

Sen. Sanders Letter on The Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza

The Honorable John J. Sullivan
Acting Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Acting Secretary Sullivan: We write regarding the urgent need to alleviate the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. The territory's lack of power, clean water, adequate medical care and other necessities not only exacerbates the hardships faced by Gaza's population, but redounds to the benefit of extremist groups who use this deprivation and despair to incite violence against Israel.

A 2012 UN report predicted that, if current trends continued, Gaza would become unlivable. A follow-up report last year said that that day might have already come. According to the Israeli human rights group B'tselem, "The coastal aquifer, which Gaza relies on as its primary water source, has been polluted by over-pumping and wastewater contamination. As a result, 96.2% of the water pumped from the aquifer and supplied for domestic use in Gaza is unsafe to drink." According to Oxfam, this water pollution is among the factors causing a dramatic increase in kidney problems among Gaza's population.

As Israel Defense Forces officials warned earlier this year, the humanitarian crisis increases the chances of incidents at the border fence that can turn deadly. Israeli security officials also believe conditions in Gaza could worsen to the point of a total collapse of order in the territory, leading to all-out confrontation between and among various Gazan factions and Israel.

There is much blame to go around for the horrific conditions in Gaza. Hamas – due to its ongoing repression, corruption and insistence on pursuing a violent struggle against Israel – bears significant responsibility for the deteriorating situation. While Israel withdrew its forces from within Gaza in 2005, its continuing control of Gaza's air, sea, and northern, southern, and eastern borders, and its restrictions on the freedom of movement of people, legitimate goods and equipment in and out of Gaza, have made the humanitarian situation worse. Egypt and the Palestinian Authority must also play a more constructive role.

The United States can help avoid further conflict and bloodshed by taking and encouraging steps to improve both the quality of life for Palestinians in Gaza as well as Israeli security. As a first step, the United States should restore its funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Israeli defense officials specifically stated that U.S. withholding of UNRWA funding could worsen the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and even spark an uprising in the territory.

The United States should also encourage the easing of restrictions on the movement of people, goods and equipment in and out of the territory, especially for materials and supplies related to critical infrastructure such as water projects, and health essentials such as medicine and hospital

supplies. Multiple parties should also be engaged to ensure greater electricity flow into Gaza to meet the territory's desperate need for energy.

The United States should also put its weight behind proposals to build Gaza's economy through bold initiatives such as the proposed Gaza Seaport. Supported by a broad range of Israeli security and cabinet officials, the new port facility could boost Gaza's economy by vastly improving the territory's access to goods and markets worldwide. This access to regular commerce is critical to ensuring that Palestinians in Gaza can reduce their reliance on aid and build a sustainable future for themselves.

The political and security challenges in Gaza are formidable, but support for the basic human rights of its people must not be conditioned on progress on those fronts. For the sake of Israelis and Palestinians alike, the United States must act urgently to help relieve the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. We stand ready to work with you on this important matter.

Sincerely