

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Integrated Regional Information Networks

## Israel-OPT: Israeli experts propose radical changes to West Bank closure regime

**JERUSALEM, 14 February 2008 (IRIN)** - A team of Israeli security experts has devised a plan to replace the existing closure regime in the West Bank with an alternative system which they say will offer Israel security while easing restrictions on Palestinians and allowing their economy to grow.

Admitting that the current matrix of earth mounds, concrete roadblocks and checkpoints is anachronistic and harmful to the Palestinians, the former defence establishment officials suggested the current system be scrapped - the first thorough overhaul proposed by such senior figures.

The new scheme would include removing major obstacles in the West Bank, while pushing for deeper Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation and projects to improve the Palestinian economy, in order to facilitate a political way forward to end the conflict.

The "Checkpoint Team" said the plan was being presented to the Israeli defence establishment and a dialogue was being conducted with a view to having it implemented.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there are 563 roadblocks in the West Bank (see map in PDF format).

### "Useless" checkpoints

Ilan Paz, a former brigadier-general who served as the head of the Civil Administration during the first years of the recent `intifada' (Palestinian uprising against Israel), said some checkpoints were set up without much planning.

During his military service he established a roadblock which separates Ramallah from East Jerusalem. "I founded the Qalandia checkpoint years ago as a flying security point for a specific reason - to prevent a specific attack we had intelligence on which was set to come out of Ramallah," he told a conference at the Jerusalem Van Leer Institute on 13 February. "That checkpoint hasn't yet been removed, years later."

Qalandia has now become part of Israel's West Bank Barrier and is treated, in many ways, as an international border terminal.

Similarly, Ron Shatzberg, a lieutenant-colonel in the reserves, showed how some restrictions remained in place in spite of being completely "useless".

Near Jenin there is an Israeli settlement called Sheve Shomron. Since the start of the `intifada', Palestinians have not been allowed to travel on the area's main road, due to security concerns. A three-metre-high wall has since been erected, a new road has been built for the settlers and an army division has based itself there.

"However, Palestinians still can't use the main road," Shatzberg said. Col Shaul Arieli said settlers in the West Bank dictated orders to the military, leading to severe restrictions on the Palestinians.

"To protect a small settlement in Hebron, they've shut down an entire (Palestinian) city," he said. "The (Israeli) defence establishment constantly checks and examines the restrictions and their impact on the Palestinians. It works to find the right balance, to both improve the daily lives of the (Palestinian) population and to ensure security for Israel," Shlomo Dror, spokesman for the Israeli Ministry of Defence, told IRIN.

## **Economic concerns**

Paz and Hagai Alon, who was a senior adviser to the former minister of defence, Amir Peretz, cited World Bank reports and warned that unless freedom of movement was improved the US\$7.7 billion pledged at the Paris Conference last year would not materialise as donors would be afraid to throw money at a stagnated economy.

"The economy can't develop when everything is blocked up," Paz said. Half of Palestinian small businesses have closed since 2001, Alon said, and more Palestinians have been emigrating in recent years. Furthermore, economic ties between the southern and northern West Bank have been severed, further harming the financial system. Many members were concerned the economic downturn was fuelling militant extremism in the occupied Palestinian territory. "The checkpoints in many ways create more terror than they prevent, and the reason is the daily humanitarian harm to the Palestinians," Arieli later told IRIN.

## **Alternative plan**

The "Checkpoint Team" suggested gradually removing many of the permanent checkpoints, starting with the ones which have the most impact on the Palestinians.

These would be replaced by random "flying" checkpoints - which would be more efficient for both the military and for Palestinians - to be complemented by the work of the Palestinian security forces, who would be given a larger role.

Furthermore, they proposed ending a policy of "separate roads" which kept Palestinians off certain main routes. This would allow for the removal of most earth mounds, and offer Israelis more security as militants would find it harder to mount attacks without harming Palestinians.

Finally, the plan requires that Israel complete the construction of the West Bank Barrier. However, its route, currently leaves some 10 percent of the West Bank on the Israeli side. The "Checkpoint Team" would like to see this reduced to 5 percent.

"Don't forget, when we started (introducing alternative plans), the Wall took over 20 percent of the West Bank," Arieli said, noting that ultimately the final border would hopefully be determined in negotiations.