

UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF ARRIVES IN JERUSALEM

(Jerusalem/New York, 1 March 2010): United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes arrived in Jerusalem yesterday 28 February to review the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) of the West Bank and Gaza, more than one year after the end of Operation Cast Lead, which ran from December 27, 2008 to January 18, 2009.

Today in Jerusalem, Mr. Holmes met Mr. Daniel Ayalon, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs; Mr. Haim Divon, head of MASHAV, Israel's Agency for Development Cooperation; and Mr. Noam Shalit, father of the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, who has been held by Hamas since June 2006. Later in the day, Mr. Holmes traveled to Ramallah, where he met members of Palestinian civil society and Mr. Ali Jarbawi, Minister of Planning and Administrative Development in the Palestinian Authority.

In his meetings with the Israeli officials Mr. Holmes discussed current challenges in disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response. He commended Israel's recent response to the earthquake in Haiti, notably the very early deployment of a field hospital, and noted that Israel has much to offer, given its considerable expertise in disaster response. It was agreed to work to strengthen cooperation between the UN and the Government of Israel in this area.

On the situation in Gaza, Mr. Holmes stressed the need for the current blockade to be lifted and the crossings fully opened to allow the Palestinians in Gaza to begin to reconstruct their shattered buildings, and restart their lives and livelihoods, in particular through the redevelopment of a viable private sector. He acknowledged some recent movement, including approval by the Government of Israel for the import of truckloads of glass to address the winter needs of people living with shattered windows. However, he also made it clear that such moves were far from sufficient to make a significant impact on the problems confronted by Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants. He also noted that the present situation only helped perpetuate smuggling through tunnels, which was undermining the legitimate economy of Gaza.

Mr. Holmes also expressed his concern about the situation in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, not least so-called Area C, which comprises 60% of the area of the West Bank and in which Palestinian construction and development are effectively prohibited for the most part.

In the meeting with Mr. Shalit, Mr. Holmes repeated UN calls on Hamas to release Gilad Shalit as soon as possible, and meanwhile to treat him in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, including allowing ICRC to visit him unconditionally.

In Ramallah, representatives of Palestinian civil society briefed Mr. Holmes on the situation in the West Bank, including the difficulties faced by businesses, NGOs, and others due to restrictions of many kinds. They called on the UN to help them strengthen Palestinian civil society. Mr. Holmes also discussed the problems in Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank with Mr. Jarbawi, and agreed to intensify the already good cooperation between OCHA and the Palestinian Authority.

While in Israel and the oPt, Mr. Holmes will also travel to Gaza, Tel Aviv, and visit parts of Area C and East Jerusalem. The ERC will depart on Friday 5 March 2010.