

UN development agency provides lifeline to Gaza lifeguards, in bid to keep workers from debtors' prison

If Bilal Bashir, a Palestinian fisherman and lifeguard living on the coast of the Gaza Strip, does not get work over the summer months, he risks being sent to debtors' prison.

That's the harsh reality facing many in the enclave, which is blockaded by Israel, as unemployment rates reach as high as 60 per cent, but the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Assistance to the Palestinian People initiative, is creating jobs as part of an overall effort to relieve the intense pressure on workers and their families during the summer period.

Since Israel's decision to close the Kerem Shalom/Karm Abu Salem commercial crossing into Gaza last month – in response to the flying of incendiary kites into southern Israel – the dire economic situation has worsened, making it even more difficult for people such as Bilal to find work.

The closure of the crossing prohibits the import of everything but food, animal fodder, livestock, fuels and medical supplies, and bans all exports. In addition, the livelihood of fishermen like Bilal has been made more precarious by the restriction of the fishing zone off the coast of Gaza from nine nautical miles, to six.

"Every year, I apply for a job in marine rescue for the three months of summer. This allows me to repay the debts that I've built up over the previous four to five months. It's a big thing for me and I wait for it every summer," he said.

"For the past decade, I have been unemployed and there are no opportunities. I don't have any skills apart from fishing and marine rescue. I support a family of four and I need to find money on a daily basis," he continued, adding that "if I don't work, I rely on credit and sometimes shop owners don't want to give us any. When that happens, my debts increase significantly, and I can end up in prison."

The summer lifeguard job that Bilal desperately waits for each year is part of the UNDP's Programme of Assistance (PAPP), designed to create job opportunities in Gaza and alleviate the impact of the economic and social hardships being endured by most of the population there. The Programme aims to provide work for more than 2,500 people over a 12-month period, with 40 per cent of placements reserved for women.

Tarik Shabat, Coordinator of PAPP, says that the current economic conditions have underlined its importance:

"The programme is an emergency job creation project for the citizens of Gaza,

who are suffering from a lack of employment opportunities and financial distress.

The primary objective of the operation is to provide an income for a period of between three and six months. When money is injected into the local economy, a virtuous cycle of development can begin.”

The scheme is funded by the Islamic Development Bank, to the tune of \$2 million; the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which provides \$1.2 million, and \$300,000 from UNDP.

As a result of PAPP and other projects, over 4,000 new sources of income will be created. Additionally, ongoing infrastructure projects related to the reconstruction and rehabilitation of educational facilities and the construction of water, wastewater and health facilities, are also creating thousands of extra shifts every week for skilled and unskilled labourers.

Initiatives such as PAPP are part of a broader UN coordinated international effort to urgently lower tensions and help prevent another armed conflict in Gaza, between Israeli forces and the militant Hamas group, which controls the enclave.