



## FIELD UPDATE ON GAZA FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

16 January 2009, 1700 hours

*“Our appeal is not just for the safety of the UN staff and compounds and locations and convoys but even more important, the civilian population, the innocent men, women and children who continue to die and be killed in this conflict and injured in unacceptable numbers by any measure and of course the scale of destruction continues, as you would expect when built-up areas are subjected to artillery and tank fire.”*

*- John Ging, Director of UNRWA Operations in the Gaza Strip*

The Israeli military operation entered its twenty first 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. The Israeli army remains in the north, east and Rafah border areas.

Yesterday, 15 January, witnessed the most intensive Israeli bombardment to date, particularly in Gaza City as Israeli ground forces advanced deeper into the city. In the 48-hour period up to 1600 hours on 16 January, 142 Palestinians were killed, of whom 48 were children. An additional 455 were injured, of whom 145 were children.

Supplies of essential commodities such as food, cooking gas, water and fuel remain critical. Large numbers of civilians remain trapped in their homes while thousands more are seeking refuge with host families and in UNRWA emergency shelters. Water, sanitation and electricity systems are in a poor condition.

Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) figures as of 1600 hours 16 January are 1,155 Palestinians dead, of whom 370 are children and 85 are women. The number of injured is at least 5,015 injured, of whom 1,745 are children and 740 are women. An estimated 400-500 are critically injured.

### PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

The danger to civilians is compounded by the many Palestinians fleeing to urban centres in response to warnings from the Israeli army to evacuate their homes. Approximately 700 Palestinians were taking refuge in the UNRWA compound and 500 in the Al Quds Palestinian Red Crescent Society Hospital on 15 January when the buildings were shelled: both groups were evacuated to other emergency shelters.

More than 20 bodies were recovered this morning in Tel Al Hawwa, the scene of the most intensive fighting on 15 January, after Israeli forces withdrew.

Palestinian militants continue to fire rockets and mortars from the Gaza Strip into Israel. According to the Magen David Adom national society, Israeli civilian casualties stand at four dead and 84 injured since 27 December. Nine Israeli soldiers have been killed since 27 December.

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

### SAFETY OF MEDICAL PERSONNEL

According to the Palestinian MoH, 13 medical personnel have been killed and 22 medical personnel injured while on duty since 27 December 2008. In addition, 16 ambulances and 16 health facilities have been damaged through direct or indirect shelling since 27 December 2008.

Max Gaylard, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory, said on 16 January, “The situation for hospitals, medical workers and the injured in Gaza is alarming and deteriorating. Hospitals must be protected and remain neutral areas under any circumstances. Civilians and the injured must have access to medical care.”

## HEALTH

Hospitals, notably intensive care units, remain overloaded with the constant influx of war injured.

Due to the understandable focus on emergency trauma, WHO remains concerned regarding the management of chronic disease patients and public health in the Gaza Strip. According to the UNFPA, an average of 150-170 babies are born every day in the Gaza Strip, of which an average of 25 are delivered by C-section. Since the beginning of the Israeli military incursion, an estimated total of 3,150-3,570 babies have been born. UNFPA remains concerned over reports of premature labour and delivery resulting from shock and trauma from continuous bombing, and the exposure of premature and newborn infants to hypothermia due to the lack of electricity.

Monitoring and surveillance of water quality has not been carried out since the central public health laboratory closed on 3 January due to its proximity to the fighting.

## SHELTER

Estimates of the total number of displaced people in Gaza remain unavailable, as the majority of displaced are staying with relatives and friends. Distribution of needed non-food items to families hosting displaced people has been limited due to the ongoing insecurity.

On 15 January, UNRWA opened eight new emergency shelters in the Gaza Strip to accommodate more than 5,000 additional displaced people. More than 45,000 people, among them at least 25,200 children, have now sought refuge in a total of 49 emergency shelters. With an estimated 1,000 people per shelter, instead of the 500 originally planned by UNRWA, the shelters are overcrowded.

UNRWA continues to deliver needed food and water to the emergency shelters. On 14 January, WFP distributed six metric tonnes of high-energy biscuits to 15,514 people staying at UNRWA shelters in North Gaza and 13,770 people staying at shelters in Gaza Governorate.

## WATER AND SANITATION

Approximately 500,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip still do not have access to running water as the CMWU, Gaza's water utility, has still not received approval for safe passage to repair damage to the water and waste water networks. CMWU has also not been able to assess the impact of damage incurred to the Gaza City Wastewater Treatment Plant. Eyewitnesses report that a stream of sewage is flowing up to one kilometre from the plant. CMWU managed to deliver 2,000 litres of fuel to the Beit Lahia Wastewater Treatment Plant which should allow it to function for one week. Sewage continues to flow in the streets of Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahia.

## FOOD

A key challenge for the Gaza population is accessing food items due to the security situation, both for farmers to access their fields and for the population to reach shops. The lack of banknotes means the population is unable to pay for the limited food stocks in the markets. Food distributions require time. Reaching vulnerable people is complicated by the fact that families are often fearful to venture out to distribution sites.

UNRWA operated seven out of ten food distribution centres on 15 January and distributed food rations to 40 families; food was distributed to an additional 656 families to address emergency needs. WFP did not distribute food on 15 January. On 14 January, it distributed 5,600 kg of bread, of which 1,800 kg in Beit Hanoun and 2,400 kg in Beit Lahia.

Since 27 December, WFP has managed to bring 3,552 metric tonnes (Mt) of food into Gaza. WFP warehouses are currently storing 4,400 Mt of food commodities which represents around 75 percent of their full storage capacity. WFP currently has access to only 66 percent of existing stocks because of security conditions. Current constraints to WFP's ability to preposition required stocks in Gaza include

transporting goods into Gaza (in terms of the backlog at Kerem Shalom) and transporting goods from the crossing to warehouses/distribution centres because of the security situation.

## **ELECTRICITY**

Although power supply has increased as a result of repairs and the partial operation of the Gaza Power Plant (GPP), most households still do not have electricity due to damage to the network (e.g. local power lines). On 15 January, two lines from Israel were damaged, and the feeder lines from the GPP were damaged in three locations. The GPP is still functioning, although power to Gaza Governorate has been redirected to the Middle Area and Khan Yunis due to the inability to reach households in Gaza City. As a result, while people in Gaza Governorate have reduced power supply since 15 January, the population in the Middle Area and Khan Yunis currently experiences good power supply.

## **CASH / LIQUIDITY**

There are currently restrictions on the transfer of currency between the Palestinian banks in the West Bank and their counterparts in Gaza. 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).

## **ACCESS WITHIN THE GAZA STRIP**

Access between northern Gaza and the rest of Gaza remains possible only via the coastal road west of the former Israeli settlement of Netzarim following coordination with the Israeli authorities by humanitarian agencies.

As of 15 January, the humanitarian “lull” was increased to four hours. On 16 January, it was activated between 1000 and 1400 hours.

## **CROSSINGS**

Only the Kerem Shalom and Rafah crossings were open on 15 January.

On 15 January, 69 truckloads including 39 for aid agencies were allowed into the Gaza Strip through Kerem Shalom crossing. At Rafah crossing, 15 truckloads of food, medical and relief supplies entered Gaza as well as five doctors. 18 medical cases were evacuated out of Gaza via Rafah.

The Palestinian Petroleum Corporation reported that its office at Nahal Oz was severely damaged on 15 January by Israeli bulldozers. The filling depots have not been damaged.

On 14 January, only the Kerem Shalom and Rafah crossings were open. 102 truckloads including 36 for aid agencies were allowed entry to Gaza through Kerem Shalom, along with nearly 150,000 litres of industrial fuel for the power plant were received through Kerem Shalom. At Rafah crossing, 12 truckloads of medical, food and relief supplies were allowed into Gaza. Thirty eight medical cases were evacuated through Rafah; 18 Egyptian Red Crescent ambulances were allowed into Gaza to help evacuate a greater number of medical cases.

In December 2005, prior to PLC elections, an average of 631 trucks was entering Gaza on a daily basis. In May 2007, prior to the Hamas takeover of Gaza, the figure dropped to 475 trucks daily and further still in November 2008 to 23 trucks daily. Since 27 December 2008, Kerem Shalom has a daily average of 73 trucks entering Gaza.

## **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](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. 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. 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.