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By Jordan FLAHERTY. June 3, 2009

Gaza Remains Devastated

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[Gaza Under Siege](#) from [Lily Keber](#) on [Vimeo](#).

More than four months after Gaza was devastated by a massive Israeli military bombardment, rebuilding has been slow to come. The problem is not a lack of funding or will. However, an Israeli-led blockade has kept all rebuilding materials, including concrete or any tools that could be used to rebuild the hundreds of homes and buildings here, out of Gaza. The border entries, controlled by the Israeli and Egyptian governments, are sealed to almost all traffic.

There is an intense desire here to rebuild. There is no shortage of skilled labor. Billions of dollars of aid from countries around the world, including the US, has been pledged. But scarcely a single house has been rebuilt. From the Rafah border in the south to the town of Beit Hanoun in the north, people are still living in tents, or with family members, or in shelters.

The range of destruction is breathtaking. More than 1,400 Palestinians were killed in 22 days, the vast majority civilians, including more than 300 children. Schools, health clinics, houses, and, most importantly, the basic infrastructure of both public services and government has been destroyed. Rubble is everywhere. Basic government structures, such as the building that houses the Palestinian parliament are all destroyed.

Two days ago, a delegation 66 activists, scholars, journalists and human rights workers, mostly from the US, visited the Parliament building. The visit was organized by the peace group Code Pink, which has led several delegations attempting to break the blockade. The group was surprised to find the building housing the legislature reduced partly to rubble, and Parliament members forced to meet in a tent outside. Having no building to meet in is just one of the many problems facing the elected government of the Palestinian people. "Not only are more than 11,000 prisoners in Israeli jails," explained Dr. Ahmed Bahar, the acting speaker of the Palestinian legislative council, and part of the Hamas political party. "Forty members of the legislative council are imprisoned, including the head of the legislature. Can you imagine if the head of the legislature, of anywhere else in the world, were held in prison by a foreign government?" Dr. Bahar appealed to the US activists assembled for help in breaking the siege. "They don't allow basic construction material to enter," he said. "Cement, glass, wood, steel."

Gaza is among the most densely populated places on earth. One and a half million people live in 139 square miles, and it has been described as the world's largest prison. Traveling across this very small area, you meet people everywhere who just want to live a normal life, but are being prevented by a cruel blockade from going anywhere or doing anything.

"The biggest lie that has been told is that Gaza is a hostile entity," declares John Ging, the head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the Gaza Strip. "It's populated by well educated, decent people. They're not spitting hatred. They're asking for help, they're asking for justice, they're asking for the rule of law." An Irish former soldier with a staff of 10,000, Ging is a UN bureaucrat, not an activist, but his respect for the international law has made him a passionate spokesperson for a rebuilding of Gaza.

Under the current siege, explains, Ging, "There's no cement, even if it's to repair a hospital or school or health center. So people are being kept alive, nothing more." It's been said in the US media that the situation in Gaza is

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complicated, that the seige is part of a defense against terrorism, but Ging denies these claims. "When it comes down to it, its rather simple whats needed," he says. "What we now need to focus on is creating a life for people here. We need to see the depoliticization of assisstance. What we have here in gaza is a failure to uphold those basic human rights."

Gaza is currently currently hosting several delegations of international human rights observers and activists from the US and Europe. With each month, more people come here, and see the painful reality of the situation here. And with each new arrival, the seige perhaps moves a step closer to ending.

President Obama is scheduled to be in Cairo tomorrow, and members of Code Pink plan to ask him to visit Gaza. Tens of thousands of people from the US have signed a petition asking him to see the devastation. Across Gaza, people are looking for some sign that the new president will stand up for human rights in Palestine. "We ask Obama not to close his eyes to the Palestinian catastrophe," says Dr. Bahar. "We are running out of time," says John Ging. "We need to move from keeping people alive to giving them a life."

Jordan Flaherty is a journalist based in New Orleans, and an editor of Left Turn Magazine. He was the first writer to bring the story of the Jena Six to a national audience and his reporting on post-Katrina New Orleans shared a journalism award from New America Media. His work has been published and broadcast in outlets including Die Zeit (in Germany), Clarin (in Argentina), Al-Jazeera, TeleSur, and Democracy Now. He is currently traveling in Gaza with a delegation of journalists, organizers and human rights workers from the US south. He can be reached at [this address](#) .