

The Elders visit Gaza; call for lifting of blockade

Mary Robinson, Ela Bhatt and Lakhdar Brahimi say the isolation of Gaza is not only illegal collective punishment, but also an impediment to peace. President Carter will join his fellow Elders in Egypt on their return from Gaza.

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Three members of The Elders today entered Gaza and spent the day on the ground with local opinion leaders, human rights activists, business people, women's organisations, UN officials and the Gaza authorities.

The Elders are on a week-long visit to the Middle East to encourage support across the region for the current final status negotiations, with emphasis on the need to reach a just and secure peace for all. They also want to draw attention to issues that cannot be ignored if there is to be a sustainable agreement – including the blockade of Gaza and the political isolation of the Hamas leadership from the peace process.

Delegation leader, former Irish President, Mary Robinson, said: "I was last here in 2008, just before the Gaza war. The situation has deteriorated to a shocking extent since then. This is not a humanitarian crisis – it is a political crisis and it can be solved politically. It is unconscionable and unacceptable that Israel and the international community have not lifted the blockade fully to allow Gazans to rebuild their lives and be part of the interconnected world that we take for granted. The easing of the blockade may mean more goods can be imported, but people are not free to come and go, reconstruction materials are still highly restricted, there is no real economy to speak of, and I have no doubt that things are not just stagnant – they are going backwards."

The Elders were briefed by UNRWA officials on the challenges of providing basic services including water, power, housing, education and health to the population of 1.5 million – half of whom are under the age of 18. They visited a school run by UNRWA that is built of shipping containers because building materials are so scarce. Access restrictions are compounded by the \$80 million shortfall in UNRWA's operational budget for this year.

They also heard from human rights and health experts that the impact of the blockade is having dangerous social consequences.

India's Ela Bhatt, a Gandhian pioneer in the field of non-violent resistance and women's economic empowerment, who visited Gaza as a student in 1968, said: "People cannot continue to live in an atmosphere of fear – no good can come of it. The people have the right to develop their economy – every other place in the world is being supported to meet the Millennium Development Goals. In Gaza, education, health, sanitation and socio-economic indicators are getting worse. I am especially concerned about the situation for women in Gaza – they have much to contribute to a peaceful future and I urged leaders here to enable them to play a much greater role in the peace process."

Former Algerian Foreign Minister and former UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said: “Holding 1.5 million people in what is effectively an open prison is deepening the sense of anger and injustice of the Palestinians. We are here to show solidarity with them. This situation is a disaster. It is creating a generation of young people who have little to lose. This is not in anyone’s interest. Marginalising the Hamas leadership from the current peace process is also counter-productive. We were encouraged to hear from Hamas that they are committed to progress on intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Whether you agree with Hamas or not, they represent an important constituency among Palestinian people and sooner or later they will have to play a role in deciding their future.”

The Elders also made clear their concerns about the erosion of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Gaza.

Mary Robinson said: “In our meetings with the authorities we raised issues of human rights violations that were reported to us. Mr Haniyeh said that if they were provided with specific allegations, they would investigate and report the outcome to us. He also said that any mistakes would be corrected.”

The Elders’ visit continues in the coming days with stops in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the West Bank.

For more information about The Elders’ work in the Middle East during their visit including media releases, blogs, photos and videos, please go to <http://www.theelders.org/middle-east>

For updates and media opportunities, please register at media@theElders.org

ABOUT THE ELDERS

The Elders are an independent group of eminent global leaders, brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007, who offer their collective influence and experience to support peace-building and help address major causes of human suffering.

The Elders are Martti Ahtisaari, Kofi Annan, Ela Bhatt, Lakhdar Brahimi, Gro Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Jimmy Carter, Graça Machel, Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu (Chair). Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi are honorary Elders.

Four members of the Elders will take part in this visit to the Middle East:

- Mary Robinson (delegation leader), former President of Ireland, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Ela Bhatt, Gandhian and founder of the million-strong Self Employed Women’s (SEWA) Association of India.
- Lakhdar Brahimi, former UN Envoy, former Foreign Minister of Algeria
- Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States of America (1977-81)

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