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US congressmen visit aid projects, ruins in Gaza

By BEN HUBBARD – 31 minutes ago

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Two U.S. congressmen made a rare visit to the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, meeting with aid workers and touring scenes of destruction left by Israel's military offensive.

Reps. Bob Inglis and Stephen F. Lynch pointedly avoided contact with the Hamas militant group, which rules Gaza and which the United States, European Union and Israel consider a terrorist organization.

Lynch, a Democrat from Massachusetts, said the world must find a way to address a "legitimate humanitarian crisis" in Gaza.

"We need to act with some urgency here. There is a humanitarian crisis going on and we can't dawdle," Lynch told the Associated Press.

Israel launched the three-week offensive in December with the aim of ending rocket fire on southern Israel by Hamas militants. Palestinian human rights groups say more than 1,400 people were killed, including more than 900 civilians. Thousands of buildings and much of Gaza's infrastructure were destroyed or damaged.

Israel says the death toll was lower, and most of those killed were Hamas militants.

Lynch said he and Inglis, a Republican from South Carolina, visited a project run by Catholic Relief Services in a heavily damaged neighborhood and a tent camp where displaced Gazans have been living since the war ended on Jan. 18. They also visited the grounds of the American International School of Gaza, a U.S.-style school the Israeli army flattened during the offensive, saying militants launched rockets from its grounds.

Lynch said the destruction in Gaza was worse than he expected.

Since Hamas violently seized the territory from forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in June 2007, Israel and Egypt have maintained tight border control. Restrictions on cement and other building materials — which Israel says could benefit Hamas — have greatly hampered the reconstruction effort.

"It is problematic having the checkpoints closed," Lynch said.

He said aid could be brought into Gaza through the U.N. and other organizations, and that safeguards could be put in place to make sure resources were used properly. But the U.S. will not work with Hamas until it changed its policy toward Israel and rejected violence, he said.

Tuesday's visit followed a similar tour earlier this year by Sen. John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat, and two Democratic congressmen, Keith Ellison of Minnesota and Brian Baird of Washington.

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