



**Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs -  
occupied Palestinian territory**

**Humanitarian Situation Report:  
Beit Hanoun, Gaza Strip**

**30 July 2004** - The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) deployed around the town of Beit Hanoun in the northeast of the Gaza Strip on 29 June, following the deaths of two Israelis in a Qassam rocket attack on the nearby Israeli town of Sderot. Rocket attacks have continued intermittently throughout the month.

One month later, IDF bulldozers and tanks remain on the edge of Beit Hanoun, to the west and east. In the last few days, the Israeli army has conducted military operations in the centre of the town. Access to Beit Hanoun has been restricted to just one route, and all entry and exit requires prior coordination with the IDF.

Ministry of Health sources report that at least 17 Palestinians have been killed since 29 June, and another 154 injured. At least three IDF soldiers have been reported injured.

Beit Hanoun has more than 30,000 residents, most of whom are registered refugees. An additional 7,000 Palestinians live in surrounding areas, including Izbat Beit Hanoun<sup>1</sup>. The town and its hinterland form one of the main agricultural areas in the Gaza Strip, producing olives and citrus fruits among other crops.

Apart from the deaths and injuries, access is the primary humanitarian concern at the moment. There are notable shortages of water, food and medical supplies in some areas, where residents are unable or afraid to get to the centre of town to access services. Water and electricity networks have been damaged during IDF operations, as have the main roads, telephone lines and sewage pipes.

Any longer term restrictions on Palestinians' access to basic services, together with continuing land-levelling, destruction of crops and restricted access to work, threaten to worsen the humanitarian situation.

At the moment, the security situation in the area between Salah El Din Street and Erez Industrial Estate, and inside Beit Hanoun, remains volatile. At least eight serious security incidents have occurred near UN staff along Salah El Din Street and inside Beit Hanoun. NGOs and other agencies have experienced similar incidents. These heightened security concerns are restricting humanitarian assistance.

UNRWA and OCHA are particularly concerned about access problems in the last fortnight. In the more serious instances, the IDF has opened fire near aid workers when they have arrived in an area, despite prior coordination efforts. Those cases led to the immediate withdrawal of relief workers.

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<sup>1</sup> PCBS 2004 [www.pcbs.org]

### **Humanitarian access**

Since the start of the current IDF deployment in and around Beit Hanoun, entry and exit has been restricted to a single dirt track off Salah El Din Street, just south of the Erez Industrial Estate. This entry and exit point is controlled by an Israeli tank position slightly to the west of Salah El Din Street. All other main roads and dirt roads to Beit Hanoun are now blocked by IDF earth mounds and trenches. Salah El Din Street is blocked by earth mounds, trenches and tank positions from the Beit Lahia/Jabalia junction up to the northern junction with the Beit Lahia bypass road. The bypass road is now the only means by which to enter or leave Gaza city from Erez.

Entry and exit has required prior coordination with the Israeli District Coordination Liaison officer (DCL). Passengers and vehicle details generally have to be faxed through, although verbal coordination has been acceptable in some cases.

Movement restrictions have intensified in isolated areas of Beit Hanoun. Additional coordination is now required for access to Al Masri, Al Farrata, Al Nazzaza, As-Shurrab, the Beit Hanoun Industrial Zone, As Sikka Street, Sultan Abdel Hamid and Salah El Din Street. Access to the west of town, particularly As Sikka Street, has been extremely problematic for UN agencies, the ICRC and NGOs.

Despite additional coordination efforts, continuous problems have arisen, including instances where access, though approved, is obstructed on the ground by earth mounds and trenches.

### **Restricted Palestinian Movement**

Commercial vehicles are allowed enter and leave Beit Hanoun after prior coordination with the District Coordination Liaison (DCL) officer through the municipality. Private vehicles are not allowed in or out. Palestinians have been permitted to enter and leave Beit Hanoun on foot and by donkey cart. Movement of vehicles and/or by foot was possible for the first few days by Al Wahd road, but this has been effectively closed off since then by additional earth mounds and periodic IDF gunfire at Palestinians attempting to cross.

The movement of more than 330 Palestinian families, or about 2,640 people, living in isolated areas of Beit Hanoun is extremely restricted. (The average family size in Beit Hanoun is eight, slightly above the national average.)

While no curfew has been declared in Beit Hanoun, residents in many eastern, southern and western areas do not travel after dusk and regularly decline to leave their homes during the day, too. Many families in isolated areas are living close to IDF positions, including positions taken up in Palestinian homes, and are visibly afraid to leave home, including to gain access to medical or other basic services.

### **Infrastructural Damage**

The movement of heavy Israeli armoured vehicles in and around Beit Hanoun has led to frequent breaks in the water, power and sewage networks. A significant part of the work on the ground by the ICRC and OCHA in the last month has been to facilitate the movement of municipality engineers to repair these faults.

**Roads:** The main north-south road in Beit Hanoun, Khalil Wazir Street, has been damaged at several points in the south and centre of town, where the IDF has built earth mounds and dug trenches. A series of earth mounds and trenches have also been established along Salah El Din Street at the Beit Lahia/Jabalia junction and at Al Wahd road junction just south of Beit Lahia bypass road junction.

A number of dirt roads leading from central Beit Hanoun to currently isolated areas have been damaged by tank and bulldozer operations, as well as the digging of trenches and erection of barriers. As Sikka Street, which runs parallel with Salah Ad Din Street in western Beit Hanoun, has sustained substantial damage. At least four large road blocks, including trenches and earth mounds, have been established on the road.

**Electricity:** Electricity networks have been damaged during IDF operations in a number of areas by the regular movement of heavy armoured vehicles. Municipality engineering teams have carried out some repairs after prior coordination with the IDF through the ICRC and OCHA, and escorted on the ground by one or other of the agencies.

Networks in a number of areas have been damaged repeatedly, requiring continued repairs. OCHA tried on four days between 18 July and 21 July to facilitate repair crews' access to As Sikka Street. Each time, access requests were either denied or repair crews were obstructed by road blocks and/or gunfire by the IDF after access had been approved.

**Water:** Water networks have been damaged and repairs have, again, been difficult to carry out, despite the ICRC and OCHA escorting repair crews. The IDF's establishment of barriers and trenches along a number of internal roads has damaged pipes, cutting water flows completely and/or resulting in contamination problems.

The municipality has reported that 17 wells – normally used for drinking water and agricultural use – have been destroyed in Beit Hanoun since 29 June, and another 12 damaged. Undamaged wells have remained unused in some cases because the electricity needed to operate water pumps has been severed.

The shortage of available water gives rise to serious hygiene concerns, particularly with average daily temperatures of more than 30 degrees Celsius.

UNRWA, the ICRC and OCHA have facilitated and provided water by tanker to the families in greatest need. The ICRC has provided water tankers or distributed 20-litre jerry cans nine times in the last month but physical obstructions and nearby military activity have made distribution problematic. In many households, especially in the isolated areas, water consumption has dropped critically low.

While some families have tanks that can take more than 1,000 litres, others have been approaching water tankers with little more than buckets and 1.5-litre bottles. UNICEF plans distribute buckets and collapsible containers, providing a capacity of 340 litres per family, in the coming days. The municipality has indicated a need for domestic water tanks (typically 1,000-1,500 litres) for up to 200 families whose tanks have been damaged by gunfire.

### **Food**

On 14 and 15 July, UNRWA did a major food distribution in Beit Hanoun, distributing 370mt of food aid intended for approximately 20,000 persons, or two-thirds of the population of the town, for 45 days. The most serious food security problems now exist in the isolated areas.

UNRWA's distribution has continued, with mobile teams trying to access families who could not get to central Beit Hanoun where the main food distribution took place. So far, emergency rations to last 8-10 days have been provided to 176 of 330 families living under severe movement restrictions. Access has been denied in some areas due to military activity. Where coordination has been approved, military activity has forced withdrawal of the food distribution teams on at least two occasions.

ICRC has also been providing emergency food and water assistance, concentrating on vulnerable populations in the isolated areas. It has distributed up to 300 food parcels in the last month.

WFP has focused on the non-refugee population in Beit Hanoun and supported 2,448 beneficiaries since 1 July, including “hardship social cases”, farmers and Bedouins. Other implementing partners distributing 63mt of food supplied by WFP have included the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture and the Italian NGO, Centro Regionale d’Intervento per la Cooperazione (CRIC).

Other NGOs providing emergency food and water assistance have included the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees (UPMRC), with access facilitated by Physicians for Human Rights and OCHA.

### **Health**

Health workers have reported increasing public health issues arising from the continuing shortages of potable, uncontaminated water. In particular, the UNRWA health clinic has reported an increase in the number of cases of parasitic infestations, skin rashes and other dermatological conditions, gastroenteritis and diarrhoeal diseases.

Beit Hanoun has three primary health care facilities, operated by UNRWA, the Ministry of Health (MoH) and a local NGO, the Health Work Committees (HWC) respectively. All three are continuing to function as normal, though UNRWA health workers who live outside Beit Hanoun continue to rely on international staff to facilitate their movement in and out of town. An UNRWA health team has been operating in conjunction with the mobile food distribution staff in the more isolated areas, though access is difficult.

Health workers have particular concerns about patients living in isolated areas who suffer from chronic diseases like hypertension, cardiac disorders and diabetes, with concern that patients are having difficulty getting the drugs or treatment required in a timely and effective way.

Secondary and tertiary medical services are not available in Beit Hanoun. Evacuation of patients to the nearest such facilities, Kamal Adwan Hospital in Jabalia and Al Awda Hospital (HWC) in Beit Lahia, have been continuing following coordination with the DCL. The MoH has its own communication system with the DCL, while the ICRC regularly helps the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS). In the week beginning 19 July, the ICRC made 11 requests for the evacuation of patients on behalf of the PRCS. Ten of those were approved although the ICRC has noted that evacuation from the fully occupied and closed areas was prolonged and slow.

Psycho-social problems have also been reported, including increasing stress and fear resulting from the unstable security situation. Of concern are those areas where there is regular movement of IDF armoured vehicles. MSF (France/Esp) has conducted six visits to the eastern border area to provide psycho-social debriefing to 10 families. Regular follow up is required, though, and this cannot be guaranteed in the current situation. The Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) has tried to get around the access problem by providing a helpline on which people can call trained counsellors to seek advice and help.

### **Land Levelling**

Levelling of agricultural land by bulldozers and tanks has continued since 29 June. Areas in the west of Beit Hanoun, between As Sikka Street and Salah Ad Din Street, and eastern and northern areas have been most affected, with losses of citrus trees and olive groves.

Exact figures are unavailable because of the difficulty of gaining access to these areas, but municipal and other local sources have estimated land levelled at more than 2,000 dunums (200 hectares). Extensive destruction of agricultural facilities and equipment has also been reported, including to water wells, animal and poultry pens, and agricultural sheds. A large refrigeration unit at the Agricultural College was badly damaged, and 20 greenhouses have been reported destroyed or damaged since 29 June.

### **Property Destruction**

Municipal and other local sources estimate that more than 30 houses have been destroyed or seriously damaged since the start of the current IDF operation in Beit Hanoun. Eight industrial/commercial facilities have been reported destroyed or damaged since 29 June, including a large tile factory. Damage to other private, commercial and public property, including schools, has also been noted.

### **Humanitarian Coordination**

OCHA, UNRWA and ICRC continue to liaise closely with the Beit Hanoun municipality, and to assess the fluctuating needs of the local population. The focus will remain on attempting to ensure access to adequate food and water in peripheral areas, access to primary and secondary health care services, and repair of damaged electricity, water and sewage networks.

Coordination efforts between humanitarian agencies and the DCL office of the IDF are continuing, though agencies are concerned at the apparent breakdown on some occasions of liaison between the DCL and operational army units.

Serious concerns remain about the safety and security of aid workers, and it is clear that humanitarian assistance will be affected if they cannot be addressed by the IDF.

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