

United Nations Nations Unies

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

HEART-BREAKING SUFFERING AND DESTRUCTION IN GAZA: UN HUMANITARIAN CHIEF

(New York, 22 January 2009): On the second day of his visit to the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes travelled to Gaza. The ERC, with the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Robert Serry, kick-started the assessment of the most immediate humanitarian and early recovery needs after the three-week military operation in Gaza.

“I want to show the people of Gaza that the UN and their partners care, and that we will do all what we can to help them to alleviate their difficult conditions,” Mr. Holmes said.

At an UNRWA “Beach Camp” school, Mr. Holmes and Mr. Serry met displaced families who sought refuge in the UN premises. As of 22 January, emergency shelters run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) still host many families who lost their homes during the hostilities. Thousands of others have been accommodated with host families. At Shifa Hospital, Mr. Holmes and Mr. Serry were briefed on the situation in the health sector, which has been overwhelmed by the influx of injured people over the past three weeks. They met victims of the latest violence, as well as medical teams who were at the forefront of the humanitarian response.

USG Holmes and SC Serry also drove through the area of Tel Al-Hawa and saw first hand the shocking level of the destruction of homes and community infrastructure. South of Tal Al-Hawa, where sewage has been flooding the streets for days, they saw the serious damage to the water and sanitation networks, and were briefed on the increasing health hazards for the population. They also met a group of pupils at the American International School, which was entirely destroyed in the first days of the Israeli military operation. USG Holmes and USG Serry visited a mixed residential and industrial zone in the east of Gaza, which was systematically flattened during the military operation.

“The level of human suffering and destruction I saw today is, from any angle, heartbreaking. It is shocking that civilians suffered so disproportionately in this military operation,” Mr. Holmes stated.

Although the United Nations and their partners have been attempting to bring assistance to the population, restrictions on the access of goods and staff continue to hamper the humanitarian response.

“We need a swift, full and sustained access of goods and staff into Gaza. We cannot go back to the unacceptable situation which prevailed before the latest hostilities,” said Mr. Holmes. He will pursue this issue with the Israeli authorities. The United Nations and their humanitarian partners are due to launch an Emergency Flash Appeal at the beginning of February.

During his meeting with UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, Mr. Holmes thanked all staff and praised their work.

“I simply cannot imagine what they went through. Their courage and their dedication to bring assistance to those in need throughout the hostilities commend our profound admiration,” he said. Mr. Holmes also expressed sympathy for the families of the relief workers and UN contractors who lost their lives during the military operation.

For further information, please call: Stephanie Bunker, OCHA-New York, +1 917 367 5126, mobile +1 917 892 1679, bunker@un.org; Nicholas Reader +1 212 963 4961, mobile +1 646 752 3117, reader@un.org, John Nyaga, OCHA-NY, +1 917 367 9262, nyagaj@un.org; Elisabeth Byrs, OCHA-Geneva, +41 22 917 2653, mobile, +41 79 473 4570, byrs@un.org. OCHA press releases are available at <http://ochaonline.un.org> or www.reliefweb.int.