



FIELD UPDATE ON GAZA FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

17-18 January 2009, 1700 hours

“Where you have a direct hit on an UNRWA school where about 1,600 people had taken refuge, where the Israeli army knows the coordinates and knows who’s there, where this comes as the latest in a catalogue of direct and indirect attacks on UNRWA facilities, there have to be investigations to establish whether war crimes have been committed.”

- Christopher Gunness, UNRWA spokesperson

Following a meeting of the Israeli security cabinet on 17 January, Prime Minister Olmert announced a unilateral cease-fire in Gaza, which came into effect at 0200 hours local time 18 January, and stated that Israeli forces will remain in the Gaza Strip ‘for the time being’ and respond to fire from militants. For its part, Hamas initially declared it would continue hostilities until Israel withdrew its forces, opened the border crossings and ended its restrictions on the entry of goods to Gaza. On the afternoon of 18 January, Hamas declared its own cease-fire, announcing that Israeli forces had one week to leave the Gaza Strip.

The cease-fire follows twenty-two days of bombardment by land, sea and air which have left 1,300 Palestinians dead according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health and caused extensive destruction to homes and to public infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip. Supplies of basic foodstuffs and fuel, and the provision of medical, water and sanitation services remain critical. In a press release on 18 January, UNDP warned that ‘the long-term implications of this most recent conflict in terms of recovery and development are mounting. [T]he livelihoods and assets of tens of thousands of civilians are being systematically undermined through the destruction of productive resources such as fruit orchards, fisheries, and basic industries.’

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

The Israeli army remains in the north, east and Rafah border areas although there are reports that ground forces are withdrawing from some areas in Gaza City and Rafah following the cease-fire. Prior to the Hamas ceasefire, Palestinian militants continued to fire rockets and mortars into Israel and Israeli fire resulted in a number of Palestinian casualties.

On the evening of 16 January, an Israeli air strike struck a residential house in Bureij Refugee Camp, killing a mother and five of her children. Seven people attending a funeral wake house in Gaza City were killed on the same day when a shell struck the house, including three brothers of the deceased. The same evening, an Israeli shell struck the Abu al-Aish family home in Jabalia killing three daughters and a niece.

Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) figures as of 1600 hours 18 January are 1,300 Palestinians dead, of whom 410 are children and 104 are women. The number of injured stands at 5,300, of whom 1,855 are children and 795 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, including the determination of the number of Palestinian male civilian casualties. Approximately 100 bodies have been recovered today 18 January from areas from which the Israeli army has withdrawn. More are expected once the Israeli army completes its withdrawal from Gaza.

Nine Israeli soldiers have been killed since 27 December. According to the Magen David Adom national society, Israeli civilian casualties stand at four dead and 84 injured since 27 December.

OCHA’s casualty figures do not include the number of Palestinians or Israelis treated for shock.

UN FACILITIES

On 17 January, a number of white phosphorous shells struck the yard of an UNRWA school in Beit Lahia, causing panic among the 1,600 civilians who had taken refuge there. While evacuating the shelter, an explosive shell struck the third floor of the school, killing two brothers, aged five and seven, and injuring 14

others including the boys' mother. UNRWA has demanded an independent investigation into this incident. A total of more than 50 UN facilities have sustained damaged since 27 December. There are no bomb shelters in the Gaza Strip, and no alarm systems to warn of impending bombardment.

SHELTER

UNRWA is now operating 50 emergency shelters for 50,896 displaced people in Gaza. The shelters, many of them schools, are overcrowded. Prior to the military operation, UNRWA had procured and pre-positioned non-food items for 5,000 people. Due to the unprecedented number of people seeking refuge, UNRWA has been able to provide only basic levels of support, including food and water. The emergency shelters, especially those in the north, are in urgent need of non-food items. Altogether, the 50 shelters have a shortage of more than 23,000 blankets and mattresses.

Construction materials also need to be brought into Gaza. Thousands of families whose houses have been damaged are struggling to stay warm as they have no materials to repair the damage.

HEALTH

The ability of hospitals and intensive care units to cope with the constant influx of war injured is stretched to the limit, and medical personnel are under severe strain following twenty-two days of crisis.

According to WHO, the administrative building, emergency and ambulance station at the Al-Quds Palestinian Red Crescent Society Hospital were entirely destroyed when it was shelled on 15 January. The hospital's roof, top floor and a corridor were also damaged. The hospital is no longer able to function. In a separate attack on the same day, the Al Wafa Rehabilitation Hospital in east Gaza City sustained damage to the eastern wall of the geriatric ward. Despite the damage, the hospital continues to provide health care.

Following these incidents, 60 patients were evacuated from the Al Quds and Al Wafa hospitals to Shifa Hospital, adding additional strain to its already overloaded capacity.

On 16 January, the ICRC coordinated the trucking of more than 25,000 litres of fuel to ten hospitals and clinics in Gaza City. Fuel is badly needed for hospital generators as well as for ambulances to move and collect the injured and sick. During the past 48 hours, Shifa Hospital has been powered exclusively by generators to avoid unexpected power cuts, especially for patients in the intensive care unit.

WATER AND SANITATION

As of 18 January, an additional 100,000 people have access to running water, though approximately 400,000 Gazans still do not have running water. The improvement is due to the partial resumption of the electricity supply, CMWU refueling of some water wells, and the distribution of drinking water by several NGOs (including ACF and Save the Children), especially in Gaza and North Gaza. The availability of running water could be further improved if safe passage for the CMWU to fix three damaged trunk lines in east of Gaza City, northern Gaza and Middle Area was authorized. A main carrier line in the Khuza'a area east of Khan Yunis has been damaged, cutting the water supply to 25,000 people.

Following a visit to the Gaza City Wastewater Treatment Plant, the CMWU confirmed that all of the two million litres of wastewater in the lagoon shelled on 10 January leaked into surrounding agricultural land. Discharge pumps at the treatment plant are out of order due to the lack of fuel; the plant cannot discharge water to the sea unless these batteries are replaced or fixed.

A sewage pump that carries sewage from Beit Hanoun to the Beit Lahia Wastewater Treatment Plant is still damaged. According to the CMWU, 30 cubic metres of sewage are flowing into the streets of Beit Hanoun every hour.

FOOD

The Gaza population continues to face difficulties accessing food items due to the security situation and the lack of banknotes. In addition, the price of food items has increased considerably since the beginning of the Israeli military operation due to the significant shortage of basic foods and agricultural inputs (water, electricity, fuel, animal feed, fertilizers) throughout the Gaza Strip. According to WFP field observations, the price of chicken has increased 23 percent; the price of wheat flour has increased by 45 percent; the price of peppers has increased by 100 percent; and the price of tomatoes has increased by 500 percent.

On 17 January, WFP distributed 98 metric tonnes (Mt) of food to 800 families in the Gaza Governorate. In addition to its regular distribution, WFP distributed 2.7 Mt of bread in Beit Lahia and 1.8 Mt in Beit Hanoun on 16 January. UNRWA distributed food parcels to 874 families on 17 January.

ELECTRICITY

Since the evening of 17 January, most Gazans receive intermittent electricity, although some households still do not have electricity due to local damage to the network. Most areas in the Gaza and North Gaza governorates receive electricity 10-12 hours per day. Households in the Middle Area and Khan Yunis receive electricity 12-16 hours per day. Rafah receives 18-20 hours of electricity per day.

The Gaza Power Plant (GPP) is only partially functioning (30 MW out of 80 MW), and has not yet been able to turn on additional turbines. On 18 January, the GPP received 90,000 litres of industrial fuel from the filling depot at Nahal Oz. Despite the entry of industrial fuel into Gaza, the GPP still does not receive enough fuel: it needs 450,000 litres of industrial fuel per day to produce its full capacity of 80 MW.

Although most feeder lines have been repaired, two lines are still damaged in northern Gaza.

CASH / LIQUIDITY

Restrictions on the transfer of currency between the Palestinian banks in the West Bank and their counterparts in Gaza continue. These restrictions have prevented the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank from paying critical salaries and benefits to PA civil servants, and the banks from operating. Further, it has delayed the payment of salaries to UNRWA staff as well as payments for its cash assistance programme for the most destitute in Gaza (94,000 beneficiaries).

CROSSINGS

The Kerem Shalom, Karni and Rafah crossings were open on 18 January.

On 17 January, a total of 51 truckloads including 10 for aid agencies entered Gaza via Kerem Shalom crossing, along with 115,000 litres of industrial fuel for the power plant. Seven truckloads of medical supplies and a medical team of 27 medics were allowed into Gaza through Rafah. 27 medical cases were evacuated out of Gaza through Rafah.

On 16 January, a total of 73 truckloads including 12 for aid agencies entered Gaza through Kerem Shalom, along with nearly 150,000 litres of industrial fuel for the power plant. Twenty-one doctors, one stranded Palestinian, two ambulances and 10 truckloads of medical aid were allowed into Gaza through Rafah. Three medical cases were allowed out of Gaza through Rafah.

FUNDING

For the Initial Response Plan and list of immediate funding needs, visit:

http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_gaza_crisis_cap_funding_2009_english.pdf

PRIORITY NEEDS

Protection of civilians: Civilians are bearing the brunt of the violence. 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. The evacuation of wounded and safe passage of ambulances and health workers are fundamental tenets 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.

Mains electricity is vital 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. A system must be established that ensures the regular and predictable monthly transfer of the necessary cash - not only for the international organisations to be able to deliver much needed humanitarian assistance, but also in order to pay the salaries of PA personnel. Without a functioning bank system in Gaza, recovery efforts will be vastly undermined.