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Gaza Strip Situation Report

The Humanitarian Impact of the Karni Crossing Closure: Bread running out in Gaza

19 March 2006

Following the closure of Karni, most bakeries in the Gaza Strip today are closed, because wheat flour stocks have finished. Bread is the staple food for 1.3 million Palestinians in Gaza. There are long lines of people outside the few bakeries that still have limited stocks of bread and the bakeries are rationing bread to those waiting.

Gaza requires 450MT of wheat each day to maintain bread supplies.¹ The usual 30-60 day wheat stock kept in Gaza is exhausted. Other basic food commodities are in extremely short supply including dairy products and fruit. Rice and sugar are selling at more than twice their normal price and are also very difficult to find in stores.

Karni crossing (al Muntar) is the only source to import large-scale quantities of wheat and the commercial terminal for imports and exports of goods from Israel. As of today, Karni crossing has been closed 46 days or 60% of this year.² In comparison, in 2005, Karni was closed for a total of 18% of the year and 19% of the year in 2004. (Figure 1).

United Nations organisations are facing similar constraints. UNRWA has been unable to start its emergency food distribution today because of insufficient wheatflour supplies. The World Food Programme reports that 3,594 MT of wheatflour contracted to local mills were unable to enter Gaza during the recent brief period Karni was opened.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) state that the reason for Karni's closure is the suspected presence of tunnels dug by Palestinian militants leading to the crossing. The IDF contends that it will not open the crossing until the Palestinian Authority (PA) digs several trenches to intercept these tunnels. Palestinian security services, at the request of the IDF, have dug four trenches, totalling more than 1.5 kilometres in length around the crossing, in an effort to find these tunnels. So far, none have been found.

Agricultural Export losses

Karni crossing is also the only point of access for Palestinian exports from the Gaza Strip. The loss of value in exports is estimated to be US\$ 500,000 a day. The Palestine Trade Center (Paltrade), estimates that 80 daily truckloads have not been able to exit since the closure at Karni crossing was imposed.³

Israeli textile companies have also raised concern over the closing of Karni. They state that approximately NIS 50 million of seasonal merchandise, which had been contracted out to 20 Gazan sewing factories, is stuck at the crossing. Unable to meet contract requirements in Israel and abroad, they have expressed concern over potential export losses and harm to the business reputation of Israeli textile manufacturers.⁴

Kerem Shalom

According to the IDF, it has opened Kerem Shalom – a crossing in the southern tip of Gaza – as an alternative point of access for imported commercial goods and export products. This crossing point has only a fraction of the capacity of the Karni and in particular is not equipped to handle the approximately 450 MT of wheat needed in Gaza for bread.

The Palestinian Authority has so far refused the IDF offer citing its wider political concerns.

Access and Movement Agreement

In November 2005, the Israeli Government agreed that Karni Crossing would be the primary crossing point for commercial goods. The Access and Movement Agreement brokered between Israel and the Palestinian Authority by the Quartet Envoy James Wolfensohn and Secretary of State Rice on the 15 November 2005 states:

The passages will operate continuously. On an urgent basis, Israel will permit the export of all agricultural products from Gaza during this 2005 harvest season... At that time, the number of export trucks per day to be processed through Karni will reach 150, and 400 by end-2006. In addition to the number of trucks above, Israel will permit export of agricultural produce from Gaza and will facilitate its speedy exit and onward movement so that quality and freshness can be maintained. Israel will ensure the continued opportunity to export.

Karni closure – facts and figures

Figure 1: Yearly percentage in which Karni crossing was closed (total and partial) ⁵

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006 (as of 19 Mar)
% closed	8%	6%	24%	19%	18%	60%

Figure 2: Opening hours from 9-13 March

Day	Opening hours	Imports (truckloads)	Exports (truckloads)
Thursday , 9 Mar.	6 hours (10 – 4 pm)	162	0
Friday, 10 Mar.	2 hours (1.30 pm – 3.30pm)	32	0
Saturday, 11 Mar.	Closed	0	0
Sunday, 12 Mar.	6 hours (10am – 4pm)	161	22
Monday, 13 Mar.	6 hours (10am – 4pm)	160	20

Figure 3: Timeline

5 January:	The IDF requests the Palestinian Authority (PA) to dig a trench west of the Karni crossing to intercept a possible tunnel leading to the crossing. The PA starts this work the same day, digging a 6 metre trench approximately 1km in length.
20 January:	The PA completes the trench. According to the IDF, one tunnel was discovered, while according to the PA, a small hole, possibly the start of a tunnel, connecting to a water pipeline was discovered.
23 January:	The IDF notifies the PA that it has information of another tunnel and requests the PA to dig a deeper trench, this time 10m in depth.
30 January:	Completion by PA of trench. No tunnel located. The IDF requests the PA to dig another trench, 10m in depth, 300m long, 100m northwest of Karni crossing.
31 January:	PA begins third trench.
14 February:	Sufa Crossing closed for security reasons
21 February:	Karni is closed in the evening amid Israeli reports of an explosion in the vicinity of the crossing.
27 February:	The IDF requests the PA to dig a trench, 20m long and 4m deep on a specific location near Karni crossing. The PA complies but no tunnels are found. Digging continues.
1 March:	Israeli Defense Minister Mofaz indicates that Karni will re-open on 2 March. However this did not take place.
9 March:	Karni opens again operating on a partial basis (see figure 2).
14 March:	IDF closes Karni again.

Following the outbreak of the second *intifada* in late September 2000, various security measures were imposed by the IDF including restricted opening hours and frequent closures. This led to a decrease in the flow of exported goods through the Karni crossing.⁶

¹ WFP Sitrep Vulnerability Analysis Mapping 9 March 2006

² Four of the days (10-13 January – ‘Eid al Adha) were due to Palestinian decision making.

³ These figures are based on truckload movement before the closure was imposed. The 15 November Agreement set an export target of 150 daily truckloads.

⁴ Association of Textile and Fashion Manufacturers in the Industrialists Association Press Release, 30 January 2006

⁵ Palestine Ministry of National Economy/2000 – 2004 Data obtained from UNSCO

⁶ In the last three months of 2000, Karni crossing was closed 22 days and partially closed 11 days. (Partially closed means that the crossing is operating only some of its official opening hours, and/or that it is operating only in one direction).