



From the Director-General

9 February 2009

Lord Hannay of Chiswick
Chair
UNA-UK
3 Whitehall Court
London SW1A 2EL

Dear Lord Hannay

Thank you for your letter of 24 January. I'm sorry to learn that you do not agree with the BBC's decision regarding carrying a DEC appeal for the situation in Gaza.

You will, I am sure, be aware of our position and why I do not believe it would be appropriate for us to broadcast this appeal. In the light of the serious misgivings expressed in your letter there may be little I can say here to change your view of that decision – nevertheless I hope you will not mind if I take this opportunity to try to explain our approach to it.

As you will know, when there is a major humanitarian crisis, if the DEC believes that various criteria are met, it asks the BBC and other broadcasters to broadcast an appeal. We usually - though not always - accede to their requests and as a result have broadcast many DEC appeals over the years. DEC emergency appeals are unique, because it is for these alone that broadcasters break their normal schedules in order to appeal to the public. These appeals are generally broadcast in peak time and on as many of BBC services as possible.

In this case we decided, after careful consideration, that the BBC should not accede to the DEC's request to broadcast the appeal. This is because Gaza remains an ongoing and highly controversial news story within which the human suffering and distress which have resulted from the conflict remain intrinsic and contentious elements. We have and will continue to cover the human side of the conflict fully across our news programmes and services. Within these bulletins and services, we can put the events in their wider context and draw attention to the claims and counter-claims that are made about them by the parties to the conflict and by others.

After consultation with appropriate senior staff, we concluded that broadcasting a freestanding appeal, no matter how carefully constructed, ran the risk of reducing the public's confidence in the BBC's impartiality in its coverage of the story as a whole. The danger for the BBC is that we would be interpreted as taking a political stance on an ongoing story. That is not a risk we could accept.



We have, I believe, a strong working relationship with the DEC and as I have noted we generally accede to their requests for appeals. We have discussed with them the decision we have made in relation to Gaza. We will continue to broadcast news about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and, if appropriate, to cover the work of the UK NGOs on the ground. As you will know from recent coverage, our news outlets, when covering this story, may provide details of the appeal.

We cannot however broadcast anything which we believe might compromise the impartiality of the BBC's journalism. We have made this decision in the context of the BBC's editorial principles and guidelines and in the light of our central duty to uphold impartiality under the BBC's Charter. It is of course for other broadcasters to make their own decision in this matter.

Your letter also refers to the practical question of delivering aid. That situation has of course developed since our original decision, but it may still be helpful to spell out our position. The DEC agencies, or some of them, must be in a position to provide effective and swift assistance at a scale to justify a national appeal. Our general principle regarding access is that the aid agencies and BBC reporters are both able to contribute to any assessment of access, as they can often be in different places and have different sources of information. We always talk to our news sources to get as comprehensive an assessment as possible of the situation on the ground.


You will know that in conflict situations the issue of access is particularly critical and liable to change at short notice. In the case of Gaza we had to form an opinion on the fragility of the ceasefire and the sporadic border access, both of which impact on the successful delivery of aid.

It is of course for the British public to determine if they wish to give humanitarian support. It does not however follow that it is, in all cases, the BBC's responsibility to encourage them to do so. We regularly support worthy causes, both through our own charities and broadcast appeals, and this work plays an important part in the BBC's remit as a public service broadcaster. Ultimately, though, we are a broadcaster, whose primary goal must be to serve our audiences with distinctive programmes and services – including impartial news coverage of the highest editorial standards. It is in part trust in the BBC's impartiality, underpinned by the independence of its journalism, which gives people the confidence to donate to its charity appeals.

I am particularly sorry that you feel that this decision undermines the laudable achievements of the UN's own aid agencies. I can only assure you that in making a decision which we believed to be right for the BBC we had no intention of casting any doubt whatsoever on the efficacy, importance, or neutrality of that work. There is of course a clear distinction between the decisions of dedicated relief agencies and those of the BBC, and I am sorry if you felt that we have failed to make clear that our judgement on this matter in no way reflects negatively on the achievements of the UNRWA and others.

In closing, I recognise that you believe this decision to be the wrong one, and that you do not share our view of the risks associated with a broadcast. I hope that my letter at least serves to explain our position, and why we believed this to be the right judgement for the BBC – and for our audiences.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Thompson', with a large, stylized flourish extending to the right.

Mark Thompson