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Quartet envoy Tony Blair visits Gaza Strip for first time

By Reuters

Tony Blair paid his first visit to the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip on Sunday as envoy of international peace brokers and said reconstruction aid after Israel's offensive would not have a lasting effect without peace.

Blair, a former British prime minister, also toured the Israeli border town of Sderot, a frequent target of rocket attacks by Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

He did not meet Hamas officials in the coastal enclave, a day before an international donor conference in Egypt to raise funds for rebuilding homes and infrastructure damaged or destroyed in the 22-day offensive Israel launched in December.

"There will be money - that will be coming, and there will be money, probably a significant amount of it, pledged at the conference - but this money will not have a lasting impact unless there is a political solution," Blair told reporters.

Blair called for a "viable, durable ceasefire", followed by a lifting of an Israeli-led blockade on the Gaza Strip that has kept out vitally needed material such as cement and steel which Israel said could be used by militants to rebuild and rearm.

He said he hoped for Palestinian unity that could ease the flow of aid to the Gaza Strip, whose Hamas rulers are shunned by the West over their refusal to recognise Israel, renounce violence and accept existing interim peace deals.

Blair was appointed Middle East envoy by the "Quartet" of brokers - the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia - two years ago with a mandate to try to strengthen the Palestinian economy and promote peace.

He has refrained from meeting Hamas officials, in line with the West's policy towards the group, which won a Palestinian election in 2006 and violently wrested control of the Gaza Strip from President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah faction in 2007.

Egypt, which like Israel borders Gaza, is trying to mediate a Palestinian reconciliation and consolidate a truce in Gaza.

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