

Global Security – Middle East

Westminster Hall

24 January 2008

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Like everyone who has spoken so far, I welcome the report. It is comprehensive and balanced, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mike Gapes) on the way in which he presented it. I shall devote most of my comments to the situation in Gaza. Time is short, but if there is time, I might say a few words about the west bank.

Let me start by putting on the record as clearly as I can, as my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) did, that the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel are to be condemned. I condemn them without qualification. That is why we know, record and monitor the numbers who—

Mr. Simon: My figures say that there have been 200 rocket attacks in the past 10 days from Gaza into Israeli schools, houses and homes, killing and wounding people. It is easy to condemn them as though they do not have any consequences or as though that is an isolated piece of the argument. My hon. Friend condemns the attacks, but does he accept that they are the fundamental cause of the problem? Does he accept that the attacks are a problem that the Israeli Government have to deal with.

Richard Burden: Are they the fundamental cause of the problem? No, I do not think they are.

Mr. Simon: A fundamental cause.

Richard Burden: I do not think they are a fundamental cause. They are to be condemned and they are unjustified. I have also visited Sderot; I hope that my hon. Friends who have visited Sderot have also been to Gaza and talked to people there. The pain that families suffer from rocket attacks is real pain, and the fear that they experience, not knowing when the next attack will come, is real fear. It helps nobody to say that either side somehow has a monopoly on pain, or on compassion for the other side. That gets this debate nowhere.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Simon) talked about the number of rocket attacks in the past week. As far as I know, one person has been killed in those attacks. I am sure that he has studied the figures, so he will also know that in the first week of this year, there were 11 Israeli air strikes into Gaza, during which 26 people were killed and 63 were injured. I do not say that because it will help the family of the two Israelis who died in 2007 to know that more Palestinians have been killed. My hon. Friend needs to understand that for a Palestinian in Gaza whose son, daughter, mother or father has been killed by a missile from an Apache helicopter or an F-16, it does not count any less; their pain is no less than that of someone whose family members are killed in Sderot by Palestinian rockets.

One fundamental cause of the situation in Gaza is the blockade. Even though things have got a lot worse in recent months and weeks, restrictions on movement in and out of Gaza did not start this week, this year or even last year. Many of them existed even before Israeli disengagement in 2005. Certainly, they were stepped up at the start of 2006 and there were rocket attacks on Gaza at that time—interestingly, not from Hamas, which was then on a ceasefire. It was not rocket attacks that led to the increased blockade on Gaza, it was an election. As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North said, the election in which Hamas was elected was internationally monitored and regarded as fair. Records show that it was the election that led to an increase in the blockade. The international community mistakenly went along with that by boycotting that Government, and ended up in the rather strange situation of having to increase its aid to Gaza through the temporary international mechanism. That had less effect because the very mechanisms needed to deliver services to people there were being boycotted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South talked about the Committee's views on engagement, which I recognise and agree with—but the Government take a different view.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend must be aware that, following the parliamentary election, a large number of those elected to the Palestinian Authority were subsequently arrested by Israeli invading forces and are currently being held in Israeli prisons. That does not show much respect for democracy.

Richard Burden: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It must be a matter of concern to all parliamentarians that elected parliamentarians are in jail. That matter is rightly being looked into by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Mr. Simon *rose*—

Richard Burden: I shall have to make some progress.

Mr. Simon: Does my hon. Friend agree that if one is a terrorist who is dedicated to using death and murder to achieve one's ends, one is not a democrat? The two are absolutely antithetical. Does he agree that the act of being elected, albeit legitimately, does not make one a democrat if one is a terrorist?

Richard Burden: The arrests of Palestinian parliamentarians have taken place by and large on the basis of membership of a particular organisation. If we are serious about trying to achieve a settlement in that part of the world, as opposed to point scoring—as far as I know, hon. Members from both sides of the House agree on that—a situation in which the majority of parliamentarians from the Palestinian Parliament are in jail does not contribute much towards that end.

The situation in Gaza has got a lot worse since the unjustified takeover of Hamas in Gaza last June. It became even more serious in October when

Israel decided to restrict further fuel supplies into Gaza. That has been stepped up again in the past few weeks. The position in Gaza was illustrated graphically last year by John Ging, of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, when he visited here and laid on the line the consequences of what was happening in Gaza. The position has also been illustrated graphically by the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Were it not for the work of the UN, certainly the OCHA, painstakingly monitoring incidents in Gaza and the west bank—closures and so on—this debate would be all the poorer. It does absolutely vital work.

As a result of the UN's investigations, we know that more than 80 per cent. of people in Gaza live below the poverty line. Some 80 per cent. of Gazans are dependent on food and humanitarian aid. When I say dependent I do not mean that they are getting enough; one thing that John Ging told us when he came to Parliament last year was that the UN estimates that the daily calorie intake for Gazans is about 61 per cent. of what is required, so malnutrition is a real and present threat.

Fuel shortages have threatened essential services and the water supply, and there are power cuts for about eight hours each day. Hospitals are running on emergency generators. Emergency generators are just that: they are meant to cut in when there is a power cut. If they are used all the time, the likelihood of breakdown is greater than ever. Many life-saving treatments are not available in Gaza and there are shortages of medicines and delays in their delivery. Some 17 per cent. of patients who have been referred outside Gaza for treatment have been refused exit by Israel.

On the economy—as the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) rightly said, aid is not the answer in that part of the world—the closure of the Karni crossing has meant that export is virtually impossible and that imports of spares and raw materials are often impossible. Nearly 90 per cent. of industrial establishments have closed since last June and thousands of labourers have lost their jobs because of the collapse of the building industry. Perhaps the most surreal problem is what has happened to the fishing industry. Fishing has been a staple part of the economy of that coastal strip of land for centuries, but because of Israeli restrictions on fishing limits, the areas closest to the coast are being overfished. The crazy situation is that the food aid coming into Gaza includes fish. Importing fish to an area that should be based on a fishing economy is absolutely crazy.

That is the situation, and it is getting worse. I received information today that, as far as the power cutbacks are concerned, the promises that were made by Israel to introduce emergency supplies of fuel into Gaza have been reversed, and that is now not happening. Haaretz reported the response of the Israeli Deputy Defence Minister, Matan Vilnai, to the blowing up of the wall at Rafa. He stated:

“We need to understand that when Gaza is open to the other side we lose responsibility for it. So we want to disconnect from it.”

That is what he told Army radio. He then went on to say that Israel's effort to disengage from Gaza, which began in 2005 with the evacuation of settlers,

“continues in that we want to stop supplying electricity to them, stop supplying them with water and medicine, so that it would come from another place.”

So we have the very real threat now that the restrictions are not seen as temporary actions in response to the firing of rockets but as a permanent plan. That is what the Deputy Defence Minister of Israel said today. To me, that is scary and worrying. It offers no prospect of a good path toward peace.

Mr. Simon: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Richard Burden: My hon. Friend has had a lot of goes. I will give him this one, but after that I will have to make some progress.

Mr. Simon: On that point, perhaps my hon. Friend could explain what all this mistreatment has to do with, if not the rockets. What is it about the Israelis that makes them treat the Palestinians so badly? Why do they do it? What is going on? If it is not to do with the terrorism of Hamas and the Gaza leadership, what is it to do with? What is his explanation? Are they just bad people?

Richard Burden: That is a question that my hon. Friend must address to the person who is responsible for the quote that I gave: the Deputy Defence Minister of Israel, Matan Vilnai.

Time is short, and I would like to ask my hon. Friend the Minister a few questions about how we move on from this desperately dangerous situation. It is right to say that the British Government have done their best to try to bring about a reasonable settlement, perhaps even more so in the past few months, and I certainly welcome the increasing engagement with this issue of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary since he took up his post. There is no doubt that the British Government are expressing their displeasure at what is happening in Gaza, but the fact is that it is still happening.

I ask the Minister what, in practical terms, we can do, not to express displeasure about the fact that 1.5 million people are living in a prison, but to stop 1.5 million people living in a prison. Not only do the British Government and, indeed, the international community rightly condemn the rockets, but they actually impose sanctions on organisations that may be responsible for them if there is a refusal to engage. If that action is appropriate in respect of the firing of rockets against civilians in southern Israel, what is the appropriate action for a country that has been responsible for collective punishment, that has launched that amount of air strikes, and, even by the most generous interpretation, has been involved in grossly disproportionate military action against Gaza? What are we going to do, apart from expressing displeasure?

I ask the Minister also to explain not only what we do at diplomatic level but what our role is as a high contracting party to the fourth Geneva Convention, which is being breached. What will we do about the situation?

Before I sit down, I want to mention just two other things. As we know, fuel supplies have been restricted since October. The restrictions have been stepped up in the past few weeks, and, according to the Deputy Defence Minister of Israel, they may be cut off altogether in the future. When Hamas was in government, the international community adopted a temporary international mechanism to ensure one of its objectives, which was that fuel supplies got through so that power and water supplies could be kept going. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to explain the current status of the temporary international mechanism, and what the international community can do to ensure that fuel supplies get through.

Perhaps my hon. Friend could also explain who is paying for the fuel supplies that are not going into Gaza. As far as I am aware, a great deal of the payment that is going to Israel to supply fuel to Gaza is coming from the international community, particularly the European Union. Am I right about that? If so, we are paying for a service that is not actually being provided. What are we doing about that?

I was on the west bank over the new year holiday. I found a contradictory situation there. At one level, I saw within the towns economic buoyancy of a kind that I have not seen in recent years. The markets were busy, and hotel tourism seemed to be up in Bethlehem, Jerusalem and elsewhere. That is not really surprising, given the unfreezing of international aid to the Palestinian authority, which means that people's salaries are being paid, and the release of the tax revenues that were owed by Israel to the Palestinian authority. So, at that level, the west bank felt better than I have known it for some time.

At the same time, however, movement restrictions inside the west bank are as great as they have ever been. In fact, they have increased, according to the UN and my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe, who responded to a parliamentary question that I tabled last week. They have gone up, not down, in recent times. Settlement building is continuing apace. The west bank is still being chopped up into different cantons. If that continues, it will prevent a viable Palestinian state from ever being formed.

As well as urging economic road maps and providing the aid that allows economic activity in Palestinian towns, what are we doing to ensure that real economic activity can take place, that people can move around the west bank, and that Palestinian businesses can trade both within the west bank and with the outside world? What are we doing, in practice, not just to say that settlement building is against international law and that Israel should stop doing it, but to ensure that settlement building stops so that the chances of a viable Palestinian state are not squandered?