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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
occupied Palestinian territory

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

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LATEST DEVELOPMENT SINCE TUESDAY, 15 September 2009

- 16 September: The Israeli authorities have announced the imminent removal of 100 closure obstacles, predominately earth mounds, in Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Qalqiliya, Tulkarem and Jenin governorates. OCHA has confirmed the actual removal of a few of them in the Hebron area. On the eve of this announcement, there were 619 closure obstacles deployed throughout the West Bank, including 69 permanently staffed checkpoints.

West Bank

Military activities affecting civilians

During the week, a Palestinian man died of wounds sustained on 26 August 2009, when Israeli forces shot him after he reportedly attempted to stab a soldier in the Israeli-controlled area of Hebron city (H2). Two other Palestinians were injured by Israeli forces during the week. Since the beginning of 2009, Israeli forces have killed 16 Palestinians and wounded 621 others in the West Bank.

The two injuries were sustained during weekly anti-Barrier demonstrations in the villages of Ni'lin and Bil'in (Ramallah), when demonstrators were hit by tear gas canisters. Another three demonstrations were held, resulting in no injuries. Among them, a demonstration was organised by Palestinians from Biddu and Beit Surik (Jerusalem), protesting the continued closure of the Barrier gate near their villages, which prevents farmers from reaching their land located on the other side of the Barrier. The three additional agricultural Barrier gates in the vicinity have remained closed since 27 August, following the detonation of an explosive device at Beit Ijza gate.

Also this week, Israeli forces stationed at Huwwara checkpoint (Nablus) arrested a 15 year-old Palestinian boy, after he reportedly attempted to stab an Israeli soldier. Israeli forces conducted over 100 search and arrest operations during the week, the majority of which took place in the northern West Bank (77); a total of 42 Palestinians were arrested.

Settler violence on the rise; 19 Palestinians injured

There was a significant increase in Israeli settler violence against Palestinian civilians this week; there were 16 settler-related incidents, more than double the weekly average since the beginning of 2009 (7). Incidents included: opening fire, physical assault, property damage and trespassing, with four separate incidents resulting in 19 Palestinian injuries. Since the beginning of 2009, there have been 269 settler-related incidents reported in the West Bank, of which 41 resulted in the injury of 108 Palestinians.

Of note, on 9 September, a group of ten Israeli settlers from Susiya settlement physically assaulted a group of Palestinians from the nearby village of Susya (Hebron), injuring 15 of them.

This followed the demolition of an outpost by Israeli security forces, west of the affected Palestinian community, which the settlers re-constructed the same night. In a separate incident on 13 September, over 30 settlers from Yitzhar settlement set fire to a field in Far'ata village (Nablus), burning at least 50 trees. In addition, a group of settlers from the same settlement shot at two Palestinians, as the latter were herding their sheep in the vicinity of the settlement (Nablus), injuring one of them in the chest. These attacks come in the context of a "price tag" strategy, where, for every attempt to dismantle a settlement outpost, settlers attack Palestinian communities.

In the Qalqiliya governorate, clashes broke out between settlers from Havat Gilad outpost and Israeli security forces, following attempts to confiscate a settler truck, allegedly used to transport a mobile home to the outpost. One border policeman was lightly injured. Havat Gilad outpost is on the list of 23-26 outposts slated for evacuation by the Israeli Ministry of Defense.

In another incident, an Israeli settler opened fire at Palestinians in the Silwan neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, seriously injuring two, including a 13 year-old boy. Israeli police arrested the suspect at the scene and is investigating the incident. In the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, an Israeli settler physically assaulted and injured a member of the Al Ghawi family, which, along with the Hannoun family, was evicted from its home in early August 2009 following a court order. The homes were immediately handed over to a settler group. The assaulted Palestinian was subsequently arrested by the Israeli police when he went to the police station to file a complaint; he was released the following day on condition that he stays away from the neighborhood for 60 days.

Also this week, there were two reported incidents involving stone throwing towards Israeli-plated vehicles driving on Road 55, next to Azzun village (Qalqiliya). Following each incident, the Israeli military imposed a three-hour curfew on the village and searched a number of homes. The village's main entrance has remained closed over the past month following similar stone-throwing incidents.

Nearly 60 percent of the Muslim/Palestinian population continued to be denied access to Friday prayers in East Jerusalem

Nearly 60 percent of Palestinians, including all of Gaza's population and over 40 percent of the West Bank population, have been prohibited from entering East Jerusalem for Friday prayers during Ramadan this year. Access for eligible Palestinians holding West Bank IDs is severely obstructed by the Barrier and is restricted through only four authorized checkpoints (Qalandiya, Gilo, Shufat Camp and Az Zeitun). Entry of eligible Palestinians this Friday (11 September) again proved difficult, particularly at Qalandiya checkpoint, due to inadequate arrangements and overcrowding, mainly for women crossing. As a result, over 80 Palestinians were injured, predominantly women and children, 20 of whom were transferred to hospital for medical care and the rest required treatment on the scene. According to the Israeli authorities, approximately 190,000 West Bank Palestinians entered Jerusalem, compared to 60,000 and 130,000 during the first and second Fridays, respectively. Access continued to be restricted to men over 50 and women over 45 years of age, and boys and girls under 12, who could pass without permits. Men between 45-50 and women between 30-45 years of age were allowed to enter with special permits. Israeli security forces and roadblocks were deployed around the Old City for the duration of the Friday prayers.

Barrier section to be re-routed

On 9 September, the Israeli High Court of Justice issued a decision on four petitions (dealt with jointly) against the route of the Barrier on the section between Tulkarm and Qalqiliya cities and the opening regime of the agricultural gates along this section. The decision establishes that the current route causes a disproportionate harm to Palestinians and orders the relocation of part of this section along an alternative route proposed by the state. Despite the improvement, the Barrier has not been re-routed to the Green Line and the new still keeps 19,000 thousand dunums of Palestinian agricultural land behind the Barrier. By contrast, the Court refrained from ordering any change on the operation of the gates, claiming that this matter should be examined only after the new route is implemented.

Other access developments

This week, the 'Atara (partial) checkpoint, located on the main route into Ramallah City from the north, was staffed by the IDF over three days, during which soldiers performed random checks on Palestinian vehicles entering and leaving the city. On one of these days, the checkpoint was closed for three hours due to a suspicious object.

Along with other measures aimed at easing Palestinian movement implemented by the IDF in late June, 'Atara checkpoint ceased to be permanently staffed, while its infrastructure remained intact. As part of June's easings also, checking of Palestinian vehicles at Huwwara checkpoint, on the southern entrance into Nablus City, began to be performed on an ad hoc basis only. Yet, this week, long queues have been observed at this checkpoint during rush hours, following longer checking procedures.

Also this week, the Israeli authorities removed two road gates on the main road between Hebron City and Halhoul town.

Concern over possible Area C demolitions following High Court decision

In response to a petition submitted by a settler organisation ("Regavim"), the Israeli High Court of Justice ordered the Israeli authorities to update it within 45 days about the steps they have taken against dozens of Palestinians structures constructed without permits in the Area C sections of the Al-Sawiya and Yatma villages (Nablus governorate). The settler organisation also petitioned the High Court this week, requesting the demolition of 257 structures belonging to a Bedouin community located in the vicinity of the Kfar Adumim settlement (Jerusalem governorate), which were built without permits. While the final outcome of these petitions remains unclear, they have raised concerns among the affected communities about possible demolitions and displacement.

To date, there are approximately 3,000 Palestinian-owned structures located in Area C, which were built without permits and have been served demolition orders by the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) that can be executed at any given moment. Under the existing planning policy implemented by the ICA, it is virtually impossible for a Palestinian to obtain a building permit in Area C, forcing many of them to build "illegally" to address their housing needs and face the risk of demolition and displacement.

Gaza Strip

Two farmers sustained wounds

On two separate incidents during the week, Israeli forces opened fire towards Palestinian farmers while working in their land near the border fence in Beit Hanoun, injuring two of them. On another two incidents this week, Israeli naval forces fired several blank shells targeting Palestinian fishermen, forcing them to return to shore but resulting in no injuries or damage. Israeli forces have continued to enforce access restrictions by opening warning fire in the direction of farmers and fishermen accessing agricultural areas along the border fence with Israel, and fishing areas beyond three nautical miles from the coast.

On six separate occasions this week Israeli forces carried out incursions into Gaza territory, three of which resulted in the arrest of five Palestinian civilians. Also this week, Palestinian factions continued to fire sporadic rocket and mortar shells towards southern Israel, including at military bases, resulting in no casualties or damage. Since the end of “Cast Lead” offensive, Israeli forces killed 44 Palestinians, and injured 102 others in the Gaza Strip, and Palestinian militants killed one Israeli and injured another seven.

UNEP releases report on Gaza water

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) released this week an environmental assessment of the Gaza Strip, focusing on the period since the end of “Cast Lead”. The report calls for the “resting” of the aquifer and for the identification of safe, alternative water sources for the 1.5 million Gazans reliant on the current system for agriculture and drinking water. The report points to increased salinity from sea water intrusion, caused by over abstraction of the ground water, alongside pollution from sewage and agricultural run off. Pollution levels are such that infants in the Gaza Strip are at risk of nitrate poisoning. UNEP estimates that well over \$1.5 billion may be needed over 20 years to restore the aquifer, including the establishment of desalination plants to take pressure off the underground water supplies.

The UN Fact Finding Mission released its report on the Gaza Conflict

On 15 September, the Fact Finding Mission appointed by the UN Human Rights Council and led by Justice Richard Goldstone released the findings of its investigation on the “Cast Lead” operation and related events. Among other findings, the Mission found evidence of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by Israel and the Palestinian armed groups during the conflict, including actions amounting to war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity. The Mission concluded that ending impunity for violations of international law is key to resolving the “justice crisis” in the oPt and recommends a number of concrete measures designed to ensure accountability. The report will be discussed by the Human Rights Council on 29 September.

Tunnels under Gaza-Egypt border continue to claim lives

During the week, two Palestinians were killed and another one sustained a critical injury when tunnels under Rafah-Egypt borders collapsed. Five other people working in the tunnels were trapped inside during the incidents. According to media reports, this week the Egyptian authorities identified and destroyed ten tunnels. Since the end of “Cast Lead” offensive, a total of 46 Palestinians were killed and 59 others have been injured in various tunnel incidents.

A slight increase in imports; the blockade continues

This week (6-12 September 2009), the level of imports into Gaza slightly increased compared to the previous week (588 compared to 564 truckloads). This week's figure constitutes around 21 percent of the average weekly of truckloads that entered during the first five months of 2007, before the Hamas takeover. Similar to previous weeks, food and hygiene items comprised the majority of imported goods (523 truckloads or 94 percent of total imports). The remaining 6 percent included limited shipments of agricultural materials, packaging materials, medical supply and non-edible consumables.

The entry of other major essential goods including materials for reconstruction (cement, steel bars, glass, wood and others), spare parts for water and sanitation projects, packaging material, industrial and electrical materials, IT equipment and vehicles remain either restricted to limited quantities, or barred from entry. No exports were allowed this week. Gaza's last shipment of exports was on 27 April 2009.

Import of industrial fuel increases on the eve of the upcoming holidays

This week recorded the highest single-week delivery of industrial fuel, exclusively used to operate the Gaza Power Plant, since November 2007: approximately 3.8 million liters compared to a weekly average of 2.2 million litres in the past two years. According to the Palestinian Energy Authority, this increase is meant to compensate the suspension of imports on a number of days over the coming period, during which the Nahal Oz Crossing will shut down due to the Muslim and Jewish holidays.

Rafah Crossing partially opens for a limited number of humanitarian cases

This week, the Rafah Crossing, which has been closed since June 2007, was exceptionally opened on three days, allowing the entry and exit of people in and out of Gaza. Most passengers who crossed were humanitarian cases, including patients and their accompaniers. Since the end of the "Cast Lead" offensive, the Egyptian authorities have opened the crossing only two to three days a month, with only a limited number of humanitarian cases, mainly medical ones, allowed passage following special authorization. Data indicate that during the first eight months of 2009, an average of 79 people have entered via Rafah and 86 others have exited per day, compared to an average of 650 people who crossed daily each way in the first six months of 2006.