

Interview with Knut Dethlefsen, resident representative of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung office in East Jerusalem, in the *Informationen am Mittag* program on Deutschlandfunk on Sunday, December 28, 2008

Over the phone I greet Knut Dethlefsen, who is head of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in East Jerusalem. Good morning, Mr. Dethlefsen.  
Good morning, Mr. Ehl.

**You're in close contact with staff still working in the Gaza Strip. When did you last hear from them, and what news are you getting from them?**

I spoke to my colleague there an hour ago, and I just got an up-to-date report from him. The Israeli attacks have continued uninterrupted for 24 hours and there is great distress and fear in the Gaza Strip.

**According to your information, are the hospitals and emergency services able to cope with the large numbers of casualties, which are going up practically every hour?**

No, they are not! The Palestinian hospitals are no longer able to cope with the major burden of those who are most seriously injured, and they have run out of many medicines. For example, they don't have any more anesthetics. So a very important condition for a more humanitarian approach would be for the UN to be enabled to provide the Palestinian hospitals in the Gaza Strip with more medicines. At the moment the possibilities of doing this are limited.

**Egypt has opened the border for the injured and wounded, in order to treat them – is this more than a mere drop in the ocean?**

It's only a partial help, because most of those wounded must be treated on the spot. Which is why it's important that Israel should open the borders to the UN relief organizations, so that first of all medicines and secondly also food can be brought into the Gaza Strip. UNRWA, the UN refugee assistance organization, is on the spot and is prepared to put things into practice – but at the moment it doesn't have enough means to do this.

**Given this situation, Mr. Dethlefsen, what consequences would an invasion, an Israel ground offensive, have for the civilian population?**

As you are aware, the Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas in the world, with almost a million and a half people living in an area of 365 square kilometers. That means that any military offensive must inevitably result in high losses among the civilian population. As a result, the whole thing will be a very bloody business, and in any case it will generate high casualty figures – which is why we hope that there will be no such offensive at the present time.

**Do you have information about how many relief organizations there are, and how many still have operations in the Gaza Strip?**

Basically it is the Red Cross or the Red Crescent, as well as the UN organizations, which however are only able to operate to some extent because for the last two months, Israel has completely blockaded the borders and has only allowed relief aid across the borders to a very limited extent.

**Mr. Dethlefsen, you travel extensively in the West Bank. There and in Jerusalem there have of course been protests against the Israeli offensive. Is this offensive in the Gaza Strip increasingly turning the Palestinian Territories into a powder keg?**

What we're currently experiencing is the greatest escalation for many, many years. We haven't had such high numbers of casualties in a 24 hour period since 1967. Now this is really like adding fuel to the fire in what, in

any case, is a very volatile atmosphere that we have here in the Palestinian Territories. Which is why the situation is very dangerous, and very difficult to control. What we have to also bear in mind is that at the moment, there are demonstrations of solidarity in other Arab States, and basically the entire region is in turmoil – when you go through the streets, there is a sense of turmoil.

**You're referring to the entire region – is there a threat of something spreading like wildfire there?**

I hope that this can be prevented through diplomatic efforts! The most important thing that must happen now is for military activities to be stopped immediately. That would enable the situation to be brought under firm control again, and then the wildfire could be avoided – but naturally there is this danger.

**The term “military action” – in your assessment, why is the Israeli offensive coming now of all times? What does Israel hope for from this?**

This is a decision by the political leadership, for which there are undoubtedly a number of motivations. One is that last week, Hamas brought a massive amount of pressure to bear on Israel with its self-made rockets, and the Israeli government saw itself forced to strike back now. One can of course ask whether this action of hitting back isn't disproportionate, since the numbers of casualties are so high. The other motivation is undoubtedly strategic, since Israel wanted to strengthen its own position vis-à-vis Hamas, by inflicting a military defeat on Hamas.

**To what extent are the upcoming elections in Israel or the change of government in the USA – in other words, a foreign policy component – playing a role?**

Undoubtedly to a very major extent – both elements. First, the elections: no politician wants to appear weak in their own population's eyes. In addition, the new US Administration is expected to adopt a perhaps somewhat more moderate attitude in the Middle East conflict, and is perhaps trying to gain strategic points right now. This will, however, be very difficult: Hamas is very strong, and of course, even if it is weakened militarily now, overall this will probably enhance its political rating.

**The influence of the Palestinian leadership under President Abbas, especially in the Gaza Strip, is deemed to be extremely small. He has now gone to Cairo for talks. Is there anything that Abbas can actually do in order to oppose further escalation?**

He can do several things. First of all, he can try to avoid any spread of wildfire in the region, by getting together with the other Arab States to bring pressure to bear on Israel so as to halt the military action in the Gaza Strip. That's one thing. In this way, the Arab States can influence Israel, and secondly, he could of course now use the situation in order, together with Hamas, to achieve, not a national unity government, but at least a kind of political unity and then make progress on an internal Palestinian level as well.

**You referred to the possibility of Abbas preventing a spread of wildfire. In this phase, does the international community of states have to do more than simply calling for a ceasefire?**

I believe that this is urgently needed! I believe that Europe in particular should be taking action. We cannot allow the situation to get out of hand – we found out in 2006 what happens if we just wait and make declarations. There could very easily be an expansion of the conflict, in the north of Israel as well – I'm thinking of Lebanon. Which is why it's important for the international community of states now, especially Europe and the USA, to take joint action and to get the parties to the conflict to put a stop to these violent operations. And this really must happen quickly! Every hour counts, because the attacks are continuing on an hourly basis.