



Environmental Assessment of the Areas Disengaged by Israel in the Gaza Strip



United Nations Environment Programme

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Foreword



The disengagement from Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip during the second part of the year 2005 was a historical event, and this environmental assessment by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) that followed was likewise a unique intervention.

The basis for UNEP's environmental cooperation in the region, however, was already laid in 2002, when UNEP started its work with the Palestinian Authority and Israel, culminating in the publication of the "Desk Study on the Environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories". The report was unanimously welcomed at the UNEP Governing Council in February 2003. Since then UNEP has organized several training events for Palestinian environmental experts and also hosted trilateral environmental meetings attended by Israeli and Palestinian delegations.

It was therefore no surprise when, as part of the Palestinian efforts to manage the anticipated impacts of the disengagement, the Palestinian Environment Quality Authority (EQA) requested UNEP to undertake an environmental assessment of the areas disengaged. UNEP agreed to lead the environmental assessment, working closely with both the EQA and the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA). In the spirit of cooperation established, UNEP requested Israel's support of the environmental assessment. The Israeli Ministry of Environment undertook to collaborate with UNEP on this matter and give the assistance required.

We agreed with our environmental partners that the approach to the assessment would be forward looking. Accordingly, UNEP's intention in conducting the assessment was not to assign blame, but to present an accurate picture of the state of environmental affairs. UNEP will further actively share the findings and recommendations of this report with donors having an interest in future environmental projects in the region.

There is no real precedent for an assessment of this nature. UNEP developed its own methods, focusing on four objectives: Firstly, to gather a baseline data set of the environment in the disengaged settlements. Secondly, to identify areas posing immediate risk to people. Thirdly, to create an information base, including satellite images and maps, for future planning. Fourthly, to provide training on environmental assessments to Palestinian experts.

Using satellite imagery, reports and comments from Israeli, Palestinian, and international sources, UNEP scientists prior to commencement of the field work identified approximately 100 areas of interest, including industrial buildings, waste disposal sites, agricultural plants and storage tanks.

The fieldwork was carried out in Gaza from 9-18 December 2005 by a UNEP-team of 8 experts with expertise in the fields of hazardous waste including asbestos, marine and coastal issues, soil contamination and water quality. The UNEP team could consequently cover all 21 disengaged settlements and the Erez industrial site.

Following the field work, samples were produced in triplicate, handed to the Palestinian and Israeli laboratories and sent to an independent, UNEP contracted laboratory in the UK.

This report presents the finding of the survey. Other than some localised pollution, the former Israeli settlements did not cause contamination of water, land or buildings posing a significant risk to the environment or public health. Pollution at the former Erez Industrial Estate are also localised and could be mitigated by targeted clean up action. The study thus finds that overall the environmental impact of the former Israeli settlements in the Gaza strip are limited, a welcome news for everyone concerned with the environment, long term stability and economic progress of the region. It is hoped that the findings we present in this report would bolster Palestinian resettlement plans and foster hopes for economic investment and peace in the region.

A major concern has been the amount of remaining asbestos in the rubble of the demolished houses. We can state that, though issues associated with asbestos need to be handled carefully so as not to expose workers or the community to unnecessary harm, the amount of asbestos remaining is minor and can be dealt with in a fast and efficient manner with proper guidance and support from asbestos experts.

On the basis of the findings of this assessment, UNEP is assisting the United Nations Development Programme - Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP) to carry out the task of clearing and recycling the rubble produced by the destruction of the settlements in the Gaza Strip. Once the rubble is removed, asbestos disposed of in a safe manner and the identified specific areas of contamination are cleaned up, there are no environmental constraints to human settlement in these areas. Some land use restrictions will have to be placed in the interim while a decision is taken on the various landfills in the settlements.

Erez Industrial Estate can also be brought back to operation after due inspection of the partly demolished buildings, safe disposal of asbestos, and clean-up of identified areas of contamination.

UNEP is working with the Palestinian research institute, ARIJ, to present all the data collected during the exercise, including the satellite images procured, in an easily navigable electronic format. UNEP will provide the Palestinian Authority with hardware, software and training on how best to handle this information.

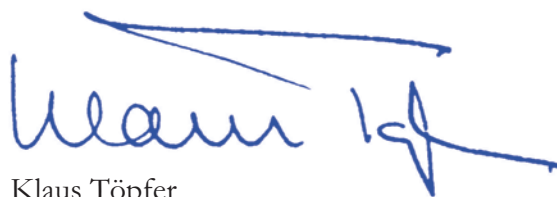
UNEP is able, with further funding, to assist the Palestinian people with other activities that would benefit the development of the Gaza Strip, be it by preparing an environmental management plan for the Erez Industrial Estate, organising training on safe handling of construction debris containing asbestos, or designing a waste management system for the entire Gaza Strip.

I would like to thank the governments of Sweden and Switzerland for their generous financial contribution, which enabled us to implement the assessment, provide relevant training to Palestinians, and publish this report in a short period of time.

Let me also express my gratitude for all support and assistance provided by the Office of the Special Envoy for the Quartet, Mr. James Wolfensohn, and my UN-colleagues at UNSCO, UNRWA, UNDP, UN DSS, and OCHA.

Given the new political situation in the region, I believe that environmental issues constitute a potential bridge-building element, reinforcing the fragile confidence between the two parties as they seek new grounds for cooperation.

UNEP would be ready to carry out similar environmental work in the West Bank, if so requested by both parties in future.



Klaus Töpfer
United Nations Under-Secretary General
Executive Director of the
United Nations Environment Programme

Introduction

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