population. In addition, the WFP said it was distributing food to 597,000 people in Gaza and the West Bank. The oPt's population is 4.2 million people.

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A western-imposed economic embargo on the Hamas-led Palestinian government for the past six months had hindered the flow of imports to, and exports from, Gaza because all entry points controlled by Israeli authorities have been tightened or closed. Hamas is considered a terrorist organisation by Israel and the West because it has refused to renounce violence and recognise Israel.

Israel has intensified its grip on Gaza since 25 June when one of its soldiers was captured by Palestinian militants. Critical entry points, such as the commercial Karni crossing and the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, have remained largely closed. Israel said this was for security reasons.

Palestinian farmer and flower greenhouses owner, Mohammed al-Astal, 45, from the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Younis said he has sustained great losses [worth more than US \$150,000] since the Israelis placed a complete blockade on Gaza's crossings as his produce is being held on the Palestinian side of the checkpoints.

"The closure coincided with the export season of strawberries, flowers, tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers. So I had to sell them in the local markets before the produce rots," he said. "Even when the crossings are open, the Israelis enforce complex search procedures that lead to the expiry of import and export goods, especially dairy products, fruits, and vegetables."

Al-Agha said that the Israeli policy of border closures and military incursions into Palestinian cities and villages had raised the level of unemployment in the occupied territories to more than 50 percent, and taken the rate of people living below the poverty line to 70 percent.

"Agricultural products, which cannot be exported, have accumulated in local markets, and as there is no sufficient consumption capacity for these products in the Gaza Strip, the result has been a large depreciation of their values and retail prices to the extent that costs of production are not being covered," Al-Agha said.

Palestinian fisherman Wael Bakir, 32, said, " The Israeli restrictions significantly cut down the amount, size, and variety of fish that we can catch. Before Israel imposed these restrictions we used to sail out tens of miles and could fish off tons of fish. This has caused us grave losses."

Shlomo Dror, spokesperson for Israel's Government Coordination office, which monitors the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the West Bank, said the main problem for Gazan farmers was the border closures, which he said were simply for security reasons to prevent attacks on the crossings.

"Now Karni, the main commercial crossing out of Gaza, is open, but not for the same quantities as before," Dror said.

"Most of the Gaza produce went to Israel. In the last few months we have seen

an increase in the price of vegetables in Israel because nothing is coming in from Gaza. Their second biggest market is Europe," Dror said. "Opening the crossings is not just up to Israel, it's up to the Palestinians as well."

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