

Road map to nowhere

The future of Palestine is as bleak as ever. By **ANGUS BENNETT**, with cartoons by **MALCOLM EVANS**.

Palestine remains the most argued about and religiously divided patchwork of land on the globe.

And the forecast for the future? Anything but optimistic, says David Shearer, the head of the United Nations' emergency relief effort in Palestine.

Shearer would know – he is a New Zealander and has spent more than 20 years in aid work in some of the most dangerous countries in the world, including Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq.

For the last four years he has headed the UN agency coordinating emergency aid and monitoring the impact of Israel's policies in the Palestinian territory.

After talking to Shearer you are left in little doubt about where things are headed in the beleaguered Gaza Strip and West Bank.

"Frankly, the situation here has gone backwards in the last two years," Shearer says.

The Gaza Strip clings to the side of Israel, squeezed between military roadblocks and the Mediterranean Sea. It is run down and war-torn by decades of neglect and conflict.

In 2002, the United States president, George W Bush, announced a joint plan for an independent Palestinian state living side by side with Israel.

It was called the "Road Map to Peace", but since then the concepts it stood for seem as far away as ever.

Shearer paints a grim picture of life as a Palestinian. He says restrictions on movement and the Israeli occupation are major hurdles for a peaceful and a stable Palestine.

Three months ago the Gaza Strip was officially isolated by Israel. This was in response to the democratic election of the hardline Islamist party Hamas in January 2006.

The United States had demanded free and democratic elections in the occupied territory but is unwilling to live with the result – and neither is Israel.

Hamas is one of two major political factions in Palestine. It refuses to denounce the use of violence or accept Israel's right to exist.

To force the Hamas government to change its hardline policies, Gaza Strip has been put under lockdown by the Israeli military.

Shearer says the choice to isolate the strip has had dire consequences for the 1.5 million people who live in what is one of the most densely populated pieces of land in the world.

"Other than emergency aid, nothing can go in or out of the territory," he says.

"This has caused an almost complete economic collapse.

"Farmers can't export their produce and more than 40 per cent of people are unemployed with that number rising day by day," Shearer says.

Despite this approach, Hamas has not changed its policies towards Israel.

Instead, there is concern that isolating the people of Gaza Strip will create a perfect breeding-ground for extremism.

"There is a small but growing school of thought that you can't just isolate 1.5 million people and expect them to just sit there getting poorer and poorer," says Shearer.

"Instead of encouraging Hamas to moderate their thinking, the policy of isolating them might encourage extremism."

For the time being, the isolation of Gaza looks set to continue. One of the fears for Shearer and his team is a complete economic collapse.

"We're on the brink," he says.

In a move to further frustrate the Hamas government, international development aid has been channelled away from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank.

But it would be wrong to think things are getting any better there either, says Shearer.

Across from Gaza lies what is known as the West Bank – the largest Palestinian territory in Israel.

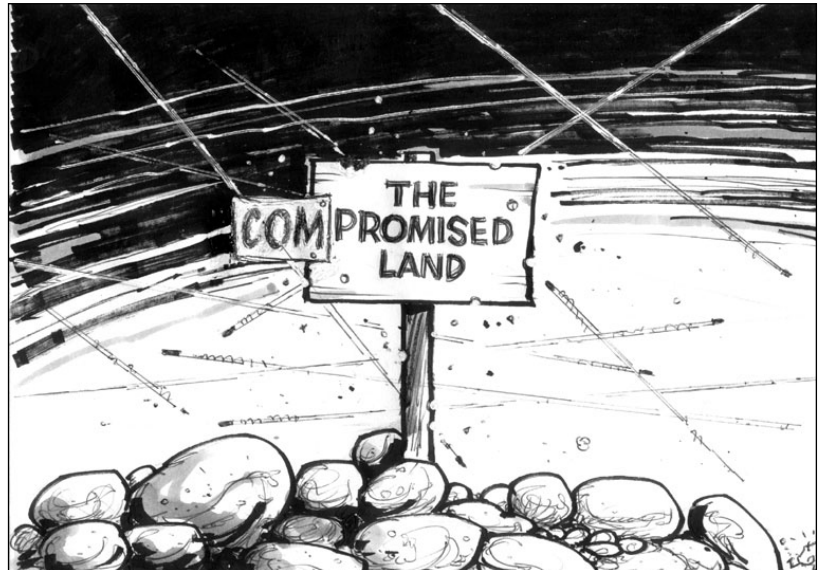
Hamas holds power in Gaza, but the West Bank continues to be ruled by Fatah. Its president, Mahmoud Abbas, has the support of Washington but still the West Bank is anything but autonomous or viable.

Israeli settlements cut through the land and occupy crucial hilltop positions.

To protect the settlements, Israel has peppered the region with military road blocks, restricting Palestinian travel and damaging what is already a barely functioning economy.

"There are currently 85 manned check points in the West Bank," Shearer says. "You drive down the end of your street and there are concrete blocks stopping you from going any further."

These intrusions into the lives of Palestinian people are a significant cause of resentment towards Israel.



Shearer sees two key areas as the most important hurdles to a peace settlement.

The first is the restriction of movement and the second is the question of Israel's highly controversial security wall. The 8m high wall does not follow Israel's international boundary, and cuts deep into Palestinian territory.

It cuts farmers from their properties and often results in Palestinian land being on the Israeli side.

It is estimated that the security wall will be finished by 2010.

When it is complete the West Bank will lose 10.2 per cent of its territory.

"That 10.2 per cent is some of the most important farming land and cultural land," Shearer says.

Another festering issue is the number of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land.

Currently 450,000 Israelis live on what the UN regards as Palestinian territory, says Shearer.

These settlements are considered illegal under international law but the UN is powerless to take any direct action.

Things are moving in the opposite direction to peace, says Shearer.

"At the moment the Palestinian territories are occupied – that means everything Palestinians do is dictated by Israeli security concerns.

"I see this as the number one hurdle – you can't have a Palestinian state while you're being occupied," he says.

Shearer does not sugar-coat the situation.

"We have gone backwards in the last seven years.

"Major political progress has to be made before anything will happen."

So what does the future hold for Palestine?

"Unfortunately it seems that things are getting worse not better," he says.

"There is no chance for peace under the conditions that exist right now."

The 2002 "Road Map for Peace" aimed to create a vision of two states, a secure state of Israel and a viable, democratic Palestine.

That vision seems as distant now as it was in 2002.

