

Sunday, 21 April 2013

Gaza farmers burn tons of basil, mint after Israel border shut



Palestinian farmers in Gaza began destroying three tons of herbs last week, saying a prolonged closure of the crossing into Israel meant the plants were no longer fit for export to Europe.

The farmers began exporting herbs to Europe earlier this year, for the first time in five years. But they say they are unable to reap the fruits of their efforts. "The project is an ambitious one and it is in its beginnings but the continuous closing of the crossings is affecting the continuity and the success of the project," said the director of Gaza's communal agriculture association, Jamal Abu Naja. Last October, Israel lifted a five-year ban on the lucrative export of Gazan herbs and spices, imposed after the Islamist Hamas group seized control of the coastal enclave, and farmers had hoped to cash in with their latest crop of mint and basil. But Israel shut its sole commercial crossing into the isolated Palestinian territory earlier this month in response to a rocket salvo fired out of Gaza, allowing only a brief reopening to enable the import of certain goods.

Farmers said the closure came just as they were preparing to harvest two tons of mint and a ton of basil, adding that the herbs were now past their prime for the European market. "We have reached a point where the herbs cannot be exported because the crossings have been closed for a long time. So, we are destroying [the produce], the farmers are harvesting the herbs and feeding them to their animals," said Abu Naja. Abu Naja urged farmers to take advantage of the decision to lift the curf last year, pointing to high demand in Europe for spices and herbs, with traders paying 26 USD a kilo for the Palestinian produce against 0.27 USD on the home market. Some 15 tons of spices have been exported since January, but the latest crop had to be mowed down and burnt, farmers said.

"As you can see, this is after a year of hard work. During this year we planted basil and mint, but whenever harvest time approaches, the crossings close, and all of the crops are destroyed," said farmer Eyad Ferwaneh.

Unlike other produce that Israel allows to be exported to Europe, such as strawberries, cherry tomatoes

Some 40 Palestinian men and women who used to work in Jewish settlements formed the backbone of the current planting teams, and they had high hopes of a lucrative income. "We were expecting to earn a lot [from exporting the crop], but we were faced with the closing of the crossings after the war. We hope that this crop will compensate us after what we lost," said farmer Mohamed al-Astal.

To date, some 30 dunam (7.4 acres) have been turned over to herbs, including 20 inside the former Israeli settlement of Gush Katif, from which Israel pulled settlers and soldiers in 2005.

The Palestinian economy is bound closely to Israel's through infrastructure and has few foreign trading partners. Israel's security cordon around Gaza and its security restrictions in the occupied West Bank limit Palestinians' ability to compete in export markets and contribute to an unemployment rate of almost 25 percent, the World Bank said last month.

Israel and Hamas fought an eight-day war last November that ended with an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire.

After three months of quiet, militants fired a rocket into Israel at the end of February, with very occasional salvos following in subsequent weeks. Israel has responded each time by closing the Kerem Shalom commercial crossing.