

OCHA
occupied Palestinian territory

humanitarian

UPDATE

1 November – 15 November 2003



www.reliefweb.int/hic-opt ▪ ochaopt@un.org

Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

OCHA oPt, MAC House, PO Box 38712, East Jerusalem ▪ Tel +972-2-582 9962 | 582 5853 ▪ Fax +972-2 582 5841

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Overview

Restrictions on Palestinian movement in the West Bank eased during this period. Nevertheless, many difficulties remain for Palestinians in reaching their land, services and jobs. And, the continued construction of the Wall will limit access for many Palestinians in its proximity.

Israel announces easing of blockades on Palestinian cities

On 2 and 5 November, Israel announced that with the exception of Jenin and Nablus, its blockade of Palestinian towns in the West Bank would be relaxed. The IDF said that Palestinians with permits will be able to travel in cars and buses between towns and 3,000 West Bank traders will be issued temporary permits to work in Israel.

Initially, OCHA field offices reported that the blockade of Palestinian towns did not ease. However, a week after the announcement, a relaxation of movement restrictions was reported in Qalqiliya, Tulkarm, Nablus, Jenin, Tubas, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron, though an increased number of mobile IDF checkpoints were reported.

This Humanitarian Update focuses on the impact of movement restrictions on Palestinians' daily lives in two areas – Hebron/Bethlehem and Salfit.

During the reporting period, some improvements in travel from Hebron to Bethlehem

The Hebron – Bethlehem road network services nearly half a million Palestinians living in the southern West Bank. Before September 2000, there were no permanent movement restrictions on these roads.

From Hebron, dozens of buses passed through Halhul to reach Bethlehem on Route 60 – the major north-south road in the area. The journey was direct and took 20 minutes. A trip from Hebron to East Jerusalem took about 35 minutes and to Ramallah, about 45 minutes. A second major road, Route 365, ran from Sa'ir to Wadi Nas, taking Palestinians northwards.

Following the imposition of Israel's closure policies in September 2000, only a limited number of buses have been allowed to operate along Route 60. Because Route 60 has been blocked with earth mounds in several areas of the route, buses are unable to transport passengers directly from Hebron to Bethlehem. Instead, the bus route begins at Halhul and ends at al Khader junction, where passengers cross on foot to continue to Bethlehem.

This journey takes a minimum of 40 minutes, including a 20-minute IDF search at Gush Etzion checkpoint. Private Palestinian cars with green license plates cannot travel without permits that are difficult to obtain.

Route 356, servicing the eastern Bethlehem and Hebron areas is now completely closed at Wadi Sari with concrete slabs, earth mounds and military outposts monitor the road. As a result, most Palestinians rely on secondary roads and mountain tracks to reach Bethlehem.

Following Israel's announcement to ease movement restrictions, travel in the southern West Bank has eased. The removal of the two gates blocking travel between Halhul and Sa'ir has meant that private vehicles can now travel from Hebron to Bethlehem via Sa'ir and then onwards along dirt roads through the villages Shuyukh al 'Arrub, Beit Fajjar and Marah Rabah.

Before reaching Bethlehem, however, Palestinians must cross a road near Efrat settlement. They are forbidden to travel on this road without permits, but to continue their journey northwards to Bethlehem, crossing it is unavoidable.

The road has a metal barrier along its verges that prevents Palestinians getting onto the road. Palestinians must locate a breach in the barrier to enter onto the road and then travel along it until they locate a breach on the road's other side to exit it. Crossing this road is risky because if caught by IDF patrols, a driver's keys may be confiscated and they face heavy fines.

On 7 November, 17 Hebron buses obtained permits to travel from Halhul – Al Khader on Route 60. Buses take 15 minutes and are not stopped at the Gush Etzion checkpoint. Although an improvement, this is still far below the estimated 54 buses that are needed.

Salfit district's vulnerability under closure

Salfit district, with a population of approximately 60,000 Palestinians living in 22 villages, is often overlooked by the international community. The district, which used to be part of Tulkarm, was established in 1996. Having always relied on neighbouring Nablus and Ramallah for services and markets, it has been hard hit by movement restrictions.

There are 20 settlements spread throughout Salfit district (including Ariel, Burkan, Rafafa, Qana and Immanuel) populated by 30,000 Israeli settlers. Their presence has severely restricted Palestinian movement. The location of the settlements and the roads that are closed to Palestinians, which link them has created three fingers stretching north, east and southwest.

As a result, Palestinian villages are clustered into three areas and travel between them has become very difficult. For essential travel, Palestinians rely on alternative, mostly unpaved roads.

Most of Salfit's residents rely on agriculture, especially olive oil production. The construction of settlements and Israeli military training centres and the designation of large areas as military zones have resulted in destruction of land and crops.

A recent FAO/WFP assessment indicated that Salfit has the highest levels of food insecurity in the West Bank with approximately 50% of Salfit's residents (28,845 people) food insecure and 6,204 (11%) under threat of becoming food insecure. The Wall's projected path suggests that already high levels of food insecurity will increase further.

Assistance to Gaza populations declining

The humanitarian situation in Gaza shows continuing signs of deterioration in the wake of the large-scale destruction of homes in Rafah in October and November. According to PCBS, 84% of Gazans live below the poverty line. UNRWA estimates that since September 2000, over 12,000 people in Gaza have been made homeless from demolitions. Between 1-20 October, UNRWA recorded the destruction of 189 homes in Rafah camp affecting 330 families – 1,780 people.

Despite these needs assistance is declining. UNRWA, which supports health, educational and other humanitarian services to most of the Gazan population, has been unable to raise more than 50% of the total amount of funds it needs to provide these services. As a consequence, services are declining with a 17% reduction in the tonnage of food delivered in recent months.

On 10 November, Palestinians residents demonstrated against the Palestinian Authority demanding to continue to receive aid from Islamic charities. The Palestinian police fired heavy gunfire in the air to break the demonstration. Support from the many Islamic charities has dried up since 24 August when the Palestinian prosecutor froze the bank accounts of 9 Islamic associations with 39 branches throughout Gaza.

These associations had supported primary health care clinics servicing over 15,000 residents, kindergartens and provided financial assistance to more than one thousand children. During Ramadan 2002, they distributed food parcels and clothes to more than 20,000 families.

Correction

In the Humanitarian Update (16-31 October), we reported that the IDF required 13,545 Palestinians living in 15 communities between the Wall and the Green Line to apply for green-coloured permits to continue living there. This figure included residents of Nazlet Issa, Baqa Ash Sharqiya and Nazlet Abu-Nar who, despite initial reports, do not have to apply for these permits. With this correction, we have revised our figure to 6,725 Palestinians living in 12 communities who will be required to apply for permits.