

OCHA

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humanitarian UPDATE

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

United Nations Office for 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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Humanitarian crisis in Gaza: Rafah

Since September 2000 an estimated 252 Palestinians residents of Rafah have been killed – over 50 of the fatalities were children. More than 2,500 Palestinians in this area have been injured, 110 cases involving brain damage, paralysis, loss of eyes and limbs.

Infrastructure damage and associated financial loss is enormous. Rafah governorate estimates that the IDF has bulldozed or confiscated 835 acres (3,343 dunums) of land with the loss of citrus fruits, olives, flowers and vegetables. The sealing-off of the Al Mawasi enclave for the last 3 years has deprived Rafah of produce from some of the most fertile Gaza land.



Rafah, Southern Gaza border with Egypt: Much of the open strip was formerly housing.

These measures, together with the closure of Gaza Airport, prolonged closures at the Rafah passenger terminal with Egypt and the destruction and closure of over 210 stores and workshops around the area of Salah el Din gate have contributed to over 70% unemployment in the town and surrounding area.



Rafah, Southern Gaza: House Demolition near the Egyptian border.

House demolitions continue

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has systematically demolished rows of homes in the Rafah refugee camp that lie directly north of the border with Egypt. Demolitions are justified on security grounds and the need to eradicate tunnels allegedly used to smuggle weapons across the border from Egypt.

This “buffer zone” has expanded to the extent that it is now up to 3 kilometres long and 200 metres deep. UNRWA recorded 7,600 people that have lost their homes in Rafah with 20% of those made homeless

between 10–20 October this year. During this 10-day period, UNRWA recorded the destruction of 189 homes in Rafah camp affecting 330 families, comprising 1780 individuals.

This incursion left 15 dead. Demolitions have continued to occur weekly in Rafah. On 10 November, 19 homes were totally demolished, a further 5 on 12 November and an additional 8 units on 18 November.

Around 12,000 Palestinians have been made homeless in the whole of Gaza since September 2000.

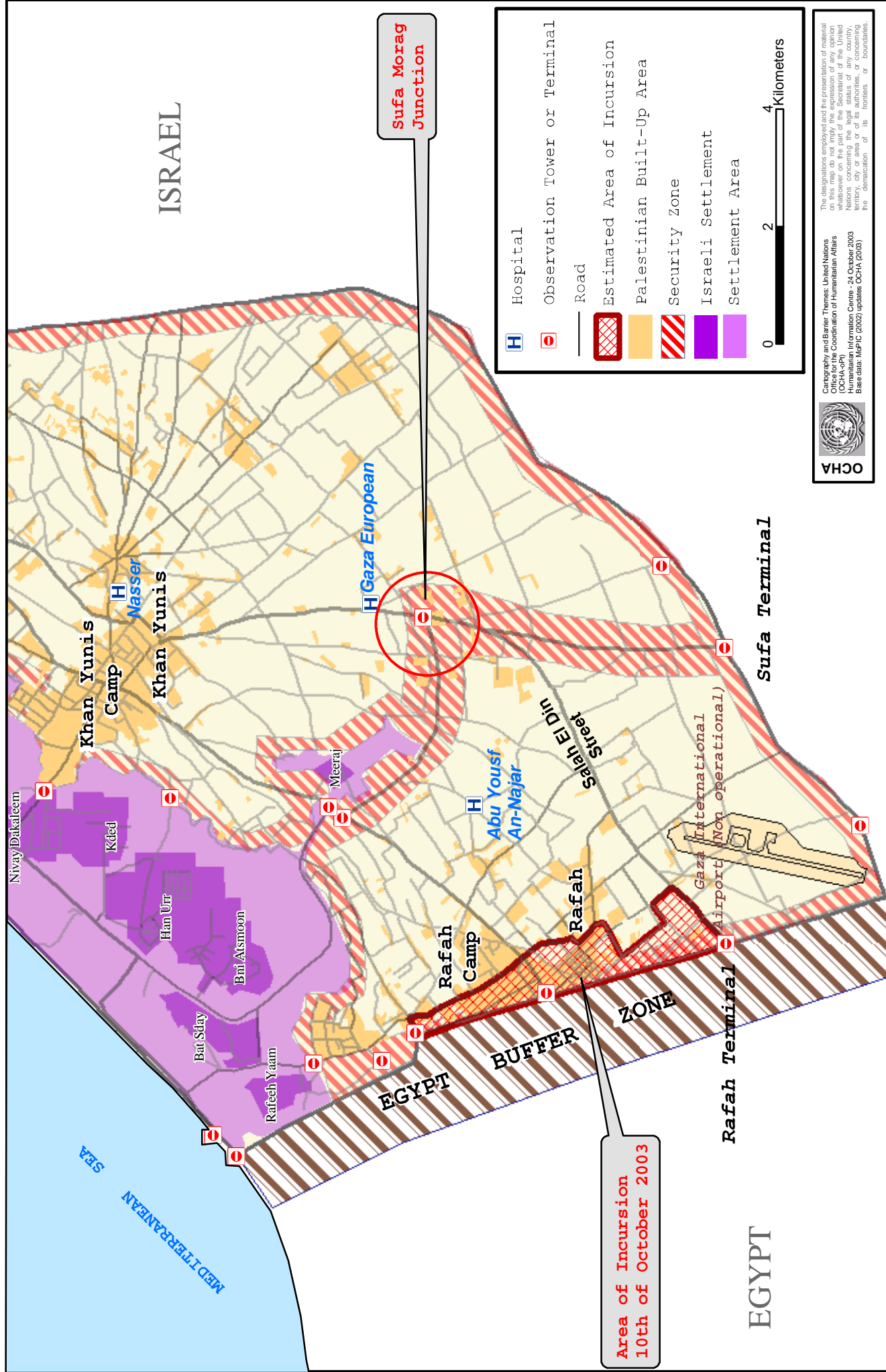
Inability of humanitarian organizations to cope with the destruction

National and international organizations face major logistic challenges dealing with the immediate aftermath of large-scale house demolitions. The Rafah Municipality’s Emergency Committee set up two initial transit stations in a sports hall and library on 11 October for hundreds of the homeless, providing shelter and food for the first 2-3 days.

UNRWA provided a one-off cash payment for nearly 250 families and cash assistance of varying amounts was provided by the Welfare Association, Rafah Governorate, Palestine Red Crescent Society, the Health Work Committees and the President’s Office. Donations of essential supplies ranging from food parcels, water, blankets, mattresses, clothes and kitchenware were given by the World Food Programme (WFP), Islamic Relief, the Union of Arab Doctors, World Vision, Save the Children (US), Catholic Relief Services, Emirates Red Crescent Society, ICRC and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Such assistance is immediate and short-term. A more sustainable approach to this level of destruction requires planning with adequate financial support to meet the costs of large-scale infrastructure re-investment. But the central issue is that organisations can not

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keep with the current pace of home destruction. UNRWA, for example, in the last 3 years has re-built 228 shelters to accommodate 236 families.

UNRWA's ability to construct new homes has been constrained by a lack of donor support. UNRWA needs over \$30.5 million for re-housing, yet has only \$3.2 million for 2003. Donors are reluctant to commit funds to infrastructure projects that may then be destroyed. In the past few weeks donors have publicly questioned their role in financing Israel's occupation. The growing sense of discontent has been fuelled by access restrictions faced by staff working in the oPt.

Instead, temporary responses are being adopted by UN organisations, notably UNRWA and WFP in conjunction with the governorate. Providing accommodation is the most pressing need. Rafah Governorate, the Welfare Association and UNRWA provide some cash assistance for monthly rental payments. But the private rental market is becoming saturated outside of Gaza city especially in camps.

Families have responded by living in smaller units due to the limited space. Some have migrated from Rafah. A small number of homeless have moved into houses abandoned by families living next to the buffer zone, who fled in the fear their homes will be demolished next.

The economic impact of the continuous incursions and increasing levels of dependency in Rafah is reflected in the levels of assistance provided by WFP in the last 5 months:

Date	Number receiving assistance
August 2003	3,473 families (20,838 beneficiaries)
End November 2003	8,809 families (53,454 beneficiaries)
End December 2003	expected 57,600 beneficiaries

Obstacles to humanitarian access

The Israeli authorities continue to impose restrictions on national and international staff members working on the humanitarian level in Gaza. These restrictions began following a Tel Aviv suicide attack carried out by 2 British passport holders at the end of April. Since then, all international staff entering Gaza are now subject to a screening process. In the last week, OCHA received reports that a list of "approved" organisations is being formulated by the IDF. It will impose further requirements on NGO operations.

Internal restrictions for all Gaza residents including humanitarian workers are a daily reality with arbitrary closure of the Beach road and Abu Houli junction. Between October 5 and 17, a third restriction was additionally imposed at the Morag-Sufa crossing. Coinciding with the IDF incursion into Rafah, these restrictions severely impeded the ability of international agencies including Medecins Sans Frontiers, Medecins du Monde, ICRC, WFP and UNRWA to provide humanitarian assistance.

Donors pull out of Beit Lahia sewage plant - potential environmental health crisis

The Beit Lahia waste water treatment plant in northern Gaza, originally designed to serve up to 50,000 habitants, is reaching a critical point. The daily amount of sewage far exceeds the capacity of the plant's seven effluent basins.

The combination of an ever-increasing volume of waste from a growing population (approx. 190,000) and insufficient capacity, has led to effluent overflowing into

surrounding sand dunes creating a lake of sewage covering over 112 acres (450 dunums) – compared to just 13 acres (112 dunums) in 1995.

This surrounding land is now saturated and if the situation is not addressed sewage will eventually flood into the surrounding communities. The local health clinic in Um An Nasir village which lies next to the lake, has observed that over 50% of children have problems with their digestive system including bloody diarrhea, abdominal pain, constipation and appetite loss, while skin infections and allergies are prevalent.

The long term effects of such a toxic environment are not clear although concern is expressed over stunted growth, mental disorder and potential cancer risk.

Solutions have been devised but have been stalled by closure and periodic Israeli incursions. In the short-term, the construction of an additional basin would reduce the volume of effluent. In the long-term, northern Gaza requires the construction of a larger treatment plant.

A proposed site was identified in the south-east of Beit Hanoun close to the border with Israel. The Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) undertook technical assessments to design the new plant and drew up tender documents.

However, European donor recently withdrew its financial support to fund the project. Although the IDF gave verbal approval in October and later in writing, the donor believes the situation is too unpredictable. The situation remains precarious, steadily worsening.



Palestinian worshippers praying at Gilo Checkpoint.

Accessing Holy Sites: Bethlehem residents prevented from praying at Al-Aqsa during Ramadan

For the four Fridays of Ramadan prayer, the IDF restricted and in some cases denied thousands of Muslim residents from Bethlehem access to prayer in Jerusalem. On the first Friday of Ramadan (31 October), tired and frustrated old men and women first kneeled down and prayed at the checkpoint and then overran soldiers at the crossing.

On the second and third Fridays, IDF soldiers denied passage to the majority of worshipers while screening a small number of people for onward travel on an ad hoc basis to control the crowd.

Before the last and holiest Friday prayer, on 18 November, the IDF announced that it would issue 5,000 permits to Palestinians from all over the West Bank to attend Friday prayers in Jerusalem. Permits would be issued to Palestinian men over the age of 45 years and women over the age of 35 years married and without a security file.

In the Bethlehem area, residents had to apply at an IDF office approximately 10 km from Bethlehem, accessible by a road open only to those who have permits to travel. Few heard the announcement.

Out of the city's 80,000 Muslim residents, 400 permits were allocated. However, two IDF soldiers were killed at a checkpoint on the same day and the city of Bethlehem was closed for 6 days. No one was allowed to exit the city for the prayers.

The difficulty in accessing holy sites in Bethlehem is not new. Military orders issued this year have turned the area around Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem into a military compound accessible daily to Israeli and foreign Jews. Local Palestinian communities have not been able to reach the mosque in the area since 1999.

During the three-day commemoration of the matriarch Rachel (5 - 7 November) the Bethlehem checkpoint was completely closed to allow worshipers to visit Rachel's Tomb. Unfortunately, this coincided with the second Friday of Ramadan when most of Bethlehem's Muslims were denied access to Jerusalem for Al-Aqsa prayers.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan: Israel not complying with UN Resolution on the Wall

On 24 November, the UN Secretary-General released his report requested by the General Assembly (GA), on the Government of Israel's compliance with the GA resolution. The resolution demands Israel to stop and reverse construction of a barrier in the occupied Palestinian territory. In his report, the Secretary General concludes that Israel is not in compliance with this demand. The report states:

I have concluded that Israel is not in compliance with the General Assembly's demand that it stop and reverse construction of the wall... In the midst of the road map process, when each party should be making good-faith confidence-building gestures, the Barrier's construction in the West Bank cannot, in this regard, be seen as anything but a deeply counterproductive act. The placing of most of the structure on occupied Palestinian land could impair future negotiations.

New settlement activity in and around Jerusalem

Construction of the Nov Zahav settlement in East Jerusalem began during this period. The total area of the settlement is 28.5 acres (114 dunums) and is located on Palestinian village lands of Jabal Al Mukaber, Obeidat, Seri, Zaatreh and Mashur. The construction provoked demonstrations by Palestinians.

In a separate initiative, a Jerusalem weekly reported that sources in the Jerusalem Municipality and the Housing and Construction Ministry have announced plans to build a settlement between the Mar Elias monastery, Kibbutz Ramat Rahel, Sur Bahir and Hirbet Mazmoriya –areas beyond the Green Line south of Jerusalem, near Bethlehem.

OCHA field workers have confirmed with local Bethlehem residents that an Israeli citizen has purchased a building in Bethlehem near Rachel's tomb. Two Palestinian shop owners in the building have been asked to leave and compensation is being offered by the new owner. One of other spaces in the building is inhabited by new residents.