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MEDIA RELEASE 5 23 April 2007

Prepared by MWA/FP

Oxfam reports poverty in Palestine

Providing a Voice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press Release No 5 – 23 April 2007

An Oxfam report released on 13 April 2007 entitled *Poverty in Palestine: the human cost of the financial boycott* has revealed a devastating humanitarian crisis requiring urgent international attention. Mr Moammar Mashni, spokesperson for *Australians for Palestine*, said that the situation was brought to a head when sanctions were imposed on the Palestinian Authority (PA) by Israel and the rest of the world after the Hamas Party won government in the January 2006 democratic elections. According to the report, the Palestinian economy is almost at a standstill and these sanctions have “led to immense suffering” at all levels of Palestinian society. The number of people living in poverty sharply increased by 30 per cent in just one year, thus pushing more than a million people living on less than 50 cents a day into deep poverty. “Few people probably know,” said Mr Mashni, “that Israel had already been refusing to transfer the tax and customs revenues it collects on behalf of the PA. Because of this, some 160,000 government employees were left without salaries for months affecting many essential services and this in turn affected some one million people who relied on those services.”

“Throughout the financial crisis,” say Oxfam “hospitals have reported a shortage of essential drugs . . . 400 doctors have lost their jobs . . . households have resorted to borrowing, selling possessions, reducing healthcare and food consumption, and taking children out of school . . . 46 per cent of Palestinians do not have enough food to meet their needs . . . essential services are facing meltdown, and previously unknown levels of factional violence plague Palestinian streets. If this situation continues, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) risk becoming a ‘failed state’, destroying the chances of achieving a two-state solution [to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict].”

Not only is the economic situation a critical issue, but the continued manoeuvrings of Western governments, Israel and local parties to bring down the elected Palestinian government has led to intense factional fighting which continually raises the spectre of civil war. Mr Mashni said that Israel’s crippling attacks on Gaza last year had only added more fuel to the volatile political climate completely rendering the Palestinian civilian population helpless and without hope. The effects of Israel’s attacks are referred to in the report: “the Israeli Defence Force has fired thousands of rockets and shells into Gaza and has destroyed aid projects worth millions of dollars. This includes the destruction of vital water and electricity infrastructure, with severe humanitarian consequences.” Mr Mashni pointed out that the deliberate oppression of an unarmed, civilian population is not only inhuman, but breaches countless UN resolutions and international law.

“All this deliberately imposed suffering is completely unjustified,” said Mr Mashni and referred to a statement made in the House of Commons in December 2006, by UK Development Minister Hilary Benn: “there is no evidence that Hamas has used any aid money to fund terrorism.” Mr Mashni went on to explain: “whether we agree or not with the policies of Hamas, it won the right to govern in elections overseen by former US President Jimmy Carter who said that they were ‘ . . . completely honest, completely fair, completely safe and without violence’ and it should have been allowed to do that without interference.” In fact, the Oxfam report states “international aid should be provided impartially on the basis of need, not as a political tool to change the policies of a government or to oust it.”

In January this year, UN Special Rapporteur John Dugard was moved to say that this is “the first time an occupied people have been so treated.” As a signatory to the Fourth Geneva convention, Australia has an obligation to demand that Israel as an Occupying Power protect the welfare of the Palestinians, and even more urgently, Australia should pressure Israel and its own Western allies to finally end the inhuman and debilitating sanctions unjustifiably imposed on a population of 4 million Palestinians. This is collective punishment, it contravenes international law and it makes every government agreeing to the sanctions complicit in crimes against humanity.

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