



## FIELD UPDATE ON GAZA FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

12 January 2009, 1700 hours

The Israeli military operation has entered its seventeenth day. Israeli air, sea and ground forces continue to surround populated areas of the Gaza Strip, and the Gaza and North Gaza Governorates remain isolated from the rest of the territory. Following the aerial dropping of leaflets on Gaza City on 10 January warning of an escalation of the operation, Israel has deployed reservist units inside Gaza to support regular troops. Increasing numbers of Palestinians are fleeing their homes, fearing either a deeper incursion into cities or an expansion of the operation to other parts of the territory.

The humanitarian crisis is intensifying and the Palestinian civilian casualty rate is increasing. Many basic food items, including food for infants and malnourished children, are no longer available. Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip is causing extensive damage to homes and to public infrastructure and is jeopardizing water, sanitation and medical services. There are increasing risks of epidemic outbreaks resulting from the disruption of vaccinations, uncollected rubbish piling up in the streets and unsafe drinking water. Of particular concern is the long-term impact of the conflict on children, who make up 56 percent of the Gaza population.

### PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

The Israeli military remains present in the northern area, eastern border area and Rafah border area. Aerial bombardment, artillery shelling and naval firing continued throughout 12 January, intensifying around the Tuffah neighbourhood in the north of Gaza. Israeli ground troops advanced further into the northern and southern outskirts of Gaza City. On 11 January, Israeli army infantry and tanks entered the Ash Sheikh 'Ijleen suburb of Gaza City and fighting continued throughout the day.

On 12 January, the humanitarian "lull" was activated between 1000 and 1300 hours to allow the civilian population to access basic supplies and medical services.

Security for health care workers and access to medical facilities continues to be extremely difficult. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society suspended activities in the Al Zeitoun and Al Atatra regions as of 11 January after their ambulances were exposed to gunfire in those regions (on 9 and 10 January, respectively), injuring two ambulance personnel and damaging one ambulance. The Palestinian Medical Relief Society reported on 11 January that their two mobile clinics, normally serving more than 42 Gaza communities, have not been operating since 28 December due to insecurity. Twelve medical personnel have been killed since 27 December.

The Palestinian civilian casualty rate continues to increase. Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) figures as of 1600 hours 12 January are 910 Palestinians dead, of whom 292 are children and 75 are women (correction: 71 as of 11 January). The number of injured stands at 4,250, of whom 1,497 are children and 626 are women. The danger to medical staff and the difficulty of extracting the injured from collapsed buildings makes proper evacuation and estimation of casualties difficult.

Palestinian militants continue to fire rockets and mortars from the Gaza Strip into Israel. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, four Israelis have been killed since 27 December by rocket fire.

### SHELTER

The number of displaced people in Gaza remains in the tens of thousands, but an accurate estimate is not available because of ongoing insecurity, with the vast majority of displaced people reportedly residing with host families. The number of people who are seeking refuge in UNRWA shelters continues to rise: as of the evening of 11 January, UNRWA was accommodating 28,116 people in 36 emergency shelters. UNRWA opened five additional shelters on 11 January to accommodate the one-day increase of 2,240 people, with

the largest increases reported in the Gaza and Khan Yunis Governorates. Two additional shelters are being opened on 12 January in government schools in Jabalia. UNRWA will use these to reduce overcrowding in existing shelters in the north.

Based on need, UNRWA distributes drinking water, bread (6 pieces per person) and canned food to all shelters on a daily basis. All shelters except one have active medical points with UNRWA health personnel. Shelters in the North Gaza and Gaza Governorates continue to face a shortage of non-food items.

The shortage of available materials (e.g. plastic sheeting) remains an issue for people seeking to repair their houses.

## **ELECTRICITY / TELECOMMUNICATION**

The Gaza Power Plant (GPP) partially resumed function on 10 January. Due to repair to localized damage on 11 and 12 January, around 40 percent of the North Gaza, Gaza and Middle Area Governorates are now receiving power supply for 8-12 hours per day. GEDCO is awaiting confirmation for safe passage to repair localized damage and the three damaged lines coming from Israel.

On 12 January, UNRWA escorted 5 trucks of industrial fuel (235,000 litres) to the Gaza Power Plant. 360,000 litres are still at the filling point on the Palestinian side of the Nahal Oz pipeline; UNRWA is awaiting confirmation from the Israeli authorities for safe passage to collect this fuel.

The Palestinian Minister of Telecom and Information Technology issued a list of needs on 12 January for the repair and rehabilitation of the telecommunication network in Gaza. Priorities are to facilitate the entry of spare parts into Gaza and to facilitate the entry of batteries and small electricity generators.

## **HEALTH**

Hospitals remain under intense pressure due to the high number of wounded who continue to be brought in for treatment. WHO warns that more patients need to be evacuated through Rafah in order to free up space in the Shifa Hospital intensive care unit, which continues to be overwhelmed.

Physicians for Human Rights, among others, have voiced concerns about the situation of the chronically ill who usually access treatment outside of the Gaza Strip in hospitals in the West Bank and Israel. Very few chronically ill have so far been evacuated.

The central drug store including the cold rooms used for vaccine storage are now receiving 8-10 hours of power supply.

## **WATER AND SANITATION**

The damage to the water and wastewater networks has not been repaired. CMWU received unconfirmed reports that 200,000 cubic metres of wastewater has leaked from the Gaza City Wastewater Treatment Plant due to damage to the embankment of one of the treatment ponds sustained on 10 January.

500 UNICEF family kits for water purification for 30,000 people, and 29,952 bottles of drinking water (1.5 litres each) entered Gaza on 11 January and were provided to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society for distribution.

UNRWA provided fuel on 11 January to municipalities in Jabalia (10,000 litres), Middle Area (27,000 litres), and southern Gaza (4,000 litres) for solid waste collection. The Gaza Municipality estimates that 3-4,000 tonnes of rubbish have not been collected throughout the Gaza Strip since 3 January.

## **FOOD**

Many basic food items remain unavailable, particularly chicken, fish, frozen meat and milk. Bread is in short supply as the majority of mills and bakeries have stopped working (12 bakeries out of 47 are currently functioning, following a loan of 300 metric tonnes of wheat flour from WFP on 11 January). Food for infants

and malnourished children is also not available. Local production of fruit and vegetables is limited because farmers are unable or too afraid to harvest their fields, and whatever is available can not be transported from the southern Gaza Strip to the north because of the bisection of the territory. The shortage of cash, cooking gas and fuel, and frequent power cuts compounds the difficulty in obtaining and preparing food.

Another key challenge faced by humanitarian organizations remains the ability to distribute food aid within the Gaza Strip. The three-hour humanitarian lulls are not long enough for the distributions, thus organizations are forced to distribute during military activity as well, putting both staff and beneficiaries at risk.

On 11 January, as part of its regular food distribution, UNRWA distributed food parcels to 945 Special Hardship Case families (4,312 people) in two centres (Beach refugee camp, Rafah) and 784 parcels for families with more than 15 persons (estimated 10,000 persons). In addition to their regular programmes, UNRWA distributed food parcels to 400 families in Gaza Governorate that had been stranded in their homes for at least two days. As part of its regular food distribution, WFP distributed 75 metric tonnes of food to 1,000 families in the Khan Yunis and Gaza Governorates, and 17 metric tonnes to 273 families in Deir el Balah. In addition to this, WFP conducted an emergency distribution of 4,200 kilos of bread in Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya in response to a reported need in the area.

## INTERNAL ACCESS

Access between northern Gaza and the rest of Gaza remains possible only via the coastal road west of the former Israeli settlement of Netzarim and is restricted to humanitarian relief assistance (including ambulances) following coordination with the Israeli authorities.

## CROSSINGS

Kerem Shalom and Rafah crossings were open on 12 January, though other crossings remained closed.

On 11 January, 93.5 truckloads entered Gaza through Kerem Shalom crossing including 55.5 truckloads for aid agencies. The cargo which had piled up on the Palestinian side of Kerem Shalom was cleared on 11 January. 23 international surgeons, 8 truckloads (4 food and clothes; 4 medical supplies) and three new ambulances entered Gaza via Rafah. This is the first time that non-medical humanitarian supplies were allowed in through Rafah. On 11 January, 18 patients exited Gaza via Rafah to Egypt. Other crossings, including Nahal Oz, were closed on 11 January.

## PRIORITY NEEDS

*Protection of civilians:* Civilians, notably children who form 56 percent of Gaza's population, are bearing the brunt of the violence. As one of the most densely populated places in the world, more civilians risk being killed or injured if the conflict continues. The parties to conflict must respect the norms of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), in particular the principles of distinction and proportionality.

*Access for ambulance and rescue teams:* An unknown number of dead, injured and trapped people remain in houses which have been shelled and in areas where hostilities are ongoing. Due to attacks on ambulances, medical staff are fearful of reaching these places. The evacuation of wounded and safe passage of ambulances and health workers are fundamental tenants of IHL, and should be facilitated at all times.

*Opening of crossings:* The number of trucks allowed into the Gaza Strip needs to be increased. Additional crossings must be opened urgently, including Karni for the provision of bulk grain.

*Electricity* is necessary for the operation of services within the Gaza Strip notably health, water and sanitation services. Back-up generators are not meant to function more than 8 hours per day, and are not reliable following repeated and prolonged use. Although efforts have been made to repair damaged electricity lines, bring in needed transformers, and allow fixing of other transformers, much more needs to be done.

*Supply of fuel:* Industrial fuel is needed to power the Gaza Power Plant, which had been shut since 30

December but partially re-opened on 10 January. Nahal Oz crossing must remain open as it is the only crossing which can facilitate the transfer of sufficient amounts of fuel to restart and maintain operations of the power plant, and restock other types of fuel needed in the Strip. Delivery of fuel to its intended destination must be facilitated.

*Cash/liquidity:* The issue of cash remains of high priority. Cash has still not entered the Gaza Strip and is urgently needed. The mechanism for transfer still has to be established.