

Will Sanctions Against Israel Follow U.S. Fact-Finding Trips to Gaza?

by Nina Ogden

Feb. 27—For the first time since 2006, members of the U.S. Congress visited the Gaza Strip this month, and after surveying the damage and destruction, and receiving eyewitness reports of the effects of the blockade by the Israeli government of the border crossings into Gaza for the shipment of food and medicines, the U.S. has warned Israel that the blockade against the Palestinians of Gaza *has to stop*. Under the Bush-Cheney Administration—which was a *de facto* extension of the British Empire—the U.S. joined in strangling Gaza to death—a process which Israel began in 2006, immediately after Hamas overwhelmingly won the Palestinian national elections.

But now, not only was Gaza visited Feb. 19 by Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) and Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), and by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but immediately after their visits, it was announced that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the President's Special Envoy George Mitchell would be attending the March 2 conference of donors to rebuild Gaza, in Cairo. The U.S. will be providing up to \$900 million in humanitarian relief to the Palestinians of Gaza.

Washington sources have told *EIR* that the Congressional trips are coherent with the policies of Clinton and Mitchell. These sources also confirmed reports appearing in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, that Clinton had relayed messages expressing anger over Israel's obstruction of the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. On Feb. 25, *Ha'aretz* reported that senior U.S. officials had told their Israeli counterparts, "Israel is not making enough effort to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The U.S. expects Israel to meet its commitments on this matter." According to Agence France Presse, Clinton will also make the opening of the border crossings a major issue in her visit to Israel following the March 2 donors' meeting.

What Congress Saw

The two Congressional tours to Gaza brought the humanitarian crisis there to the public eye. Baird, a clinical psychologist, and Ellison, the first person of the Muslim faith to be elected to Congress, met with Gazans and relief workers for nine hours, viewing the destruction from the recent Israeli air and ground attacks. Ellison said, "We wanted to understand what can and must be done to recover from the destruction, address the underlying issues, and work towards a lasting, just, and peaceful resolution."

Baird reported, "The amount of physical destruction and the depth of human suffering here is staggering." He posted photographs of bomb damage to hospitals, homes, and schools on his website. The Congressmen reported that vital humanitarian aid including food and construction material vital for repairing the bomb damage, was being blocked by Israel from entering Gaza through the border crossings. Simple foodstuffs such as lentils, macaroni, and tomato paste are being prevented from entering Gaza, they reported, as well as construction material, such as cement and steel.

Kerry also spoke, in Gaza and to senior officials in the U.S. upon his return, of the destruction he witnessed. On Feb. 26, in his opening remarks at a Senate Foreign Relations hearing, titled "Engaging with Muslim Communities Around the World," Kerry said, "I visited a village called Izbet Abed Rabbo, and I saw little Palestinian girls playing in the rubble, where three months ago buildings stood. It was searing."

Kerry intervened in a matter which has become a worldwide image of those obstacles Israel is placing on humanitarian aid into Gaza. When Kerry witnessed trucks loaded with pasta being stopped at the crossings and prevented from entering Gaza, he asked UN relief workers about it. They told him that pasta is not on the



U.S. Representatives Brian Baird (D-Wash.) and Keith Ellison (D-Minn.) pose with UN Aid workers in front of some of the devastation inflicted by the Israeli assault on Gaza.

Israeli list of humanitarian aid, and cannot be brought across the border, but that rice can. They said that Israel sees allowing pasta into Gaza as a concession to Hamas. Kerry confronted Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak about the policy. Barak said that pasta was not on the allowed list, but then relented, and said he would *now* allow pasta into Gaza.

At the State Department briefing, Feb. 25, CNN reporter Elise Labott was unrelenting in her questions, asking if State can possibly see pasta as a “dual-use” commodity. Another reporter said, “Is rigatoni going to be used as a weapon? . . . It just seems absurd on the face of it.” Although Barak gave his personal consent for the now-famous pasta to pass the crossings, other basic foods are still being held up. Baird asked, “When have lentil bombs been going off lately? Is someone going to kill you with a piece of macaroni?”

Will the U.S. Sanction Israel?

On Feb. 24, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that the Israeli Defense Ministry is concerned that the U.S. will cut foreign aid to Israel in the fiscal 2010 budget, to pressure the new Israeli government to take action against illegal outposts and settlement activities.

EIR spoke to a Washington source who suggested

that the concerns of the Israelis relate to U.S. loan guarantees to Israel which have been periodically suspended or deducted by the U.S.—under Presidents George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush. The law regarding these loan guarantees—which were initiated to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel—specifies that they cannot be used to finance Israel’s settlements in areas occupied since the 1967 war. The law further specifies that the U.S. is authorized to reduce aid by amounts equal to Israel’s estimated spending on settlement construction.

But there is also a concern about the impact of U.S. weapons sales to Israel. On Feb. 24, Amnesty International released a letter to Secretary of State Clinton expressing grave concern about Gaza, and asking her to investigate Israel’s use of any weap-

ons procured from the U.S., to determine if they were used to harm civilians. Amnesty says that until this can be determined, the U.S. should cease all weapons transfers to Israel.

Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign aid since World War II. The Arms Export Control Act specifies that the U.S. may stop aid to countries that use military assistance for purposes other than legitimate self-defense. In 1982, the Reagan Administration banned sales of cluster bombs to Israel because Israel may have used them in Lebanon. President Reagan also suspended sales of F-16 fighter planes to Israel, after Israel bombed Iraq’s Osirak nuclear plant in 1981, according to a Congressional Research Service report updated last year.

The U.S. also co-signs loan guarantees for Israel, so Israel can receive larger loans at better terms. In 1991, George H.W. Bush suspended the loan guarantees for four months. In the 1990s President Clinton subtracted \$773.8 million, almost half of the loan guarantees, over a three-year period. On Nov. 26, 2003 the \$3 billion loan guarantee for FY 2003, was reduced by \$289.5 billion because Israel continued to build settlements in the occupied territories, and was building a security wall to separate Israelis and Palestinians.