

Palestine: Political Ecology of Disaster

On March 26, in Northern Gaza a river of raw sewage and debris overflowed from a collapsed earth embankment into a refugee camp driving 3,000 Palestinians from their homes. Five residents drowned, 25 were injured and scores of houses were destroyed.

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and the television media blamed shoddy infrastructure. The *Daily Alert* (the house organ of the Presidents of the Major American Jewish Organisations, PMAJO) blamed the Palestinians who they claimed were removing sand to sell to construction contractors, thus undermining the earth embankment. The disaster at Umm Naser (the village in question) is emblematic of everything that is wrong with US-Israeli politics in west Asia. The disaster in this isolated village has its roots first and foremost in Washington where the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its political allies have successfully secured US backing for Israel's financial and economic boycott of the Palestinian government subsequent to the democratic electoral victory of Hamas. AIPAC's victory in Washington reverberated throughout Europe and beyond – as the European Union also applied sanctions shutting off financing of all new infrastructure projects and the maintenance of existing facilities. At the AIPAC conventions of 2005 through 2007, the leaders of both major American parties, congressional leaders and the White House pledged to re-enforce AIPAC's boycott and sanctions strategy. AIPAC celebrated its victory for Israeli policy and claimed authorship of the legislation. In addition to malnutrition, the policy undermined all public maintenance projects.

Equally central to the disaster, Israel's massive sustained bombing attack on Gaza in the summer of 2006 demolished roads, bridges, sewage treatment facilities, water purification and electrical power plants. Northern Gaza was one of its many targets, putting severe strain on already precarious infrastructure, including the maintenance of sewage treatment plants and cesspools.

The Israeli economic blockade of Gaza increased unemployment, poverty and hunger to unprecedented levels. Out of work Gazans reached over 60 per cent of the population; large families with young children were reduced to one meal a day. Family heads desperately looked for any way to earn funds to buy a pound of chickpeas, oil, rice and flour for bread. It is possible that forced by the AIPAC-induced US-EU boycott and Israeli bombing and blockade, some desperate workers removed some sand around the cesspool.

The PMAJO has justified 39 years of Israeli occupation and criminal neglect of Gaza's basic sewage treatment facilities. In per capita terms, on basic services Israel spends in the Occupied Territories less than 2 per cent of what it spends in Israel itself. The United Nations and Israeli human rights groups have documented Israel's callous lack of responsibility toward the Palestinian civilians under its brutal occupation. It is not surprising that the PMAJO can think of nothing better than to blame the destitute Palestinians for the collapse of a primitive earth embankment and the horrific deaths.

The plight of the Umm Naser villagers deluged by their own sewage was neither an act of fate nor a result of local negligence or theft: It was a direct consequence of all that is wrong in US-west Asia politics, the taking sides with a brutal colonial power and its powerful voices and organisations in Washington. Umm Naser is written large throughout Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon: Millions of Arab villagers suffer the consequences of pre-emptive wars to secure Greater Israel as both president George W Bush and vice-president Dick Cheney have publicly stated in justifying their aggression. Their commitments follow the lobby's script, which "coincidentally" is exactly what pleases the Israeli foreign office.

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Re-imagining Education

The analysis of the implications for education of the Union Budget 2007-08 by Anit Mukherjee (April 7) is extremely timely and important. There is an urgent need to re-imagine the educational spectrum. We need to provide for multiple exit points in this linear system – after class 8 there should be a four-year technical (not vocational, because it has a chequered history) education which enables students to get training (skills) and the confidence to enter the job market or set themselves up as self-employed

technicians. I agree with Anit that going into such a stream should not preclude moving into graduation if the student so desires. After the 10th standard, a similar four-year programme may be provided.

A marker survey (done every few years) needs to be done in every region to assess technical skill requirements. Also, “technical” should include training as a paramedic/para-vet, training in childcare and early childhood education, in horticulture, agriculture and food processing, as also in specific trades related to mechanical, electrical, electronic, textile and other branches of engineering.

Two-year modules with one building on the other could create a system where students can exit at different points and enter the technical stream. Equally important is the need to

provide “multiple entry” with a provision for bridge programmes to enable students who went into the technical stream to re-join the “academic” stream.

Unfortunately the national debate on reservations and affirmative action has completely ignored the structural barriers to continued education. These are visible not only in the ratio of primary to upper primary school and upper primary to high school, but also in the lopsided allocation of resources. Availability of relevant and accessible education at higher levels (post elementary, post high school) could act as a powerful suction-pump that would pull children through more than 12 years of education.

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