2005 Volume 3

Revitalizing
Gaza’s Economy

Interview:
Dr. Haider Abdel
Shafi, Gaza’s
Elder Statesman

Palestinian
Perspectives
on the Disengagement
Process

Helping the
Homeless in
Rafah

Gaza:
Great Challenges and
Opportunities
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*Let me say that I do believe — and I think the whole UN system is trying to be extremely helpful to the peace process and to the end of violence, to the security and development for all in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel — that we are at a very critical stage. We have to try to make this succeed. We do hope that whatever things may happen here and there don’t undermine our overall commitment to make the peace process succeed in that part of the world.*

— Kemal Dervi, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme

News Press Briefing, 16 August 2005
Introduction

An Overview of Gaza: Ancient History, to Current Challenges

Gaza has always been of strategic importance owing largely to its location situated along the Mediterranean coast, on the crossroads between Africa, Europe and Asia. With its rich history as a prosperous trade centre and port, and its diverse range of influences over the centuries, Gaza is said to be one of the oldest cities in the world.

Established some 3000 years ago as a hub for both the land and sea trade routes, Gaza was first inhabited by the Canaanites and then Egypt, before becoming a main Philistine city several hundred years later. Over the course of its history, Gaza has been a main stopping point for the Persians, Assyrians and Nabateans, as well as the Romans, Byzantines, Mamluks and Crusaders, among others. Gaza was always regarded as a hub of trade and commerce, influenced by the number of civilizations that at one time or another passed through Gaza’s shores. The name Gaza, has no actual meaning in Arabic, but has been translated from a variety of languages as meaning ‘the treasure,’ and the ‘prized city.’

Gaza also has religious significance and is referenced throughout the bible, most significantly as the location where Samson brought down the temple upon himself and his enemies. For Muslims, its significance lies in the belief that it is the burial place of the Prophet Mohammed’s great-grandfather Hashem – a merchant from Mecca. As the Byzantine influence was dwindling years after the death of the Prophet’s great-grandfather, a number of other successful Arab traders from Mecca made Gaza their home, including a young man by the name of ‘Omar ibn al-Khattab. He would later go on to become the second Caliph.

Until the 18th century, Gaza was a fortified city, reflecting the

Gaza City is the largest city in the strip, with approximately 400,000 inhabitants and is regarded as the administrative and commercial hub.

Arab historian Al-Ostakhri, referred to Gaza as the last city in Palestine close to the Egyptian desert. Napoleon is said to have dubbed the city as the front garrison of Africa and the gate of Asia.
...precarious nature of the times. Remnants from this period and others, can be found in the number of historical and archeological sites located throughout Gaza, including the Mosque of Omar built following Salah al-Din’s victory in 1187, and the tomb of the Prophet Mohammed’s great-grandfather, which lies in the corner of a 19th century mosque. Also located in Gaza is an impressive stone building dating back to the Mamluk period. Known as the Qasr Al Basha, or Pasha’s Palace (recently transformed by a UNDP/PAPP project into a museum, funded by the German Development Bank), Napoleon is said to have inhabited the building during his short stay in Gaza.

**Today’s Challenges**
The Gaza of today is strikingly different to its thriving past. While remnants remain, the last 57 years have seen a marked and rapid change in the fortunes of this once prosperous and economically viable area. Since 1948, Gaza has become home to many of Palestine’s refugees, who fled into what now includes some of the most densely populated areas on earth. This along with other factors including the restrictions on the access of Gaza to the outside world, has lead to the phenomenon of ‘de-development’. Gaza currently suffers from increasingly alarming rates of poverty and unemployment, particularly since the outbreak of the second Intifada, in 2000.

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Gaza is home to over 950,000 Palestine refugees from both 1948 and 1967 - when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. Between these two pivotal dates in the region’s history, Gaza was administered by, but not annexed to Egypt. In 1994, Gaza became the first headquarters for the Palestinian Authority, which governs the areas under ‘self-rule,’ as defined by the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Despite the enormity of the challenges ahead, the tenacious nature of the people and its history of changing circumstances, as well as continued support from the international community, Gaza has the potential to defy the odds and overcome its current challenges.

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“A city so rich in trees it looks like a cloth of brocade spread out upon the land.”

-14th-century Syrian scholar al-Dimashqi on Gaza. References to the ancient city can also be found in the works of Herodotus, Pliny, Strabo and others.
In December 2003, the Israeli government unveiled a plan to evacuate all settlements from Gaza and four from the northern West Bank. In addition, the plan called for the continuation of settlement activity and construction of the separation wall in the West Bank. On August 15, 2005, the disengagement plan came into effect, marking the official start to a process that has seen the evacuation of the approximately 8000 settlers from the twenty-one settlements in Gaza and four in the West Bank.

According to the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) Withdrawal Communications Department (WCD), it has been decided that the vast majority of the land vacated by the settlements will now be used for housing projects, hospitals, schools, universities and public spaces.

“95 per cent of the land where the settlements were is actually… considered as state land, so therefore it is going to revert back to the public domain,” explained Diana Buttu, spokeswoman for the Palestinian Ministerial Committee for the Israeli Evacuation.

“The government has taken a decision that whoever owns the remaining 5 per cent of the land in those areas, is going to get it back. They are just working out the legal mechanism right now to adjudicate any claims and I think that this is really setting a precedent… that indicates that we are giving back the land to the people to whom it rightfully belongs.”

Efforts are also currently underway to revitalize the Gazan economy, primarily through the development of key sectors, encouraging investment and job creation. However, while the disengagement process does represent an unprecedented opportunity for the people of Gaza, for this to translate into much-needed economic recovery, trade and the movement of goods in and out of Gaza must be facilitated.

The construction of a sea port in Gaza’s harbor is expected and there are also hopes that the airport will be rehabilitated and reopened. The Palestinian International Airport was opened by the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and former US President Bill Clinton in 1998. Since 2000 it has been closed due to damage incurred during the conflict, but there are now indications that it could re-open in the near future.
Quick Facts: Disengagement

1. Most Palestinians in Gaza are refugees or descendents of refugees from the 1948 war. More than 3/4 of Gaza’s population are registered refugees.

2. The Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip is close to 1.4 million in an area only 40 kilometers long and 10 kilometers wide. Prior to the evacuation of the settlements, the Israeli settler population was approximately 8000.

3. Gaza represents only 1% of historical Palestine and 6% of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). It is home to 30% of the total population of the oPt.

4. Israel has occupied the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza since 1967.

5. Under the Oslo agreement, the Palestinians controlled 2/3 of Gaza, while Israel was in direct control of 1/3.

6. There were approximately 2500 settler houses, in 21 settlements occupying 20% of the land in Gaza.

7. The PA estimates that following the dismantlement of the settlement structures, 80,000 tonnes of rubble has been left behind.
When Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon unveiled his plan to evacuate Israel’s twenty-one settlements from Gaza along with four settlements in the northern West Bank in December 2003, it created tremendous worldwide media interest.

As part of his portfolio as Palestinian Minister of Civil Affairs, Mohammed Dahlan is heading up the Technical Committee on Withdrawals (TCW), which has been working to help the Palestinian Authority (PA) promote their position leading up to and following the recent evacuation of Israeli settlements from Gaza.

“I am hopeful that this move will mark a positive change for the people of Gaza,” explained Minister Dahlan in his Gaza City office prior to the evacuation of the settlement areas. “However, there are many unanswered questions that remain, and Israel holds 90 per cent of these answers. The main question we have to ask ourselves is whether Israel will evacuate the settlements to start a process that will lead to a complete end to the occupation, or whether complete control will be maintained from outside Gaza’s borders.”

The question of the control of Gaza’s borders is one of the main issues of concern. Without control over the borders, restrictions on the movement of people and goods may continue, or even worsen. The reversal of these restrictions is crucial for the revitalization of the political process, as well as the rejuvenation of Gaza’s economy.
Despite hopes that movement through the Rafah terminal would improve following Israel’s September 12 pullout from Gaza, the official terminal has remained largely closed. Special arrangements have been made through an agreement reached between Israeli, Egyptian and Palestinian officials to open the terminal for short periods for humanitarian cases, but free movement across the official border has so far not eventuated. With the recent deployment of Egyptian soldiers along the border, it is believed that the terminal will remain closed until an accord is reached between the concerned parties on how to manage the Gaza-Egypt border. However, Minister Dahlan is also confident of the imminent construction of a seaport in Gaza’s harbour and even mentions the likelihood of Gaza’s destroyed airport re-opening under Palestinian control.

These developments however, would not solve the fundamental problem of movement between Gaza and the West Bank. The issue of securing ‘safe passage’ for Palestinians – which functioned, albeit sporadically prior to the outbreak of the second Intifada – is something that is currently being addressed.

There is also concern about further escalation in civil unrest following the pullout, particularly given the recent flaring of tension between the competing power structures, factions and armed groups within Gaza. This is something that the Ministry of Civil Affairs’ Withdrawals Communications Department (WCD) has been eager to respond to, by launching public awareness campaigns throughout Gaza to try to unite Palestinians and promote the idea of the disengagement as an opportunity for a better future.

Mohammed Dahlan and the Technical Committee on Withdrawals are continuing to work to try to clarify the Palestinian position regarding Israel’s recent disengagement from Gaza. From this situation over which the Palestinians had little control, a positive message has been developed. Billboards positioned throughout Gaza proudly proclaim that “Our Land is Being Returned to Us, So Let’s Protect It.”
Born in Gaza in 1919, Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi is more qualified than most to talk of his perspectives and hopes for Gaza post-evacuation of Israeli settlers and troops. His unassuming manner belies his standing within Palestinian society – particularly in Gaza – and the role he has played in Palestinian politics since the 1960’s, when he served as the Chairman of the first Palestinian Legislative Council in Gaza from 1962 to 1964.

Dr. Abdel Shafi graduated from the American University of Beirut’s Faculty of Medicine in 1943, before returning to Gaza in 1945, opening a private practice and becoming director of medical services in Gaza from 1957 to 1960. From 1951 to 1954, he studied surgery at the Miami Valley Hospital in Dayton, Ohio (USA). He served as a member of the conference convened in Jerusalem in 1964, which established the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and was subsequently deported to Lebanon in 1970 for related activities.

As a leading Palestinian political figure, he was involved as a key member of Palestinian delegations at numerous peace-talks and negotiations, notably as head of the 1990 Madrid Conference and the subsequent Washington talks. Today, at the age of 86, he remains head of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society in Gaza – a post he has held since 1972.

From his modest office in Gaza City, Dr. Haider Abdel Shafi explained to Focus about his visions for the future and the obstacles that may prove difficult for Gaza during the coming months.

“First of all, the conflict could be resolved on resolutions that are fair. Israel has not abided by the resolutions made at the Madrid Conference, which has crystallized into the current impasse in this extended conflict,” said Dr. Abdel Shafi.
“All we are looking for is to see a Palestinian state along the borders of 1967, which represents less than one quarter of [historical] Palestine, with Jerusalem as the capital. This has been clear position for years, and it is up to Israel to respond and agree as to how to move forward.”

Dr. Abdel Shafi’s vast experience in dealing with issues relating to negotiations and the final status of the future Palestinian state have enabled him to see past the day-to-day events. He views many of the current problems as being directly linked to a lack of effective organization within the Palestinian Authority (PA), with responsibility resting on the shoulders of the Palestinian leadership. Dr. Abdel Shafi lays blame on a lack of national unity, and appropriate, effective dialogue with groups such as Hamas, which enjoy high levels of support particularly in Gaza.

“All political parties and factions – including Hamas – should come together and engage and debate on how to deal with this situation,” he explained. “I think, in principle, this is what should take place, because different factions have different views and different ambitions. Take for example the position of the Islamists and the position of Fatah. There is no way to reach a consensus except through free debate, and to decide democratically how to proceed.”

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has temporarily moved his headquarters from the West Bank city of Ramallah to Gaza City, for the duration of the Israeli disengagement - a move which Dr. Abdel Shafi regards as vital towards efforts at maintaining order and preventing further civil unrest during this crucial time.

“I believe that the President should take this opportunity to convene a conference attended by all political factions so that there can be an extended debate so that all factions can express their views on what should be done,” he said. The issue of what should be done with the land once the settlements have been dismantled is something that is of concern to Dr. Abdel Shafi, but he believes that like all decisions, should be left for the collective Palestinian leadership to decide in a democratic manner.

Since Dr. Abdel Shafi’s role as chief negotiator at the Washington peace talks in the early 1990’s, settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territory has increased dramatically. Now, he sees the end of the settlements in Gaza as a real chance for the future of his home.

“I do think that once this evacuation process is completed Palestinians should be able to have free movement and be able to drive from Gaza to Cairo, but a lot of this rests with the Egyptian government... but, I think it could happen,” he explained. “As I can see it, Gaza may be cut off from Israel and economic activities will be carried out mainly with Egypt across the southern Rafah border. Also we have an airport in Rafah, which could open the way to the rest of the Arab world. I do think that this is a realistic possibility and could even happen in the short-term.”

It is these and other factors that encourage Palestine’s elder statesman to remain hopeful of a just resolution to this protracted conflict.

“I feel that this change in the status quo presents a real opportunity,” says Dr. Abdel Shafi. “Generally my outlook is optimistic rather than pessimistic. I am hopeful for the future. I am afraid I will not live to see the end, but I trust that my grandchildren will.”
Gaza is suffering from an economic crisis. Since 2000 and the beginning of the second Intifada, or uprising, the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that over two-thirds of the population are currently living below the poverty line. According to the World Bank, the Palestinian recession is one of the worst in modern history and has resulted in average family incomes declining by more than a third since 2000.

The reasons for this are varied, but many of the problems stem from the restriction on movement of goods and people, both within Gaza and externally. Restoring the predictable flow of goods, is seen as one of the keys to restoring economic vitality in the Gaza Strip. However it is hoped that a new situation created by the disengagement from Gaza will change these alarming patterns by, among other things, encouraging greater private investment in the area.

Traditionally, Gaza’s economy is based primarily on trade and agriculture. Although large areas of Gaza are covered in sand-dunes, a rich, natural aquifer allows for farming of a wide variety of fruits and vegetables that are exported to Israeli and international markets. Manufacturing is also a major sector in Gaza, with the textile and
clothing industry identified as one of the most significant. Gaza has also relied on laborers and workers being allowed to enter Israel for employment.

However, in recent years this has been reduced dramatically, due to restrictions on the number of people permitted to enter Israel, as well as routine closures of the Erez border. In addition, the official disengagement plan of May 2004 envisions that there will be no Palestinian workers entering Israel in the long term.

The Erez industrial zone has also provided many Palestinians with employment with according to the World Bank, approximately 100 of the 200 companies operating from this area being Palestinian-owned. Also subject to regular closures over the past five years, the disengagement plan calls for the area to be transferred to a Palestinian or international body following the full evacuation from Gaza.

So the question remains, can Gaza’s economy be revived? The international donor community recently pledged to give generously towards this end, particularly in light of the perceived new opportunity brought about by the disengagement. There is a hope that this new situation will create more favorable conditions on the ground, more conducive to sustainable economic development.

However, international financial assistance in isolation cannot alter the economic crisis, and must be coupled by tangible developments that will facilitate and ease movement of goods and services both to the West Bank, Israel and beyond.

As was noted in a recent World Bank report on the Israeli disengagement, “an emphatic doctrine of physical and economic separation cannot be expected to encourage private investment – particularly since the immediate potential for Palestinian economic recovery lies in rebuilding trading links with Israel.”

The disengagement process will certainly remove internal movement restrictions within Gaza. However, in order for Gaza’s economy to be revived, it is clear that easing of movement between the West Bank and Gaza is required, as well as the opening of external borders, that will facilitate trade.

The economic outcome of this new situation brought about by the disengagement process, is predominantly reliant on the issue of access, as well as the ability of the Palestinian government and the private sector to rise to the considerable challenges ahead. With support pledged by the international community, there is an opportunity to certainly turn Gaza’s fortunes around.

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The Palestinian economy is one-fortieth the size of Israel’s economy - US$3 billion compared to US$130 billion. According to IMF figures the Palestinian Authority’s budget deficit for 2005 is estimated to be between US$550 million and US$650 million.

GDP: US$1 billion
GDP per person: US$722
Poverty rate: 73%
Unemployment rate: 38%
The Palestinian economy is currently in a state of crisis, with unemployment levels at alarming rates and poverty affecting most of the population. Nowhere is this more evident than in Gaza, where over two-thirds of the population live below the poverty line.

One of the main obstructions to the development of the Gazan economy has been restrictions on the movement of goods across borders, particularly the vital link between the West Bank and Gaza. There is currently only one commercial crossing on the Gaza-Israel border, where trucks transport goods out of Gaza, via a laborious system known as ‘back-to-back’.

Products exiting Gaza for Israel, the West Bank and elsewhere, are subject to this practice which entails the goods being manually offloaded from the Palestinian truck, transferred onto a conveyor belt surrounded by cement blocks, and moved to an x-ray machine. Finally, once the goods have passed all of the security requirements and deemed safe, they are then reloaded onto an Israeli truck and transported to their final destination. Goods being transported in a container are subject to similar procedures.

Karni, or Al Montar, crossing point is the main terminal through which goods are permitted to be brought into and exported from Gaza. A trade policy specialist and United Nations Volunteer (UNV) working with the Palestine Trade Centre (PalTrade), was recently placed at the Palestinian side of the terminal to monitor the flow of goods.

“The aim of my placement is to monitor and analyze Al Montar crossing terminal, or Karni, and to collect data relating to the movement of goods, vehicle traffic data and how the terminal is operating,” explained Mohammed Skaik.
Particularly given the degree of uncertainty surrounding the status of the border crossings following the disengagement process, Skaik has been placed at Karni for a period of six months. In addition to monitoring the day-to-day functioning of the terminal, his work also involves conceptualizing and developing work plans relating to the current project; conducting quantitative analysis of collated data; compiling related statistics and trend charts illustrating operational flow; and reporting back to the PalTrade working team with recommendations based on his assessments.

“I am working in coordination with the with Palestinian Ministry of National Economy, private sector associations and other stake holders to collect and verify trade data at the terminal,” Skaik said. “Our main aim is to improve the development of Palestinian trade as a driving force for sustainable national economic growth.”

Through his work monitoring the terminal, Skaik has observed that there are a number of problems hindering the routine flow of goods from Gaza into Israel and beyond. He cites the complex procedures involved as among the problems, as well as the fact that the terminal does not operate on predictable working hours. On the Palestinian side, he noted that the management of the area is not centralized and the terminal’s infrastructure is not conducive to the easy-flow of goods.

“Palestinians hope that the disengagement will improve the movement of local goods,” explained Skaik. “The best solution would be to change the ‘back-to-back’ system to a direct ‘door-to-door’ system, which would increase private sector output. We are looking for a feasible way to facilitate the free-flow of goods between Gaza and the rest of the world.”

“Karni, or Al Montar, crossing point is the main terminal through which goods are permitted to be brought into and exported from the Gaza Strip.”
The immediate benefits for Palestinians from the Israeli government’s unilateral withdrawal from twenty-one settlements in Gaza are greater freedom of movement for Gazans internally and the return of land, however the phenomenon of closure continues.

Gaza’s economic recovery and stability require the free movement of goods and people through the border with Egypt, through the borders into Israel, and directly from Gaza to the rest of the world through the airport and seaport, and the creation of a viable, safe passage connecting Gaza to the West Bank.

The next two to three months will determine the pace of Gaza’s recovery, and the issues of border controls and a viable link between the territories could shape Israeli-Palestinian relations for the next decade, according to James Wolfensohn, Special Envoy to the Middle East Quartet and former World Bank President.

Palestinians and others are adamant that Gaza must have a window to the outside world. The World Bank has been invited by both parties as a technical advisor to discussions of proposed methods for safe passage between the territories.

Today the borders are managed by Israel, and there must be a balance between security concerns and commercial necessities, which Mr. Roberts assures is entirely possible. A conversion to a bilateral system with mutually agreed upon management systems for screening and scanning cargo will be necessary to move goods and people between the West Bank and Gaza, and to create an environment conducive to private investment.

If Palestinians are going to attract private investors, the current environment simply will not suffice. If goods cannot move freely, there is no predictability for imports and exports, government regulations are inconsistent and not enforced, and the legal and judicial system does not have the capacity to govern commercial disputes. This will cause rational investors to look elsewhere.

Gaza could be self-sustaining, however the price of Palestinian products has been inflated through arbitrary, unregulated import and export procedures. As of June 2005, the ratio of imports to exports was 12:1. According to Palestinian estimates, it is nearly the same cost to import Chinese products, as it is to import Palestinian products from the West Bank into Gaza.

“Unless Gaza has better access to the outside world there will be no change in the economy,” warns Nigel Roberts, World Bank Country Director for the West Bank and Gaza.
“Israel has agreed to implement an escorted convoy system shortly after the withdrawal, and the understanding is that goods and people can move between the two areas,” said Mr. Roberts. Presently there is a “back-to-back” system, which means that Palestinian trucks stop at the border and goods are unloaded and reloaded onto Israeli trucks. Often goods are loaded and unloaded several times throughout the process.

Two options for the new system are on the table. First, Israeli trucks would shuttle between the two terminals and then unload at each end. Alternatively, Palestinian trucks would cross in convoys from one territory to the other, which is certainly the Palestinian preference, since it would initiate a “door to door” system.

It will take six to nine months for the security equipment to arrive for the new system, such as giant scanners, and the debate continues over what can be scanned and what must be inspected. In addition, a Palestinian border agency must be created to coordinate with Israel and manage affairs on their own side.

The World Bank and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) are exploring the best options for a safe passage between the West Bank and Gaza, with suggestions including a railway, a sunken roadway, or a combination or both.

The Rand Corporation, an influential non-profit organization recently proposed a high-speed 225 kilometer rail line, known as the ARC. The line would include a highway, aqueduct, energy network, and fiber-optic cables linking the major towns and cities of the future Palestinian state.

Its proposed arc-like route begins in Jerusalem, runs up through the West Bank, linking Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron, and then curves left to reach Gaza City.

“According to Palestinian estimates, it is nearly the same cost to import Chinese products, as it is to import Palestinian products from the West Bank into Gaza.”

Rand’s analysts project that the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza will almost double over the next 15 years, demanding a more comprehensive transit system and rehabilitation of their infrastructure, much of which was destroyed during the Intifada. The ARC would cost approximately US$6 billion to construct, and would bolster the Palestinian economy by employing an estimated 160,000 people.

Today, when, for example, the Gaza branches coordinator of the Arab Bank attends a business meeting in Ramallah, he exits through Rafah, travels across the Sinai and the Suez Canal to Cairo, and then flies from Cairo to Amman, before making his way through the Allenby Bridge from Jordan into the West Bank, and finally arriving in Ramallah. By contrast, if traveling directly, it takes less than two hours by car from Gaza City to Ramallah.

No matter what method is chosen, the uninterrupted transport of people and goods between the territories and throughout the West Bank, between the major municipalities, and between the village hinterlands and their main metropolitan centers is essential to economic viability.

An estimated 1.4 million Palestinians, more than half of which are refugees, live in Gaza, an area of only 365 square kilometers, making it one of the most densely populated places on earth. Unemployment hovers at 38 per cent and over two-thirds of the population live below the poverty line.

Providing for an increasing population and rising unemployment is unsolvable unless there is a fundamental change, and a new relationship is forged between the Palestinians and Israel, built on reform and access with security.

“It is the policies that matter; the money will follow,” assured Mr. Roberts, and the decisions have to be made right now.
The raw sewage that stagnates in Wadi Gaza these days makes it almost impossible to imagine Gaza was ever considered an oasis. For over 3,000 years, Gaza’s underground aquifer of fresh, sweet groundwater has nourished inhabitants and travellers, just as the mighty Tigris River attracted civilisation to ancient Mesopotamia. After a hot and dry trek across the Sinai on their way to riches sought in Syria, the pharaohs of ancient Egypt were obliged to stop at (and indeed ‘secure’) the first place they might draw water from – Gaza. Here they faced resistance from the original Gazans defending their lives and wells in battles that seem destined to repeat themselves. The biggest change in the drama these days is that the water now is polluted in many areas.

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 forced thousands of refugees onto the sands of Gaza, forever altering the delicate balance of nature, people and trade that the environment sustained. More and more wells punctured the aquifer, and seawater started to creep in. Intensive farming with fertilisers and pesticides increased during the same period and an ever greater quantity of untreated human waste poured out onto the sands. The result was as predictable as it is tragic – Gaza’s famous ‘fresh’ water is in some places twice as saline as the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends while nitrate levels have skyrocketed to levels four times higher than the standard (thought to be responsible for the lethal ‘blue baby’ syndrome).

UNDP/PAPP has been active in the water sector in Gaza for over a decade, documenting the effects of drinking this non-potable water on public health and addressing the issue through infrastructure. Since 1995, UNDP/PAPP has supported the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA).

Just as the rain that falls on the West Bank flows slowly underground across to Israel, so Gaza is ‘downstream’, or at the receiving end of water that originates in Israel. Polluted...
water thus poses no threat to water consumed in Israel. The former settlement of Gush Katif was established on top of some of Gaza’s sweetest and most-accessible water, and the settlers drew roughly 5 million cubic meters of water from beneath Gazan sounds each year – ten times more than the average Palestinian consumes.

The challenges facing the PWA today are formidable. Following a dramatic increase in over-pumping during the first years of Palestinian rule (due to the authority’s lack of control), water consumption continues to rise along with the population. Impressive cooperation between municipal water practitioners and the PWA staff has resulted in the Coastal Water Utility, responsible now for the operation and maintenance of water infrastructures Gaza-wide.

Improvements on the ground have also been substantial, thanks in great part to UNDP/PAPP and PWA engineers and planners, who together have built the storm water collection network of Khan Younis, wastewater pumping stations throughout Gaza City, in addition to improved water supplies in Rafah, Deir al Balah, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahia.

The PWA’s proposal to pipe water in from the West Bank was made unfeasible by the Oslo II Accords’ ban on drilling wells in that most-parched part of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). Similar PWA proposals for compensation of the water taken by the settlements in Gaza with a guaranteed supply of an equal amount from the Israeli water network for the next thirty years have not received a positive response. In light of these constraining circumstances, Palestinians are forced to look inward and consider the desalination of seawater.

Although plans for a large desalination plant was initiated by the PWA and USAID in 1998, the project is currently on hold. The solution to Gaza’s water problems lies in developing more ‘crops per drop’ in the agricultural sector; in the increased re-use of treated wastewater, and in providing a new source of freshwater.

UNDP/PAPP and the PWA are addressing – and committed to continue addressing – the first two issues. The desperately needed new source of freshwater, however, is linked to the politics of occupation and donor funding. Until and unless the root causes of water pollution are addressed, the only part retained of Gaza’s historic role as a contested desert oasis will be the conflict.

Mark Zeitoun is a Palestinian-Canadian humanitarian-aid water and sanitation engineer currently completing his PhD in London. He has worked in the water field in the occupied Palestinian territory, the Congo, Chad, Iraq, Lebanon, France and Canada. He is the co-founder of the Canadian-Palestinian Educational Exchange (CEPAL).
The Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) has been providing comprehensive mental health services to Gaza since commencing its operations in 1990. Today, it is one of the leading mental health organizations in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPT), and cares for thousands of people suffering from trauma, stress and numerous other mental health problems.

The figures are truly astounding: over 30 per cent of Gaza’s adult population suffer from an acute form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), requiring immediate intervention and treatment. Symptoms can include flashbacks to a traumatic event, panic, severe forms of anxiety, fainting, intense fear, inability to concentrate or walk, difficulty in sleeping and working, and depression. Stress and trauma are widespread amongst a population that has seen dramatic increases in cases of mental health problems in recent years.

According to the Director of the GCMHP, Dr. Eyad El Sarraj, mental health problems have been exacerbated dramatically by a neglect for the provision of basic mental health services to the Palestinian population and the psychological impact of living under occupation. Despite the scale of the problem, many are reluctant to seek help due to the stigma attached to mental health issues.

“We have adopted a community based and community-centric approach to treating the widespread mental health problems.”

Dr. Eyad El Sarraj

The conflict has had a profound, detrimental effect on Gazan society, particularly considering its isolation,
which has also served to aggravate mental health problems.

“We have adopted a community based and community-centric approach to treating the widespread mental health problems,” explained Dr. El Sarraj. “We try to raise awareness amongst people, through different activities – visits to schools, meeting people and visiting them at home. We even try to go around the issue of stigma, by tackling the question of mental health in indirect ways.”

Currently, there are nine GCMHP clinics throughout Gaza, with a total of forty mental health professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and counselors. According to Dr. El Sarraj, the GCMHP has so far reached around 15 per cent of the Gazan population, either through direct mental health services, psychiatric help, psychotherapy, or training. In terms of direct treatments, the centre has cared for approximately 20,000 men, women and children. The clinical methods used range from supportive therapy, through to behavioral-therapy, psychodynamics, medication, as well as engaging the family in the therapy process.

“Family therapy is incredibly important when you want treat any case, including the psychotics, meaning extremely severe cases,” said Dr. El Sarraj. “The support you get from your family is very important if it is done in a guided way. The problems of people here in Gaza are often exacerbated because of the lack of proper family support or because of confrontation resulting from lack of understanding about the roots of the problem.”

Due to the severity of the conflict, the prevalence of PTSD among children in Gaza is particularly alarming. Whether through exposure to violence, or being subjected to curfews, trauma and stress related problems are increasingly occurring at a young age.

Dr. El Sarraj is optimistic about the prospect of a just and lasting peace in the long-term, but believes that the uncertainty about the future after disengagement will lead to greater levels of anxiety and fear within the society. A more holistic approach to dealing with the mental health crisis has been identified as a priority.

“I do not take mental health out of context,” explained Dr. El Sarraj. “The culture and the environment in which we live needs a lot of work. I believe that if you improve the human rights situation, you improve mental health. You cannot take the two in isolation…So, you have to also treat the issues of human rights, the economy, education and health awareness.”

Funded by the German Development Fund (KfW) through UNDP/PAPP, the construction of the GCMHP Rehabilitation Center of Victims of Violence in Deir Al Balah was recently completed. Built to cater for the mental health needs for the middle area of Gaza in particular, the center will offer training and rehabilitation services for victims of violence.

For more information about the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, see www.gcmhp.net

Gazan children suffer from alarmingly high levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.
Since the outbreak of the Intifada in 2000, nearly 25,000 Palestinians have been left homeless. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the southern Gaza town and refugee camp of Rafah. Straddling Gaza’s border with Egypt, Rafah has been one of the hardest hit areas particularly over the past five years. Over the years, the town has become indistinguishable from the refugee camp and both areas are overcrowded and the population live in poverty-stricken conditions.

Since 2000, thousands of civilians have been killed and injured and it is estimated that more than 1700 homes have been completely demolished. This has left more than 15,000 Palestinians in Rafah without a home.

In 2001, Moez Zourob and his family decided to leave their home that was located only 60 meters from the Egyptian border, due to the volatilities in the area. He was fearful for his children’s safety and the suffering they were enduring, and so decided to rent a house further away from the frequent flashpoint. Then in June of 2003, his family home was demolished by the IDF.

UNDP/PAPP through funding provided by the Government of Japan, initiated a project to rebuild...
homes in the Rafah area. Moez Zourob and his family were among the beneficiaries of this project, that aimed to tackle the serious problem of inadequate housing in the area due to home demolitions.

“UNDP, the Rafah municipality and the Government of Japan were very kind to my family and I,” said Mr. Zourob. “They provided us with a nice home. While it does not take away the feeling that my family home was destroyed, it does make us all feel as though people are aware of what we are suffering and are willing to help. We feel very lucky.”

Completed in February of this year, the Rafah Re-Housing project took 6 months in construction time and also tackled the widespread problem of unemployment by generating work within the local community. The project’s target was to complete 52 housing units, but it exceeded this, by providing a further 16 families with new homes built on their land. 68 homes have been built in some of the harshest hit areas of this volatile town.

Zakaria Humeid and his family of ten also benefited from this project. With his house only 50 meters from the Rafah border terminal with Egypt, military operations in the area were frequent.

“Our home was quite large and had three floors,” he explained. “But, we had to have space, as it was home to 35 members of our family, mostly children. In 2003, the IDF destroyed our home with no prior warning, so we were forced to move into two rooms that I built. There were holes in the wall and the roof, and it used to leak when it rained.”

Zakaria and his family lived in these conditions for two years, before being moved into a house constructed through the Rafah Re-Housing project. During this period, his entire family lived under trying circumstances, but he mentions in particular his 14 year-old son Mohammed, whose schoolwork suffered greatly. Zakaria is proud to report that following the move, Mohammed is now ranked fourth in his class.

“Finally the burden of having to raise my children in those terrible conditions was lifted,” he said. “Our new home has allowed us to live like a normal family and has given me hope for my children’s future. We even have windows for my children to look out.”

“Since 2000, thousands of civilians have been killed and injured and it is estimated that more than 1700 homes have been completely demolished.”
Since its inception, UNDP/PAPP has carried out hundreds of projects tackling a lack of or damage to infrastructure in Gaza. Through support from a wide range of donor countries and institutions, the agency has been able to provide assistance to thousands of people, through the construction and rehabilitation of houses, schools, community and health centres, water and sewerage networks, roads, electricity systems and municipal and government buildings.

Major donors have included the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the TASHGHIL project; the German Development Bank (KfW); and the Government of Japan.

KfW was instrumental in expanding the Al Awda Hospital in the Jebaliya refugee camp in northern Gaza. Thanks to a grant of US$150,000, two additional floors were built, which house an operating theatre and an intensive care unit. With these additions, the hospital was given the potential to serve the entire northern Gaza region’s total population of 300,000. During the past five years, the area which includes Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun and Jebaliya, has been particularly volatile, so suitable medical services have been a necessity. The project also involved a job-creation component, and 30 per cent of the project funding went towards hiring local laborers, which resulted in 4,500 working days.

UNDP/PAPP partnered on this project with the Union of Health Works Committees (UHWC). The UHWC works to develop a coherent health strategy for the Palestinian people and has pioneered training in Gaza and encouraged the spirit of volunteerism within the community.

“At the Al Awda Hospital and UHWC, we greatly value our relationship with UNDP, both through this generous KfW grant, and in past projects,” said Dr. Rabah Mohannad, former chairman of the UHWC and Director of the Al Awda Hospital. “We are very comfortable working with the UNDP team and we sense their clear intention to help. UNDP...helps us as a grassroots organization to tackle the problems of the most marginalized communities.”
Tackling Unemployment: Focusing on Graduates in Gaza

With alarmingly high levels of unemployment in Gaza, UNDP/PAPP has initiated a number of projects to tackle this worrying trend.

With workers in Gaza currently having to support an average of eight people, the question of poverty and unemployment has reached crisis levels. Aimed at alleviating poverty and reducing unemployment, the Employment Generation Through Training project was launched in December 2004, with support from the Government of Austria. Through targeting young graduates seeking employment, the project’s aim is to provide them with vital training to develop their skills, as well as the creation of jobs through working with non-governmental (NGO) and private sector institutions in Gaza.

Given high levels of unemployment that currently stand at nearly 40 per cent, Gaza’s graduates face an up-hill struggle to find work in an already saturated job-market. While the potential is there for further development of a variety of sectors, various factors including the issue of access to outside markets have had a devastating impact on job creation in Gaza. In addition, many job creation programmes focus on un-skilled labour, rather than professional posts for university graduates.

The Employment Generation Through Training project has focused on the NGO sector in Gaza, working with a variety of organizations to develop and expand their capacity through the placement of valuable human resources, which benefit not only the organizations, but the graduates themselves.

Given the unprecedented levels of poverty and unemployment in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), the NGO sector has responded to try to meet the requirements of a population in need. Today, NGO’s provide 60 per cent of primary health care services, and manage 42 per cent of hospitals, 90 per cent of disability and rehabilitation centres, and 95 per cent of preschool education. In addition they also work extensively in the agriculture sector and have rehabilitated 25,000 dunums of land threatened with confiscation, and employ an estimated 25,000. Particularly vulnerable to poverty-related problems, women were also identified as a key target area. Particularly over the past five years, an increasing number of women have been forced to assume the role of primary care giver and bread-winner.

The IT sector in Gaza has also suffered from the recent, dramatic economic downturn. As such, it was deemed important to try to support attempts to revitalize the sector through the injection of 100 young graduates. Graduates were placed with a number of companies, to try to promote greater IT diffusion within the Palestinian private sector, while simultaneously upgrading their skills and contributing to the development of this vital industry.

The Employment Generation Through Training project has successfully placed 320 graduates for periods of six months, resulting in nearly 51,000 work days being generated. While this has undoubtedly been of great benefit to the graduates, their families and communities have also been impacted by this innovative and successful approach to tackling Gaza’s unemployment crisis.

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Revitalizing a Traditional Sector

Working to rehabilitate areas of northern Gaza.

UNDP/PAPP has had a long working relationship with the agricultural sector through the initiation of a number of projects in support of its development.
Gaza’s agricultural sector has traditionally been one of the most robust, employing a significant proportion of Gaza’s workforce and contributing a large percentage to the area’s economy. With its natural aquifers and warm, humid climate, an abundance of fruit and vegetables grows in this deceptively sparse landscape. From grapes, figs, lemons and strawberries, to cucumbers, tomatoes and olives, a variety of local produce is available along this rich Mediterranean coastal area.

UNDP/PAPP has had a long working relationship with the agricultural sector through the initiation of a number of projects in support of its development. However, particularly over the past five years, the agricultural sector has suffered immensely due to the conflict, which has resulted in land razing, levelling of trees, crops and agricultural infrastructure. These factors combined have had a highly detrimental effect on the agricultural sector. Not only has it resulted in a massive decrease in productivity, it has also impacted unemployment rates and contributed to the current dire state of Gaza’s economy. In addition, tough trade restrictions on the export of fresh produce from Gaza through Israel, has also had a huge impact on the sector as a whole.

According to the Palestinian Authority (PA) Ministry of Planning, between September 2000 and November 2004, the total amount for aggregate damage incurred by the agricultural sector, amounts to over US$310 million. This included a total of nearly 13,000 dunums (1/2 acre, or 1000 metres squared) of agricultural land either levelled or destroyed.

With the aim of rehabilitating and developing areas of destroyed agricultural land, the Consolidated Appeals Project (CAP) through UNDP/PAPP and funded by the Government of Japan, initiated a project in northern Gaza around the towns of Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahia and Jabaliya. In addition to rehabilitating the agricultural areas, the US$4 million project also had the objective of generating employment in an area severely hit by lack of work. A significant number of workers needed for this labor-intensive project are being employed, generating over 94,000 workdays.

The project is being implemented through a number of local agricultural NGO’s in the northern region of Gaza, including the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, the Agricultural Relief Committee, the Beit Hanoun Cooperative, the Arab Agricultural Work Centre and the Ma’an Development Centre.

Approximately 4000 dunums of citrus and olive orchards are currently being rehabilitated and replanted, in addition to the reconstruction of destroyed water wells and agricultural cold storage facilities, livestock and poultry farms, and greenhouses. The project has ensured that the most vulnerable and poverty stricken laborers and farmers from the local areas are employed to carry out the work and a strict set of criteria were imposed when selecting the beneficiaries for the project. The farm land chosen belongs to the poorest subsistence farmers, for whom farming is their primary source of income. The Rehabilitation of Destroyed Agriculture Sector in Northern Gaza project was commenced in June of this year and is due for completion in June 2006.

Key project facts:

- Rehabilitating and replanting 1000 dunums of citrus and olive groves
- Reconstruction of 25 livestock and poultry farms
- Rehabilitation of 10 water wells
- Rehabilitation of 40 greenhouses
- Reconstruction of a cold storage facility

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In times of conflict, it is often children who suffer the most. Unable to fully understand the reasons behind violence and struggling to cope with losses within the family or community, they are particularly susceptible to conditions such as PTSD. Similarly, the most vulnerable of children, especially those with congenital disabilities can also be overlooked when the entire community is in need.

In order to tackle these pressing problems UNDP/PAPP has initiated a number of programmes, including a drama therapy project to help children suffering from a variety of PTSD symptoms including loneliness, depression, and anxiety. The project chose a number of children from areas most affected by the conflict, including areas where the children’s homes had been demolished.

Through exercises and activities such as role-playing, improvisation, games, acting out traditional myths and legends, and wide-reaching discussions, the children were able to express themselves and better understand the world in which they live. The activities also act as a means of providing the children with a safe and secure environment in which to express themselves through the medium of drama.

The objectives of the programme are to try to provide children with a safe environment in which to develop as individuals, as well as learn new skills. Through the different role-playing activities, the children are also taught about their human rights and encouraged to adopt a more self-confident outlook. It is hoped that these activities will not only affect the children taking part in the therapy sessions, but will impact the awareness of children’s rights and needs within the community at large.

Given the high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among children in Gaza, alternative forms of therapy have been sought to consolidate more conventional methods. Providing children with disabilities with the optimal care is also regarded as a primary objective.

Through the programme young Gazans are given the opportunity to be children.
The activities provide...the children with a safe and secure environment in which to express themselves through the medium of drama.

Implemented through Batouna for Community Development, UNDP/PAPP also initiated a project that provides home care and early interventions for children with disabilities. The project’s aim is to provide practical training for 300 mothers about childcare and early intervention in cases of mental or physical disability. In addition, the project has taken the novel approach of conducting early rehabilitation – for newborns to the age of five – within the home, to ensure that the child is in a comfortable and familiar environment.

The project entails visits to the homes of disabled babies and young children, where professional staff are responsible for providing practical training for the family. This way, the entire family are informed of the best ways in which to care for the child, as well as counsel the family on how to deal with the issue of disability.

Caring for the most vulnerable children is seen as vital for sustainable human development. By mainstreaming these issues and highlighting the importance of caring for children with special needs, either mentally or physically, these projects seek to precipitate change within communities and promote greater understanding of these issues which affect everyone.
Gaza’s strategic location has long played a significant role in engaging successive civilizations since the ancient Canaanite epoch. Gaza is located on the ancient road that connected Egypt in the south to Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia in the north and east. This historic road was known by the Pharaohs as Horus Road, and in the Old Testament was referred to as the Road to the Land of the Philistines. The Greeks and Romans called it Via Maris, meaning the ‘sea road,’ and in the Islamic era, it was called the Sultanic Road. Today, it is known as Salah Al Din Road.

Its location has allowed Gaza – an ancient Canaanite city bordering Egypt – to play a significant political, military and economic role since the early Bronze Age (3200-2000 BC). As a result, today Gaza boasts a wealth of archeological sites and historic buildings that embody the area’s rich history.

One of the most significant archeological sites in Gaza is Tal Al-Sakan (or Tal Al-Tin) that contains the ruins of the largest castellated Canaanite city in south Palestine discovered to date. This site is a perfect example of an early stage of civilization in southwest Palestine during the early Bronze Age. The
oldest archeological stratum dates back to approximately 3150 BC, around the time of the establishment of the first ancient Egyptian dynasty.

The most recent archeological strata in the site dates back to the second millennium BC and the structures are prime examples of civilized Canaanite development. The Canaanites abandoned this city for unknown reasons in order to erect a new city at a site known today as Tal Al ‘Ujoul on the north bank of the Gaza valley, which dates back to the middle and last Bronze Age (2000-1200 BC). Another archeological site from the Iron Age in Gaza is Anthedon – a large seaport surrounded by a wall, which was constructed during the eighth century BC and then expanded during the Greek, Roman and Persian epochs.

The St. Hilarion Monastery in Al-Nusseirat area is an excellent example of Christian architectural heritage in Gaza. The site perfectly encapsulates the development of mosaics in the area and is one of the oldest known monasteries in the region. The monastery was established by St. Hilarion, who introduced monasticism to Palestine at the beginning of the fourth century AD.

The Byzantine church in Jabaliah in northern Gaza is another prime example of Christian heritage in the area. The site contains a church in the style of a basilica, with three corridors, a baptismal hall and others for accommodation and dining. Inscriptions at the site indicate a variety of religious and civil activities, as well as the successive stages of construction, the oldest of which dates back to the middle of the fifth century AD.

The Porphyrius Roman Orthodox Church in Al-Zaitoun neighborhood in the center of the old city is Gaza’s oldest church and is located in the midst of a wealth of historical buildings that reflect the splendor of the Arab architectural heritage of the city. The history of this church is linked to the beginnings of Christianity in Gaza, following the arrival of the bishop Porphyrius to the city in 395 AD.

During the successive Islamic dynasties, Gaza benefited greatly from its strategic location. During the Mamluk rule (1250-1517AD), the sultans made use of the ancient terrestrial transportation routes linking Egypt with Syria. Gaza was a central market and distribution point for the areas to the north, south and east, as well as a starting point for trade with other Mediterranean civilizations through its seaport.

"Its location has allowed Gaza – an ancient Canaanite city bordering Egypt – to play a significant political, military and economic role since the early Bronze Age."
More than any other period in the Islamic era, under Mamluk rule Gaza witnessed a great deal of activity in the field of construction. As a result, Gaza’s old city has long since been an architectural haven for scholars and sightseers. The city was once encircled by a wall with seven gates and Gaza’s historical buildings provide a perfect setting for cultural tourism. The Commissary’s Palace, also known as Pasha Palace, Sa’ada Palace or Al Radwan Palace, is regarded as one of the most significant historical buildings that forms the nucleus of the old city along with the Great Omary Mosque, the Roman Orthodox Church, Qissarya, and the Hamam al Sumara.

The Great Omary Mosque is among Gaza’s major religious and historical landmarks. The mosque embodies the work of different architectural schools, as it reflects classical Islamic architecture in its plan, with a court in the center, surrounded by aisles with pointed arches and crossing cupolas for covering. One can also see the basilica architectural plan.

Another mosque intrinsically linked to Gaza’s history is the Hashem Mosque, named after Hashem Abd Manaf, the grandfather of the Prophet Mohammed. Hashem – a merchant from Mecca – died in Gaza and is buried at the site of the mosque.

One of the most significant trade-related historical buildings is the Qissarya building, adjacent to the Great Omary Mosque, and the Prince Younis Nairouzi Inn, also known as Qala’a (or castle) in the center of the city of Khan Younis on the ancient road from Egypt. The Inn dates back to the establishment of the city, which derives its name from the historical site (Khan in Arabic means guest house), and was built by Prince Younis in the year 1387AD.

The Pasha Palace Museum
Once a seat of regional power, Qasr Al Basha, or Pasha’s Palace was recently restored and transformed into a museum. The UNDP/PAPP project which oversaw the transformation of this Gaza landmark was made possible through funding from the German Development Bank (KfW). The restoration work was carried out under close supervision from the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage and the venue has since played host to a variety of artistic and cultural events.
There is a plaque in the lobby of the hamam proclaiming that it was restored by the Mamluk Governor Sangar Ibn Abdullah in the 14th century. The latest efforts to restore this ancient bathhouse took place under the supervision of the Islamic University in Gaza City, with support from UNDP/PAPP.

Regarded as a local masterpiece, the Hamam Al Sumara was once one of five similar bathhouses in Gaza. The others have since been lost over time, so the preservation of the last remaining example of a Gazan hamam was seen as imperative.

Salim Al Wazeer, one of the current owners of the bathhouse admits to a deep sentimental attachment to the site, which has been in his family for over 100 years. With the restoration of the hamam, he hopes to continue the renovations of the ancient aqueducts beneath the marble floor. To this day, the baths are heated by an ancient system of wood-fire ovens and aqueducts.

The Hamam Al Sumara is made up of several rooms, each varying in temperature. People who come to bathe start in the steam room, before moving on to the first warm water bathing pool. After bathing, one then moves into a lounge area set at room-temperature, where traditional massage therapy is available.

According to Al Wazeer, some mothers even bring their one month old babies to the hamam, owing to its healing qualities, which are also said to be effective on rheumatism and infertility.

There is also a traditional social element to the ritual of the bathing experience. With men and women coming at separate times during the day, it has traditionally been regarded as a meeting place for members of the local community.
Some of the most talented up-and-coming artists in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) hail from Gaza. Sitting by the shores of Gaza’s stunning Mediterranean coastline, a talented group from this new vanguard explained what it is about this vibrant, intense and subjugated place that produces such talent.

“The current situation inspires us,” said Hazem Harb. “The severe level of psychological pressure and lack of freedom forces you to free and unleash your mind and creativity.”

Harb is one of the youngest of a group known as Shababeek (the Arabic for ‘windows’) – a number of artists who have joined together through similarities in their ideals, values and perspectives on the direction that art in the oPt should be headed. They decry the lack of infrastructure and support for artists, as well as what they regard as unsatisfactory art education in the schooling and university systems. However, their critical approach is aimed at initiating and effecting change, both within the realm of the artistic community and Palestinian society at large.

They see the restrictions placed on them not only by their conservative society, but more overbearingly by the lack of freedom due to the conflict, claiming that the more freedom is denied, the more it is desired.

“In large part, our mission as artists becomes more and more important, as our situation changes,” explained Basel Magoussi, one of the more established of the group. “We have to be responsible for our art, as it is the only way by which we can express and convey our hopes and the hopes of our people.”

Palestinian culture and art is alive and well in Gaza. From embroidery to carpet weaving; Palestinian dancing (dabke) and artistic pursuits such as painting and sculpture; both traditional and contemporary cultural activities are being pursued throughout Gaza.
On the back of the success of their work, many of the artists have had the opportunity to travel overseas to exhibit and also to study in places including the United States, France, Germany, Italy and Egypt. However, they view these trips not just in terms of furthering their careers and expanding their skills, but also as representing their people and Gaza.

“When we go overseas we try to present more than just the conflict,” explained Magoussi. “We also want to present Gaza’s reality, with all its complexities. Our life is not only about the occupation, we have hopes and dreams like any other people.”

This is also evident in much of their work, where themes include universal issues, as well as unavoidable subject-matter relating to life under occupation and the depth of control that denotes. The artists view their work also as a means of expressing their solidarity, and as a way of articulating through artistic mediums the hardship under which they live.

One of the group’s members is Saadah Radhy - one of only a small number of female artists active in Gaza today. She sees her role as doubly important, given the restrictions – imposed or not – on many women in an increasingly conservative society.

“I try to convey the message that our women can be strong and independent,” explained Radhy, surrounded by her supportive male colleagues. “There are many talented female artists, but more should be supported and given the courage to follow their dreams. I would say that only 10 per cent of women with artistic tendencies actually put their talent to use. This is not only an issue for artists though, but about female participation in all aspects of life.”

One of the main centers for Gaza’s artistic community is the Arts and Crafts Village in Gaza City, which not only serves as a focal point for many of the artists and artisans, but also as the location for exhibitions held to display the work of local and international artists. However, while this location is predominantly used for exhibitions and smaller meetings, the artists identify the need for a large, common space for artists in Gaza. Given that the population stands at nearly 1.4 million in an area only 40km long and 10km wide, space is something that is hard to come by.

“The answer to this problem could be that one of the [former] settlements could be turned into an artistic space,” Magoussi suggested.

Members of the Shababeek group, along with other Palestinian artists from both the West Bank, Gaza and inside Israel, have exhibited at a number of events organized by UNDP/PAPP. These have included an art auction held annually in Jerusalem and a highly successful art exhibition, with works from Palestinian artists, held earlier this year in Dubai. Funds raised from the sale of the paintings exhibited went to the artists, as well as the establishment of Al Hoash, a national Palestinian art gallery to be opened in Jerusalem.

“This ongoing relationship with UNDP is very important to us, as many people who otherwise wouldn’t know of us, have been given the opportunity to see our work, and our perspectives on life in general, but most importantly our life in Gaza,” explained Shareef Sarhan.
Gaza is one of the most densely populated places on earth. With a total area of 365 km² and population of over 1.3 million, Gaza has suffered immensely under an occupation that has lasted for 38 years. Since the beginning of the second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising which began in September 2000 and the resulting escalation in tensions, the situation for Palestinians in Gaza has worsened, with marked increases in unemployment, poverty levels and deaths. Not only have people’s livelihoods been severely affected during this period, but entire families have been rendered homeless due to house demolitions and the crippling effect of closures have been widely felt with many prevented from reaching their places of work and children unable to attend their schools.

**Economy**

The Gazan economy has been greatly affected during the last five years due to a combination of unemployment, closures, curfews and restrictions placed on workers and industries. With unemployment in Gaza reaching alarmingly high levels, even the ever decreasing number of Palestinian labourers permitted to enter Israel to work have been regularly prevented from doing so. During the month of December 2004, the designated crossing for these workers was subject to a total of 24 days of full closure. Goods being exported have also been subject to similar restrictions, with all external borders controlled by the Israeli military.

**Agriculture**

The Gazan economy is largely dependant on agriculture, however due to closures and land razing this sector has been greatly affected, particularly over the past five years. Military operations have resulted in the demolition of greenhouses and agricultural infrastructure, razing of agricultural land and wide-spread damage to crops, which in the past five years has resulted in increased food insecurity and losses of up to US$317,335,084. More than 50% of the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanoun’s agricultural land has been destroyed in the last five years.
Infrastructure
Infrastructure in Gaza has been severely affected by lack of funds for upgrades and rehabilitation, in addition to destruction incurred during military operations. From electricity and sewerage networks, to access to roads and clean, running water, basic daily requirements have not been maintained. Particularly over the past five years, municipal buildings and schools have been occupied, damaged or destroyed and roads rendered inoperative. This has necessitated greater action on the part of international organisations.

House Demolitions
The past five years have witnessed a marked increase in damages incurred to the homes of refugees and non-refugees in Gaza, including the complete demolition of homes. This has resulted in thousands of Palestinian men, women and children being made homeless. Rafah in southern Gaza has been most affected by this practice, with entire neighbourhoods destroyed during wide-scale operations.

UNDP/PAPP’s Response
In response to the complex-set of problems facing Gaza, UNDP/Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP), has initiated a wide-range of projects, including rehabilitation of agricultural land; employment generation projects and vocational training; infrastructure projects, including construction and rehabilitation of houses, schools, community and health centres, water and sewerage networks, roads, electricity systems and municipal and government buildings; support to microfinance projects; and institution building. These projects have been funded and supported by a number of agencies and governments, including the Government of Japan, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the German Development Bank (KfW), the Austrian Government, the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the Islamic Development Bank.

Despite the challenges and uncertainty that lies ahead, UNDP/PAPP is determined to continue its broad support and assistance to the people of Gaza.
Gaza at a Glance

- **Population:** 1.4 million. Approximately half of the population is under the age of 18.
- **Total area:** 365 km$^2$ (45km long, 2-5km wide)
- **Population growth:** 5.4%
- **Number of registered Palestine refugees:** 969,588
- **Gazan refugee population as a percentage of total:** Nearly 70%
- **Number of refugee camps:** 8
  The largest and most densely populated Palestinian refugee camp is Jabaliya, just north of Gaza City, where 90,000 people live in an area of 3km$^2$.
- **Unemployment:** 38%
- **Percentage of population living below the poverty line (US$2 per day):** 73%
- **Number of children killed during military operations in Gaza in the last five years:** 358
  (26% of total Palestinians killed in Gaza)
- **Number of homes completely demolished during military operations in the last five years:** 2704.
  This has resulted in a total of 25,000 Palestinians being made homeless.

*As of September 2005*