



PONTIFICAL MISSION

the papal agency for Middle East relief and development

P.O. Box 19642, Jerusalem 91196 • +972 (2) 627 21 26, fax 627 3777 • pmp@pmp.co.il

Gaza Situation Update

Gaza, one year on... Hope and faith still alive!

One year ago, the war on Gaza was launched – the third war in just a span of six years. When the war started, given that it was during the holy month of Ramadan, everyone expected that the fighting would be short, similar to the second Gaza war in 2012 which lasted for only 8 days; no one imagined that the war would last for 51 days. During the war, we were in daily contact with our local partners in Gaza, in order to follow the situation more closely as well as express our solidarity with our partners – even from a distance – so that they knew that they were not forgotten. As the conversations became very desperate with each passing day, it became clear that nowhere was safe and that this war was different, not only the length of time but also the vast amount of destruction and the number of casualties. Pontifical Mission for Palestine (PMP) conducted a rapid needs assessment and devised an emergency intervention that aimed to provide the necessary support for the people of Gaza. Soon after, the PMP invited a representative group consisting of Catholic Aid organizations: Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Jerusalem, the German Association of the Holy Land and the Latin Patriarchate to meet on a weekly basis to better coordinate all humanitarian aid and relief efforts. At a later stage, members of the ACT Alliance also joined this collaboration, which maximized emergency aid and relief for the people of Gaza.



CCAO solidarity visit at the Holy Family Parish, Gaza City.



Destroyed Al-Wafa Hospital in Al-Shija'ia neighborhood, Gaza City. Surveying damages on the health sector.

My very first visit – one of six visits to the Gaza Strip after the war, was in early September 2014. It took me over a week to regain my sanity as I couldn't erase the raw images of war and the testimonies I had heard. I can recall though the sheer bravery that our people in Gaza faced during this most brutal war, their deep faith and an unwavering sense of hope that tomorrow will be a better day. It is amazing that these people have such optimism after such devastation. When we recount the statistics (according to verified UN sources), there were 6,000 airstrikes in Gaza; 14,500 tank shells and 45,000 artillery shells fired and people were forced out of the outlying areas of Gaza (50 percent of Gaza's land mass) and a military 'buffer zone' was declared in this area. Can you imagine 1.8 million people living on a mere 180 square kilometers being subjected on average to one explosion



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per minute nonstop for 51 days! Let alone the physical destruction and the multiple times families were forced to move. If there is heroism in this world, it is most evident in our people in Gaza.

Re-cap of PMP's Emergency Intervention:

PMP's emergency program was launched on 23 July 2014 -some two weeks into the war. To our surprise, the response of our modestly- budgeted emergency intervention surpassed all of our expectations, receiving pledges that almost tripled the amount we requested. We received donations from 23 donors who were clearly appalled by the level of destruction, the stories of human loss and suffering and injustices inflicted on Gaza and its people. The pledges were also an indirect statement that the international community would not stand idle. However, as other reports of war, destruction and persecution of minorities (including Christians) in Syria and Iraq at the hands of ISIS and other radical groups quickly grew, the attention shifted away from the Gaza Strip, especially when the ceasefire was declared and there was no active war.

PMP's emergency intervention in Gaza was divided into two phases which were based on the needs assessment carried out a month prior and intended to meet the most critical needs at the time. The intervention's first phase was to ensure that our partners working in the health sector were sufficiently well-stocked with supplies, fuel, medicines and services during and after the war. Thanks to donor pledges, over 20,000 people were successfully treated at Al- Ahli Arab Hospital and the Near East Council of Churches Mother and Child clinics in Shaja'ia, Darraj, and Rafah.

PMP's first phase also helped repair moderate and severe war damages at local partner institutions which reinstated services almost immediately after the war. Donor contributions were allocated towards rehabilitation projects at the Rosary Sisters School, Holy Family School, and the Greek Orthodox School as well as the Mother and Child clinics and vocational centers of the Near East Council of Churches; the Orthodox Cultural Center; Palestine Avenir Society; the living quarters of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word; and the cemetery of the Greek Orthodox Church. PMP's intervention also aided 80 Christian families whose homes sustained minor to moderate war damages which enabled the families to return to their homes. The intervention also supported two families, whose homes were completely destroyed, subsidizing the costs of rent for one year.



Even cemeteries were not spared!
Checking the damages at the Greek Orthodox Church cemetery, Gaza City.

The PMP emergency intervention's second phase consisted of psychosocial support in response to a study conducted by UNICEF which estimated that 373,000 Gaza children were in need of psychosocial therapy. The intervention also considered PMP's first visit to the Gaza Strip in which psychosocial support was clearly needed. Through the second phase, PMP partnered with



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Traumatized schoolchildren at the Rosary Sisters School, Gaza City.

individual therapy, interactive games and fun activities for over 23,500 children, school teachers and parents (some of the other programs are still ongoing). Our greatest joy was to meet the wonderful children, counselors, teachers, parents and staff members of the program and listen to their personal stories on how they were transformed by the program; many have said that the program has helped them “regain their sanity” and even expressed their sincere appreciation which was truly a priceless testimony to us.

Gaza's Christian Faith in Action:

As difficult as this war was and the destruction and devastation it left behind, there were also unforeseen positive signs that emerged. During our visits to Gaza, it was highlighted that the Christian institutions who were at the frontlines delivering treatment and care backed by Christian donors, gained a renewed, profound respect by the greater community - not only by the beneficiaries of both faiths but also by Hamas politicians and religious leaders. A recap of the efforts included: Al-Ahli Arab Hospital which provided non-stop, high quality medical care and support; NECC clinics which operated during the short-lived ceasefires and was fully operational once the war ended, especially NECC's clinic in Shaja'ia neighborhood which miraculously was a fully operating medical clinic while other medical clinics in the area were completely destroyed; the Greek Orthodox convent; the Holy Family School; the Greek Orthodox Cultural Center and Al-Ahli Arab Hospital which were turned into makeshift shelters that served no less than 3,000 displaced people. Other Christian institutions including the YMCA - Gaza and the Myrrh Bearers Society were also turned into distribution centers distributing food, hygiene kits, and potable water. Clearly, Gaza's small Christian community –with true Christian values at heart, rose up to help those in desperate need.

six partner institutions to implement psychosocial programs at local institutions, healthcare centers and at 47 public and private schools: the Society of Women Graduates; Ashtar for Theater Productions; Al-Ahli Arab Hospital; the Near East Council of Churches clinics and vocational training centers; the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) - Gaza; and the Community Training Center and Crisis Management (CTCCM). This successful component has provided group and



Child walking home with bottled drinking water in Shija'ia neighborhood, Gaza City.



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The community's appreciation was apparent during the 2014 Christmas season when the Orthodox community was permitted to organize a Christmas bazaar for the first time in many years. Additionally, high-level politicians personally bid their greetings to Gaza religious hierarchs during the Christmas season. These were small steps of solidarity and have helped ease the tension between the two faiths which had been simmering for some time, especially in 2013 when Hamas was trying to impose the gender segregation law in all of Gaza's Christian schools. Then again, the rise of the Salafis and other ISIS-related splinter groups in Gaza is really a cause for worry as it remains to be seen how Hamas will deal with them in the near future and how this will affect Gaza's small Christian community.

How is Gaza really doing?

At the end of the war, victory was declared by both Israel and Hamas. In the eyes of the Israeli government, Gaza and Hamas were dealt with a heavy handed response so that they will think twice if they decide to launch rockets at Israel again, and thus quiet was returned to southern Israel. In the eyes of Hamas, it withstood a major attack and resisted the Israeli army's invasion costing the lives of some 70 Israeli soldiers, and thus Israel will think twice if it decides to take over the Gaza Strip in the future. In addition, Hamas sold the public that the terms of the ceasefire included lifting the 7-year old blockade on Gaza, establishing a seaport and an airport. Sadly, all of this seemed like a public relations exercise to satisfy audiences and hide the bitter truth. The reality on the ground today proves that there were no winners, and the people of Gaza paid and continue to pay a very heavy price as the situation remains unchanged.



One year later- not much has changed.
Damages in Shija'ia neighborhood, Gaza
City.

One year after the war, many concerning issues still remain: the blockade, though eased a little bit remains in full force; the borders with Egypt continue to be tightly shut and most, if not all of the tunnels have been destroyed; not a single Gaza home that was destroyed during the war has been rebuilt; Gaza's unemployment rate stands at 43 percent and possibly the highest in the world –reaching about 60 percent among youth; Gaza's exports simply disappeared and the manufacturing sector shrunk by as much as 60 percent due to the bombing raids that destroyed factories; Gaza's poverty rate is now 39 percent; 80 percent of Gaza's residents are aid dependant; and electricity is still in short supply with the average of 6-8 hour shifts. Needless to say, there is no seaport or airport.



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Prospects for the Future – Where to go from here

Building on the success of our recent work in Gaza and after consultations including religious and civic authorities as well as youth, the PMP has identified the following three main areas for our future work in Gaza:

- **Sustaining the Christian Institutions**

Given that the Christian institutions working in education, healthcare, and social services are considered to be the ‘backbone’ of the Christian presence in Gaza, we feel they should be supported and strengthened to ensure the continuity of quality services to the population at large. Program support and providing equipment, capacity building programs, and capital development projects are all possible interventions. The main targeted institutions include the NECC network of clinics and vocational training centers, the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, YMCA, the Rosary Sisters School, the Holy Family School, the Latin Patriarchate School and the Society of Myrrh Bearers, among others.

- **Training and Job Creation**

Over the past 6 years, there has been a consistent local call for projects that would create jobs, which has been confirmed by our visits and local economic needs. A training and job creation project is commencing now with Al-Ahli Arab Hospital and the NECC that would last until the end of 2015. This should be renewed and expanded into 2016 while considering other local partners and other creative possibilities, especially including Christian youth employment.

- **Psychosocial Therapy Programs**

One of the greater needs in Gaza is to help children and youth cope with the trauma of war. An evaluation is currently underway to assess the impact of our psychosocial program. We aim to launch a new psychosocial program within the coming months in collaboration with some of our partners, with an emphasis on capacity building.

We have been blessed with the generosity of so many donors near and far, who have sensed the grave injustice inflicted on our people in Gaza and entrusted the Pontifical Mission to implement projects and programs with local partners in Gaza. Once well thought out proposals are developed in the above three categories, we will share them with our donors.



Students of the Lighthouse School in Gaza City greeting visitors with a smile.



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Solidarity, Hope and Faith:

One can easily forget Gaza and pass it up as “too problematic and chronic” – hopeless situations where extremism, poverty, lawlessness and other negative aspects are on the rise. However, our experience with the brave souls of Gaza is that they aspire – like anyone else in the world, to have prosperity for themselves, their families and their children. Unfortunately, the reality is the population has become accustomed to living with the absolute minimum, making the best of their situation and adapting their daily lives with many limitations. They are brave, optimistic, creative, resourceful, and appreciative. Above all, they have a deep sense of *faith and hope*. How else could they have survived three devastating wars in a span of 6 years?



Solidarity visit with the leadership of Misereor.

We, at PMP and with our partner donors, continue to show our solidarity with Gaza. To tell them face to face that “we feel with you, and we shall do whatever we can within our limited means to support you and be in solidarity with you. You deserve a better life, and we will continue to do what we can to ensure that you have that better life!”

Sami El-Yousef
July 8, 2015

Our work in Gaza would have been impossible without the constant encouragement and support from our headquarters at CNEWA as well as the following generous donors: *Frank and Rita Deiters, Embrace the Middle East, Manos Unidas, Custody of the Holy Land, Caritas Baby Hospital, Christian Brothers of Bethlehem University, St. Vincent de Paul, Al-Sabeel, Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF), Archdiocese of Cologne, Misereor, Caritas Switzerland, Knights of the Holy Sepulchre – Holland (KHS-Holland), Grand Magisterium, Missio Aachen, Kinderhilfe Bethlehem (KHB), Kindermisionwerk (PMK), Anonymous Donor, Secours Catholique, German Association of the Holy Land, Friends of the Holy Land in the United Kingdom, Church – in – Need, and Knights of the Holy Sepulchre – Switzerland.*