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Protection of Civilians Weekly Report - 291

24 – 31 December 2008**Unprecedented Military Operation in the Gaza Strip**

On 27 December, the IDF launched an attack of unprecedented scale on the Gaza Strip, labelled "Operation Cast Lead". According to the Israeli government, the attack was launched in response to unyielding Palestinian rocket and mortar fire into Israel since the end of the 19 December Egyptian-negotiated "calm". Israeli warplanes bombed more than 400 targets throughout the densely populated Gaza Strip; many during a simultaneous wave of bombings within the first few minutes of the operation.

Hundreds of Palestinians killed and over 1500 injured—in three days

Exact casualty figures are impossible to provide at this juncture. However, several humanitarian and human rights organizations including Al Mezan, PCHR, and UNRWA, as well as healthcare providers, have estimated as many as 310-390 fatalities and 1500-1800 Palestinians injured in the first three days. At least 32 Palestinian children were killed in the first 48 hours of airstrikes.

Increased rockets and mortars fired towards Israel

Since the beginning of the Israeli military escalation on 27 December, Palestinian militants fired over 247 rockets and mortars, some of which landed in large Israeli towns and cities, killing four Israelis, and injuring 34 others.

Destruction of buildings and resultant casualties

The Israeli attack hit all parts of the densely populated Gaza Strip. Air-strikes targeted a variety of public buildings, including mosques, civil police stations, universities and sports centres *in addition* to government buildings and military training bases. The IDF claims that all targeted buildings either sheltered Hamas forces or served as command and control bases, arms and ammunition depots and explosive development laboratories.

On 27 December, an Israeli missile attack killed at least 40 people at the police headquarters in

Gaza City during preparations for a graduation ceremony for regular civilian and traffic police.

Many of the civilian casualties occurred among those living in residences within the vicinity of targeted buildings. In one such incident, on 28 December, Israeli missiles hit and destroyed a mosque in Jabalia Camp, instantly killing five children of the same family living in an adjacent home. Four other children were also injured in the bombing (Al Mezan).

High risk of displacement

Telephone calls from IDF personnel, or leaflets dropped by airplanes to people throughout Gaza ordering evacuation from their homes prior to bombings were widely reported. While in some cases homes were bombed immediately after the calls were made, others were not. Nevertheless, given the high population density in Gaza and the close proximity between homes, this has caused considerable panic and uncertainty among those receiving phone calls, as well as neighboring houses. People have been evacuating their homes and staying in streets for long hours exposed to further danger, or staying with relatives. In some cases, residents have reportedly gathered on rooftops to prevent the Israeli Air Force from shelling them. UNRWA schools throughout Gaza are prepared to temporarily shelter displaced persons.

Humanitarian operations severely affected by high levels of insecurity

The widespread Israeli airstrikes have severely disrupted humanitarian and relief operations. While UN installations and personnel have not been directly targeted during the air strikes, many beneficiaries have been killed or injured, and buildings and equipment damaged. In one of the gravest incidents on 27 December, an IAF missile targeted a group of Palestinian policemen standing in front of the UNRWA Training Centre in Gaza City. Eight UNRWA students waiting for UN buses were killed and 19 others were injured. Another air strike on 30 December of the former Preventative Security building in Sheikh Zayed City caused extensive damage to a WFP flour storage warehouse. Other damaged UN installations include thirteen UNRWA schools, and the offices of UNSCO, OCHA, and FAO.

Increased risks faced by humanitarian aid workers in Gaza conflict zones have been exacerbated by an almost complete collapse of the Gaza police force, exposing humanitarian staff to the threat of violence and looting. As a result of heightened levels of insecurity, some critical humanitarian activities, including food distribution to the poorest households by WFP, have been suspended.

Widespread reactions in the West Bank to Gaza airstrikes

Palestinians throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, reacted to the Israeli airstrikes in Gaza with a general commercial strike and organized demonstrations, during which two Palestinians, including a 17-year-old boy, were killed (Ramallah) and more than 100 Palestinians were injured—the majority by live ammunition. Four Israeli soldiers were also injured in demonstrations. A demonstration in the Palestinian-controlled area of the city of Hebron (H1) resulted in the injury of five Palestinians when PA security forces opened fire with live ammunition and physically assaulted the demonstrators. The IDF claims that 19 Israelis have been injured in the West Bank. In two separate incidents, Palestinians stabbed five Israeli settlers either in or near Modi'in (Ramallah) and Qedumim settlements (Qalqiliya).

Although Israeli military search operations in the West Bank declined slightly this week (74 vs. 75 of the previous reporting period), there was a sharp increase in the number of Palestinians arrested (75 arrests compared to 56).

Humanitarian aid allowed into the Gaza Strip

The Gaza crossings have remained closed during the reporting period, except for Kerem Shalom crossing, which was partially opened for four days for the entry of humanitarian supplies. A total of 218 truckloads carrying mainly food and medical supplies, were allowed entry to the Gaza Strip. Other Gaza goods crossing including the grains conveyer belt and Nahal Oz fuel pipelines remained closed exacerbating the wheat grain and fuel shortage crisis.

The Karni conveyer belt was open on 26 December for the entry of 25 trucks of wheat (nearly 1,000 tonnes) and 18 trucks of animal feed. As of 31 December, nearly 100 truckloads, including 45 of humanitarian supplies, had been expected to arrive into Gaza during the day through Kerem Shalom.

Until 27 December, the number of Gaza truckloads had been severely reduced to an average of 16 truckloads per day—down from 123 truckloads per day in October and 475 trucks per day in May 2007, before the Hamas takeover.

The lack of cash affects UNRWA programs

The ban on the entry of cash-notes into Gaza has hampered several humanitarian programmes run by UNRWA. As a result, the agency was forced to suspend its cash distribution program to some 94,000 dependent households, as well as payment to beneficiaries in its “cash for work” program and various suppliers of goods and services within Gaza.

Wheat shortage in Gaza

The Gaza Ministry of National Economy has been rationing wheat flour distribution since 26 December, and has ordered wheat flour importers/wholesalers to bypass retailers and distribute or sell wheat received during the week (400Mt) directly to Gaza's population. Large queues at bakeries continue to be reported, as bread is rationed at fifty pita loaves per extended household per day.

During the week, the Bakery Owners' association received 17.5 tonnes of cooking gas, thereby allowing the operation of 40 out of 47 pita bread bakeries. The distribution of the Bakery Owners' association's wheat flour and cooking gas is organized in a manner that allows for bakeries in almost every neighbourhood, to help minimize population travel in conflict-torn areas.

However, due to the lack of wheat flour and other food items in Gaza, UNRWA food distribution programs to nearly half the population of Gaza (750,000 people) has been suspended since 18 December. As a result, people depending on food distribution and the emergency assistance programs have been adversely affected.

Gaza fuel depletion and electricity outages

After only four days of operation, Gaza's only power plant shut down on 30 December for the sixth time since 5 November 2008 for lack of fuel and spares parts. At any given time, more than 650,000 residents of Central and Northern Gaza experience power cuts lasting 16 hours per day. (See also health section)

Gaza healthcare in time of crisis

World Health Organization (WHO) reports that although healthcare in Gaza had been initially

overwhelmed by the large numbers of Palestinian casualties, it remains functional. Even so, the Central Drug Store reported that 105 drugs and 225 medical supplies of the essential drug and supplies list are still unavailable in Gaza and approximately 20% of ambulances are grounded due to the dearth of spare parts.

Hospitals affected by fuel shortages and electricity failure

The current level of generator fuel at health facilities is sufficient for one month under normal conditions. However, when electricity cuts reach eight hours per day, current fuel levels are only sufficient for 10-14 days. Moreover, as generators are not designed to operate for long hours, the increasing dependence on them is of particular concern.

The referral of patients to Israeli hospitals suspended by the PA in Ramallah

The PA Ministry of Health in Ramallah has recently decided to refer Palestinian patients requiring medical treatment unavailable in Gaza to Egyptian hospitals only, thus suspending the arrangement in regard to Israeli hospitals. As a result, the Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee is no longer submitting requests for that purpose to the Israeli side. Due to current conditions, evacuation of patients in critical conditions through Rafah crossing is not always possible.

Access to water

Palestinian Water Authority to sign fuel payment contract

After nearly five months of non-payment, on 24 December, the Ramallah-based PWA agreed to sign the fuel payment contract with a local supplier, enabling the Gaza Coastal Water Utility (CMWU) to receive its monthly fuel supply. The fuel shipment is mainly used for the operation of drinking water wells and sewage treatment plants. However, CMWU is still in urgent need of other essential equipment and spare parts to provide adequate service to Gaza population. CMWU has been largely dependent on fuel donations from UNRWA, UNICEF, and other humanitarian organizations.

Impact of military operations on water services

IAF airstrikes in Gaza City and east of Jabalia on 27 December extensively damaged two water wells, rendering a population of 30,000 Palestinians without water. To alleviate the situation, CMWU redirected the affected areas to functioning water wells in other areas, thus increasing the burden stress on functioning wells.

Working under fear of being targeted

The use of water piping greatly increases the risk of CMWU employees mistakenly identified by IAF aircraft as militants transporting rockets. Despite increased risks, CMWU operations are ongoing. However, in the event of an Israeli ground operation, CMWU, lacking spare parts, will likely be unable to cope with damages.

Water disinfection materials

Since 5 November, there has been a shortage of chlorine for water treatment, increasing the risk of outbreak of waterborne diseases. An expected one month supply of chlorine (60 tonnes), due on 29 December, was not allowed into Gaza. According to UNICEF, the chlorine currently available in Gaza is enough for only one week.