



Editorial Complaints Unit

Ms E Keen
Email elliekeen@gmail.com

Ref: CT/1000179

9 September 2010

Dear Ms Keen

“Guide: Gaza Under Blockade”, BBC News Website

I am writing as promised to let you know the conclusion of my investigation into your complaint about the above article on the BBC News website¹. I have understood your complaint to be that a paragraph in the article gave an inaccurate and misleading impression because it did not make it clear that senior bodies such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the International Committee of the Red Cross have condemned the blockade of Gaza in the strongest possible terms; you have said this was not conveyed adequately by the descriptions used in the article. You have also said the article did not explain that the charge of “collective punishment” made against the Israelis is a violation of the Geneva Conventions and therefore an international war crime. In particular, I note from your email of 30 August that you do not believe that it was made clear that the UN Commissioner for Human Rights has described Israel’s action as “collective punishment”, but instead left this claim unattributed and therefore open to the incorrect interpretation that the UNHCR does not agree with this claim.

I have therefore considered your complaint against the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines on Accuracy which state that output must be well sourced, based on sound evidence and presented in clear, precise language. The principles of accuracy also say that if an issue is controversial, relevant opinion as well as facts may need to be considered. I have also borne in mind the guidelines on War, Terror and Emergencies, including the principle which you quoted in your email of 30 August.

I appreciate that you do not believe the article made it sufficiently clear that Israel has been condemned by leading international organisations and I have some sympathy with your point of view. However, in considering whether or not the article gave a seriously inaccurate or misleading impression, I have to consider the likely impression the reader would have been given not only by this paragraph but also by the article as a whole.

The paragraph in question would, I think, have left readers with the clear impression that Israel’s blockade has been condemned by the UN (albeit not necessarily by the UNHCR) and that it is regarded by some as “collective punishment”. You may well

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7545636.stm

be right that many readers might not appreciate that this phrase is normally used to refer to a breach of the Geneva Conventions but I still think that it implies a serious criticism. I accept that the level of condemnation may not be as explicit or as strong as you would like but I think the reference to a "*humanitarian crisis*" and describing the situation in Gaza as like a "*medieval siege*" would have ensured that readers understood that organisations such as the United Nations are publicly critical of Israel's actions.

I also think it is necessary to bear in mind other references elsewhere in the article. It contained a number of comments from recognised international organisations about the effects of the blockade which ensured that readers would have been aware of the widespread condemnation of Israel's actions and concern about its consequences. For example, the article quotes the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation as saying "*61% of Gazans are 'food insecure'*" and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) as saying "*80% of Gazan households rely on some kind of food aid*". Oxfam is quoted as saying its research in April 2010 "*showed houses across Gaza without power for 35-60 hours a week*". The World Health Organisation is quoted as saying "*Operation Cast Lead worsened an already bad situation. Before the operation, it says Gazans had only half the water they needed according to international standards, and 80% of water supplied did not meet WHO drinking standards*". The WHO is also quoted as saying the blockade has led to a "*worsening of the health conditions of the population*" and a shortage of drugs. The article also quoted the United Nations as saying "*the blockade has caused the economy 'irreversible damage'*".

Taking all these references together, I am afraid I don't believe that the article would have given a seriously misleading impression about the extent to which the international community and leading organisations have condemned the action of Israel. I am therefore unable to uphold your complaint.

I appreciate that you may not agree with my conclusion but I hope I have been able to explain my thinking. However, I would be happy to consider any further points you might wish to make on my finding. You can also ask the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust to review my finding. Correspondence for the Committee should be addressed to its Secretary, Bruce Vander, at the BBC Trust Unit, 180 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5QZ or by email to trust.editorial@bbc.co.uk. The Trust normally expects to receive an appeal within four weeks of the date of this letter, or of any subsequent correspondence between us.

Yours sincerely



Colin Tregear
Complaints Director