

UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF VISITS GAZA, CALLS FOR CROSSINGS TO RE-OPEN

(Gaza/New York, 2 March): United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes arrived in Gaza today, as part of his four-day visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory.

Mr. Holmes witnessed first hand the conditions in Gaza, one year after the end of operation “Cast Lead,” which ran from 27 December to 18 January, as well as of the local efforts being made to alleviate the suffering of the population.

In Beit Hanoun and Izbet Abed Rabbu, Mr. Holmes met families whose houses were destroyed during the conflict. He was briefed on the efforts of the humanitarian community, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and the public and private sectors to rebuild shelters and improve water and sanitation facilities. He saw how local materials such as mud and rubble from operation “Cast Lead”, were used to construct temporary shelters and water tanks, despite the continuing ban on the import of nearly all construction materials into Gaza.

“I have a lot of admiration for the resilience and ingenuity of Gaza residents in trying to cope with the present circumstances,” Mr. Holmes said. “The work of relief agencies to assist those who have to endure hardship is also remarkable. However, it is disturbing to see that more than a year after “Cast Lead,” the unacceptable blockade continues and all that we can offer to the people of Gaza is limited to temporary shelters and emergency assistance. No meaningful reconstruction has started yet. I could see for myself today the continuing erosion of livelihoods and people’s ability to lead anything resembling a normal life.” He underlined the negative impact of the blockade and the tunnel economy on the legitimate economy and on the society as a whole.

In the afternoon, Mr. Holmes discussed the socio-economic conditions in Gaza with members of the civil society and the private sector. He also met members of the humanitarian community, who stressed their growing concerns regarding the lack of hope for significant change and shrinking humanitarian space. Mr. Holmes called on all parties to the conflict to allow the unimpeded provision of assistance to those in need.

During a briefing to the press, as well as highlighting the unacceptability of the continuing blockade, Mr. Holmes also recalled the case of Gilad Shalit, who has been held incommunicado for nearly four years. He repeated the United Nations’ call for his immediate release and for him to be treated in accordance with the Geneva Conventions in the meantime, while rejecting any link between this case and the conditions of 1.4 million Palestinians in Gaza.

Calling for a dramatic change of policy, including the full re-opening of the crossings, in order to give people the opportunity to live dignified lives, as they are entitled to, Mr. Holmes added: “While there have been some marginal access improvements in some sectors during the past months, including the import of glass which we welcome, this falls far short of what is needed to rebuild livelihoods and avoid Gaza sliding backwards.”

Mr. Holmes is due to leave Gaza on 3 March for Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.