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Gaza: ARTICLE 19 Joins Condemnation of Israel's Media and Information Blackout in Gaza

ARTICLE 19 joins the mounting condemnation by global media organisations of the Israeli authorities' decision to ban foreign journalists from entering Gaza and reporting on the worsening humanitarian crisis there.

On 4 November 2008 the Israeli authorities extended their blockade of Gaza to prevent food, fuel and essential supplies from entering the territory. The blockade even extends to UN aid provisions. Furthermore, on 6 November the authorities imposed a news blackout by preventing international media from accessing Gaza.

"This situation is absolutely intolerable. International media must be permitted to report on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The people of Gaza have a right to be heard globally. Journalists must be able to report from Gaza and add their voice to the mounting campaign against the blockade of aid convoys, health supplies, food and fuel. The world needs know what is happening inside Gaza," commented Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19.

She continued, *"We condemn the media blockade in Gaza and urge the Israeli authorities to immediately lift this. We also condemn the food and fuel blockade, which is in flagrant violation of Israel's obligations as an Occupying Power, under Article 55 of the Fourth Geneva Convention."*

In a letter addressed to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, sent on 21 November 2008, leading global media executives, including Associated Press President Tom Curley; Reuters Editor-in-Chief David Schlesinger; ABC News President David Westin; and BBC News Director Helen Boaden, expressed their grave concern *"about the prolonged and unprecedented denial of access to the Gaza Strip for the international media"*. Yesterday the Foreign Press Association in Israel submitted a petition against the ban to the Israeli Supreme Court arguing, *"The media ban constitutes a grave and mortal blow against freedom of the press and other basic rights and gives the unpleasant feeling that the state of Israel has something to hide."*

The Foreign Press Association highlighted the serious implications of an international media ban emphasising that, *"The international media serve as the world's window into Gaza providing vital coverage of all aspects of Gazan life to news consumers around the world."*

Israel's blockade on Gaza has severe humanitarian consequences for over 1.5 million Palestinians living in the Gaza strip. These repercussions include the crippling

shortage of fuel supplies following the forced closure of Gaza's only power plant and the blockade of vital aid shipments. The UN's food aid programme to the territory (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA) was forced to suspend its work on 4 November. Hospitals have been gravely affected by the blockade: with limited fuel and medical supplies running dangerously low, the impact on health care provision in Gaza is critical

This media blackout is widely perceived as an attempt by the Israeli authorities to manage international news coverage of the decline in humanitarian conditions in Gaza. On 18 November 2008, a delegation representing over twenty international humanitarian organizations was also prevented from entering the Gaza Strip. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, also condemned the Israeli blockade saying "*By function of this blockade, 1.5 million Palestinian men, women and children have been forcibly deprived of their most basic human rights for months. This is in direct contravention of international human rights and humanitarian law. It must end now.*"

The media ban imposed by Israel is not the first time foreign journalists and media professionals have faced restrictions in reporting the conflict in the West Bank and Gaza. Journalists are subject to strict security checks, governmental authorization and military censorship. In recent years a number of journalists have been killed or injured by Israeli security forces whilst reporting the conflict, including Fadel Shanna, a Palestinian cameraman who worked for Reuters, who was killed in April 2008 and James Miller, an award winning British cameraman, who was killed in May 2003. Israeli journalists have been banned from entering Gaza for over two years, since the start of the Israeli blockade.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.