



FIELD UPDATE ON GAZA FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

8 January 2009, 17.00 hours

UNRWA suspends relief operations in the Gaza Strip until security can be guaranteed

The Israeli military operation has entered its thirteenth day. Israeli air, sea and ground forces continue to surround Gazan populated areas while the Gaza and North Gaza governorates remain isolated from the rest of the territory.

A humanitarian cease-fire, the first since hostilities began on 27 December, came into effect between 1300 and 1600 hours on 7 January to allow the civilian population to access basic supplies and medical services and medics to access the dead and wounded trapped under destroyed buildings. Israeli air strikes and clashes resumed as soon as the cease-fire ended. Today, air strikes continue notably in open areas of Nuseirat, Beit Lahia and Rafah (along the Egyptian border).

The Israeli military operation has caused extensive damage to homes, civilian institutions and infrastructure. The entire Gaza Strip is on the verge of collapse, already weakened by the 18-month blockade on the territory. Most people have no electricity and no clean running water. While food assistance has entered, agencies are facing difficulties to distribute it due to the security situation. Food stocks are low in people's homes, people are afraid to go out to find food and there is no cooking gas to cook whatever is available. Many homes do not have glass in their windows, and others are leaving them open to avoid shattering. Without electricity, the hospitals are operating on backup generators and are low on fuel, threatening the life-saving services doctors and nurses are urgently providing in the overloaded hospitals.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

On 8 January, a UN-contracted convoy transporting food through the Erez crossing was shelled. One UNRWA-contracted worker was killed and two injured. At approximately 14.00, a UN convoy of two armoured vehicles escorted an ambulance through Gaza City to recover the body of a local UN staff member during the scheduled humanitarian cease-fire. On Salah Ed Din Street the vehicles were targeted by three rounds of small arms fire. One armoured vehicle was hit. Two international staff were in the vehicle, but no casualties were reported. The movement of the convoy had been coordinated in advance and the UN vehicles were clearly identified. UNRWA has announced that it is temporarily suspending its operations until real security guarantees can be ensured.

Following repeated requests since 3 January for safe passage, four ambulances from the ICRC and PRCS succeeded in reaching several buildings in the Zeitoun neighbourhood which had been the scene of heavy Israeli shelling. In total, 18 wounded and 12 other survivors were evacuated by donkey cart to the ambulances, as military fortifications prevented the ambulances from reaching the houses. "The ICRC/PRCS team found four small children next to their dead mothers in one of the houses. They were too weak to stand up on their own. In all there were at least 12 corpses lying on mattresses", according to the ICRC press release. The ICRC stated that the IDF did not assist the wounded and delayed access to medical assistance, and has demanded safe passage for ICRC and PRCS ambulances to search for other wounded who remain trapped in neighbouring houses.

As of 16.00 on 8 January, the MoH in Gaza revealed that 50 bodies were recovered today from the rubble of houses: the total number of fatalities is now 758, of whom 257 (34%) are children and 56 (7.4%) are women. Of the 3,100 injuries, 1,080 (34.8%) are children and 452 (14.6%) 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.

Palestinian militants continued to fire rockets and mortar shells into Israel resulting in moderate to light injuries. An IDF soldier was killed this morning.

SHELTER

UNRWA is currently operating 27 shelters with over 19,800 displaced people. Water tanks and water are reportedly available at all shelters. UNRWA's stocks of NFIs in Gaza have been exhausted, and the quantity distributed is insufficient for the number of people in shelters. On 7 January, the Israeli air force dropped leaflets over Rafah warning people to evacuate their homes in the Philadelphi corridor area. Thousands of people have fled to emergency shelters.

ELECTRICITY

Virtually all of Gaza is out of power. Yesterday evening, the power plant turned on one turbine to test the network. Areas did not receive electricity due to other damage, and GEDCO is now working to repair the damage pending coordination with the Israeli authorities.

GEDCO reports that all the damaged electrical lines from Israel have been fixed with the exception of one line (13 MW) in northern Gaza. However, the majority of these lines are not being utilized due to compounded damage to the network. One line providing electricity to Shifa Hospital has been fixed and is being utilized

HEALTH

WHO reported yesterday that it is greatly concerned by the public health situation in Gaza and the potential impact of the total halt in vaccinations since 27 December 2008. This could result in outbreaks of epidemics, a risk increased by Gaza's high population density and dire living conditions.

Antenatal services have also been suspended, and while there are reported individual cases of pregnant women being transported to hospitals in ambulances for safe deliveries, UNFPA have grave concerns that a large number of women are not accessing obstetric care. Notably, there are no reports of deliveries being made by c-section as all operation rooms are used for war surgery. Normally, an average of 150-200 babies are born per day in Gaza, and an average of 17 percent of deliveries need to be made by c-section.

24 MoH and four UNRWA primary health care centres have been converted to Emergency Evacuation Centres, primarily to relieve hospitals of non-urgent patients still in need of care.

As movement within the Gaza Strip becomes increasingly difficult, efforts are ongoing to identify medical personnel in communities in order to equip them with first aid kits to enable them to provide basic medical response in their neighborhoods.

WATER AND SANITATION

Many water wells and sewage pumps are still not functioning due to lack of electricity, diminished fuel supplies to operate back-up generators and lack of spare parts. The Gaza Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU) Gaza's water utility, reports that despite yesterday's humanitarian cease-fire, technicians were not able to repair the systems.

Following the delivery of 20,000 litres of fuel to water wells yesterday and today, the number of people who have no running water has decreased to 500,000, though this will be short lived if fuel supply is not continued. Drinking water remains difficult to obtain for most people in Gaza. Private contractors are now selling water for 40-60 NIS per cubic meter.

Since yesterday, fuel reserves at the Beit Lahiya waste water treatment plant have run out and the plant is urgently requesting fuel supplies. Without fuel there are serious concerns about the sewage lagoons overflowing. The CMWU is also concerned that the waste water plant at Sheikh Ajlan southwest of Gaza City will overflow. Currently, water pipes are absorbing much of the sewage as they are not being utilized, also with the risk of overflowing.

FOOD

Six out of 10 UNRWA distribution centers distributed food yesterday. Some of the distribution centers in Gaza City and North Gaza were too dangerous to access. On 7 January, World Food Programme (WFP) distribution took place in Gaza City, Khan Yunis and in the Middle Area.

During yesterday's cease-fire, UNRWA managed to reach the Khalil Uweiyya School in Beit Hanoun where 570 people had been out of reach for the previous four days. UNRWA provided food supplies and a medical team.

ACCESS

Access between northern Gaza and the rest of Gaza is now only possible at the coastal road west of the former Israeli settlement of Netzarim. Movement during the 8 January day was restricted to humanitarian aid (including ambulances), coordinated either by ICRC or UNRWA. A humanitarian cease-fire was again coordinated for between 1300 and 1600 hours today to allow the civilian population to access basic food supplies and medical services.

CROSSING

Due to the dangerous security situation and bisection of Gaza, 27 out of 35 employees of Kerem Shalom who live in Gaza City cannot get to the crossing, hampering the ability to process aid.

Kerem Shalom crossing and Nahal Oz pipeline were open during the morning 8 January, however it is not clear what entered following the incident at Erez crossing on 8 January. There is only one transportation company authorized to handle the movement of goods at the Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings. Following the Erez incident, and due to the prevailing insecurity, the company has now declared that it will suspend all movement until a cease-fire is reached or firm security guarantees are provided. In effect, aid convoys into Gaza are suspended even if crossings are opened.

Kerem Shalom crossing: On 7 January, a total of 78 truckloads including 36 for aid agencies were allowed entry to Gaza. Additionally, three truckloads carrying nearly 135,000 litres of industrial gas were allowed through Kerem Shalom (back-to-back). This was the first time Israel allowed fuel through Kerem Shalom.

Nahal Oz pipeline: On 7 January, a total of 362,000 litres of industrial fuel for the Gaza power plant, 92,000 litres of diesel for UNRWA and 43 tonnes of cooking gas were pumped through Nahal Oz. However, due to security concerns, only 90,000 litres of the industrial fuel, and none of the cooking gas, were collected. Nearly 100 tonnes of cooking gas are now awaiting collection at the Nahal Oz filling depot.

Rafah was open on 8 January. Seven truckloads of medical supplies and three ambulances were allowed entry to Gaza through Rafah crossing on 7 January. 29 medical cases were transferred out of Gaza through the Rafah crossing.

PRIORITY NEEDS

Protection of civilians: Civilians, notably children who form 56 percent of Gaza's population, are bearing the brunt of the violence. As one of the most densely populated places in the world, it is clear that many more civilians will be killed if the conflict continues. Israel must respect the norms of International Humanitarian Law, 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 there are ongoing hostilities. Ambulances and fire trucks have been attacked before and are fearful to go out to these places.

Electricity is necessary for the operation of services within the Gaza Strip notably health, water and sanitation services. What is needed includes repairing damaged electricity lines, bringing in needed transformers, and allowing fixing of other transformers. Back-up generators are not meant to function more than 8 hours per day, and are not reliable following repeated and prolonged use.

Supply of fuel: Industrial fuel is needed to power the Gaza Power Plant, which has been shut down since 30 December. 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.

Wheat grain is essential to provide flour for local bakeries and humanitarian food distribution to the population of Gaza. The Karni crossing conveyor belt is the only mechanism which can facilitate the import of the amount of grain required in the Strip at this time.

Cash has still not entered the Gaza Strip and is urgently needed, including for PA salaries and the UNRWA cash distribution programme to some 94,000 dependent beneficiaries, as well as its "cash for work" programme, salaries for its staff and payments to suppliers.