

Gaza: Fearing humanitarian disaster, Israel turns to world for help

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Israel seeks world's help for funding a series of big-ticket development projects in Gaza

Jerusalem: Four years ago, Israel inflicted heavy damage on Gaza's infrastructure during a bruising 50-day war with Hamas militants. Now, fearing a humanitarian disaster on its doorstep, it's appealing to the world to fund a series of big-ticket development projects in the war-battered strip.

In a windfall, the wealthy Gulf Arab state of Qatar, a key donor, has become an unlikely partner in Israel's quest, and has urged other nations to follow suit.

But it remains unclear whether the rest of the international community is in a giving mood.

Donors say that while there have been some successes with reconstruction since the 2014 war, Israeli bureaucracy and security reviews are still too slow and Israel's ongoing blockade of Hamas-ruled Gaza is stifling the broader goal of developing the territory's devastated economy.

"Israel now realizes the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and its impact on the population," said the World Bank, which has helped oversee international reconstruction efforts. "Donors will be more encouraged to invest if the right conditions on the ground are put in place to allow sustainable growth."

Gaza, a tiny strip of land sandwiched between Israel and Egypt, has seen conditions steadily deteriorate since Hamas overran the territory in 2007 and took control from the internationally backed Palestinian Authority.

Israel and Egypt clamped a blockade in an attempt to weaken Hamas, and Israel and Hamas have fought three wars. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, hoping to regain control, has stepped up pressure on Hamas by cutting salaries of civil servants and limiting electricity deliveries.

The last war, in 2014, was especially devastating. Nearly 20,000 homes were destroyed, and over 150,000 others were damaged, according to U.N. figures. Hospitals, schools and infrastructure were also damaged.

Following the war, international donors gathered in Cairo and came up with a \$3.5 billion reconstruction plan. But only 53 percent of the promised money has been delivered, according to the World Bank, and Gaza's economy is in shambles. Unemployment is over 40 percent, tap water is undrinkable and Gazans receive only a few hours of electricity a day.

Signs of distress are visible throughout Gaza's potholed streets. Young men sit idly in groups on sidewalks, shopkeepers kill time on their smartphones as they mind their empty shops and the smell of sewage from the Mediterranean often wafts through the air.

Israel blames Hamas, a militant group sworn to its destruction, for the conditions. It says it has no choice but to maintain the blockade, which restricts imports and exports, because the group continues to plot ways to attack Israel.

But fearing a humanitarian disaster that could spill over into violence, Israel has begun to soften its line, echoing warnings by international officials.

“We are well beyond a humanitarian crisis, but on the verge of a total system failure in Gaza, with a full collapse of the economy and social services with political, humanitarian and security implications to match,” U.N. Mideast envoy Nickolay Mladenov said.

Looking forward, Israel and the international community have different visions for how to fix the situation.

On Jan. 31, Israeli Cabinet Minister Tzachi Hanegbi and Maj. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, who oversees Israeli civilian policies for Gaza, appealed to an emergency gathering of donor nations in Brussels to deliver hundreds of millions of dollars for long-delayed projects sought by the international community.

According to a document obtained by The Associated Press, the Israeli list included a power line, natural gas line, desalination plant, industrial zone and sewage treatment facility.

“Israel is ready to provide its technological skills and infrastructure to prevent a humanitarian disaster in Gaza, on the condition that the funds come from the international community and that we know that they will not go to strengthen Hamas,” Hanegbi told the Ynet news site.

In a rare interview, Mohammed Al-Emadi, the head of Qatar’s Gaza reconstruction committee, urged other nations to support the effort.

“We have to fund as soon as possible,” he told the AP. “When you want to do work in Gaza, you have to go through the Israelis.”

Qatar, along with the United States and European Union, has been a leading donor to the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, a system set up after the 2014 war to rebuild the territory while avoiding contact with Hamas.

Under the arrangement, the Palestinian Authority leads the projects, Israeli security officials review and approve them, while the U.N. monitors the delivery of goods to make sure that items like cement and metal pipes don’t reach Hamas. It relies on various tools, including authorized vendors, security cameras and spot inspections of construction sites.

Israel considers the system to be a success, given the challenging circumstances. According to Israeli figures, nearly 90,000 homes have been rebuilt, while 380 large projects, such as hospitals, housing complexes and water treatment facilities, have been completed.

Qatar has funded some of the most high-profile projects, including an \$84 million highway running the 40-kilometer (25-mile) length of Gaza, a \$114 million high-rise development in southern Gaza and a \$17 million state-of-the-art rehabilitation hospital.

Life-size pictures of Qatar’s former emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and his son, current emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, greet visitors at the hospital entrance.

In Brussels, Jason Greenblatt, the White House Mideast envoy, also called for donors to “dedicate” themselves to investing in Gaza’s infrastructure.

Other key donors, however, seem to be more hesitant. It appears unlikely they will open their wallets with internal

Palestinian reconciliation at a standstill, the Trump administration unable to restart peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, and continued international frustration over Israel's 11-year blockade of Gaza. U.S. cuts to UNRWA, the U.N. agency that assists more than half of Gaza's population, have further complicated the situation.

Illustrating the atmosphere, the new Qatari hospital overlooks a beach contaminated by untreated sewage water that pours into the sea due to power failures.

Guri Solberg, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman for Norway, one of the sponsors of the Brussels meeting, said the gathering was meant to reiterate support for a two-state solution and to enable the Palestinian Authority to regain control of Gaza.

It was "not a pledging conference," she said, adding it was impossible to say whether countries are ready to pledge more funds. A "number of donors" expressed concerns over the cuts to UNRWA, she added.

U.N. and World Bank officials say the reconstruction mechanism has worked well on routine projects but that Israeli bureaucracy and lengthy security reviews on complicated pieces of equipment have resulted in delays of up to six months.

Rebhi Sheikh-Khalil, deputy head of the Palestinian Water Authority, said a one-year project to build the first phase of a desalination plant end up dragging on for three years.

"This is due to the Israeli approvals that take a long time and so many procedures," he said.

In Brussels, the Israelis pledged to ease some restrictions to speed up construction "a step welcomed by the World Bank.

Mladenov, the U.N. envoy, said that for Gaza's economy to truly recover, the world must focus on broader goals: enabling Abbas' government to retake control, ending the Israeli blockade and halting Hamas' militant activities.

"This will fully enable the international community to support the economic and social revival of Gaza," he said.

- AP