



FIELD UPDATE ON GAZA FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

22-23 January 2009, 1700 hours

The cease-fire, implemented unilaterally by Israel on 18 January, and later the same day by Hamas and other Palestinian factions, continues to hold. Israel withdrew the last of its forces from the Gaza Strip on 21 January. The cease-fire followed twenty-two days of bombardment by land, sea and air which left over 1,300 Palestinians dead and over 5,000 injured.

Extensive destruction has been caused to private homes and commercial enterprises and to public infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip. Many families are homeless: preliminary estimates by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics indicate the complete destruction of over 4,000 residences and partial destruction to 17,000 others.

At the request of the Secretary-General, The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, and UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry, visited Gaza on 22 January to launch the joint needs assessment of the immediate needs of the civilian population. Given the scale and urgency of the needs, the UN and partners will initially focus on meeting most urgent needs, restoring basic social services, such as water, health and education, and supporting emergency repairs of critical infrastructure. The assessment will conclude with a special appeal for Gaza to be launched in early February. Even as assessments are on-going, work has been initiated to conduct essential repairs to shelters, water and sanitation, health facilities, etc. The immediate import of construction materials and spare parts are vital in this regard.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

Four Palestinians were injured on 22 January by a shell fired from an Israeli gunboat off the Gaza coast. The same day, a house was set on fire by a shell fired from an Israeli gunboat. No injuries were reported. Also on 22 January, IDF troops shot and injured a child east of Gaza City near the border.

UNICEF, the ICRC and other agencies continue to highlight the danger posed by unexploded ordnance (UXO) following the deaths of two children by UXO on 20 January. "The fact that Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world makes the problem of unexploded munitions even more acute," the head of the ICRC office in Gaza warns. "The contamination represents a major threat for the population and for rescue teams working in the field. It could hold back the pace of humanitarian work."

Rescue services continue to recover the dead: Palestinian Red Crescent Society workers recovered three bodies on 21 January and another three on 22 January. Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) figures as of 19 January are 1,314 Palestinians dead, of whom 412 are children and 110 are women. The number of injuries stands at 5,300, of whom 1,855 are children and 795 are women. It is still not possible to determine the number of Palestinian male civilian casualties.

According to the Magen David Adom national society, four Israeli civilians were killed and 182 injured by rocket and mortar fire by Palestinian militants from the Gaza Strip. Nine Israeli soldiers were killed and 336 wounded during the course of the military operation, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

MINE ACTION

A three-person mine action assessment team comprising UN Mine Action Service, Mine Action Group and Norwegian Peoples Aid representatives arrived in Gaza on 23 January, to conduct an assessment of the scope and scale of the UXO problem in order to facilitate delivery of humanitarian assistance.

SHELTER

Gazans displaced due to the military operation continue to make their way home. However, with the extensive destruction of homes, many people have found they are now homeless, and remain with host families or in UNRWA shelters. As of 23 January, UNRWA was operating 15 emergency shelters to accommodate 8,500 people, down from 18,035 people on 20 January and from a peak of nearly 51,000 people on 18 January. UNRWA aims to close the emergency shelters as soon as possible so that they can reopen the schools. Those families who are unable to return to their homes because of existing damage and have been unable to identify a family to host them will be provided with short-term rental housing allowance by UNRWA.

The total number of people displaced during the course of the war can still not be ascertained. CARE International and CHF International have released preliminary results of phone surveys conducted between 17 and 19 January, which found that 52-60 percent of the respondents were hosting displaced people in their homes.

On 21 January, ICRC helped replace windows and doors of approximately 600 houses in Rafah and surroundings and 430 houses in badly damaged neighbourhoods in Gaza City.

HEALTH

Hospitals continue to function at full capacity as many injured patients remain hospitalized, with the result that hospitals have been unable to resume regular services such as elective surgery. Post-surgical physiotherapy is provided in Shifa hospital. Most repair work to the Al Quds Hospital in Gaza City, which was shelled on 15 January, has been completed and the facility is now functioning again.

Chronically ill patients who were accessing care outside of the Gaza Strip prior to the conflict urgently need to resume their treatment.

According to WHO, immunization, antenatal care and the management of chronic diseases services have been fully resumed in the 50 functioning MoH PHC clinics. Laboratory and dental services have been partially resumed. In addition, immunization services began 19 January at the UNRWA emergency shelters for the displaced: the MoH and UNRWA will start to immunize all children in Gaza as soon as schooling resumes. With UNICEF support, an important vaccine storage facility in Gaza is now functional, and routine vaccines will be available until March. In addition, two therapeutic centres, supported by UNICEF, are working at full capacity to provide services for 120 malnourished children per day. All 18 UNRWA health centres have been open since 20 January and are functioning normally.

WATER AND SANITATION

The Gaza water utility, Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU), has carried out a damage assessment of water and waste water facilities throughout the Gaza Strip. Four water wells (in Beit Hanoun, Gaza and Jabalia) have been totally destroyed and there is also damage to several water carriers (e.g. Nusairat, Gaza main water wells and in Khan Yuonis). The waste water networks in Gaza, Beit Hanoun, Jabalia and Beit Lahia have also sustained serious damage. In addition to the assessment CMWU has conducted emergency repairs to sewage carriers, wells and electrical repairs. According to the assessment, supplies urgently needed are pipes, cement, pumps, generators, fittings, aluminium, and other essential equipment.

The Ash Sheikh 'Ijleen sewage plant which treats the raw sewage of an area inhabited by 400,000 people has been out of order since it was struck by a shell in the second week of the conflict.

According to the MoH, one fifth of the population of the Gaza strip has no direct access to drinking water and currently depends on water purchased from private suppliers.

ICRC repair work to the Rafah water network, which was interrupted by the conflict, has resumed. Action Against Hunger has so far distributed 1,051 m³ of water and 38,000 litres of fuel. UNICEF has delivered 1,300 water purification tablets, sufficient to purify drinking water for 30,000 people for the next three months.

FOOD

The Gaza population continues to face difficulties accessing food due to price increases and the lack of banknotes. In addition, the destruction to agricultural fields has added to a shortage of high-nutrition foods.

Since the start of the military operation, the World Food Programme (WFP) has delivered 3,897 metric tonnes (Mt) of food into Gaza, reaching approximately 186,000 beneficiaries from its regular caseload. An additional 154,000 Palestinians have been reached through emergency bread distributions in Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya, distribution of ready-to-eat food to 6,000 patients in 13 hospitals, and nutritious date bars and high energy biscuit (HEB). It is estimated that an additional 300,000 Gazans, refugee and non-refugee, will need UN food assistance.

EDUCATION

The second school semester, which should have started on 17 January, was interrupted due to the military operation, affecting more than 440,000 government and UNRWA school students. The final exams of the first semester were also disrupted and have been postponed.

All UNRWA schools are scheduled to open on 24 January, covering approximately half of the children who have been out of school since 27 December. Schools will focus on the children's psychosocial needs in the first weeks of operation, before resuming teaching of core subjects. The MoE in Gaza has announced that the PA schools will also re-open on 24 January.

ELECTRICITY / FUEL

According to GEDCO, Gaza's power distribution utility, 40 percent of the population remains without electricity. The remaining 60 percent receive only intermittent supply. In the north of the Gaza Strip households receive power for only six hours a day. The need for spare parts and other equipment remains a priority in order to allow GEDCO to repair damage.

CROSSINGS

The Kerem Shalom, Nahal Oz (for fuel), Rafah, Erez, and Karni crossings (bulk wheat) were open on 22 January. Sufa remained closed. Karni was closed on 23 January for maintenance of the conveyor belt.

Erez was scheduled to open on 23 January for foreign journalists. A small number of personnel from international NGOs, mainly media and communications staff, was allowed entry through Erez today. However, it is unclear whether entry for INGOs will be permitted on a regular basis, especially for essential operational staff.

FUNDING

For the list of immediate funding needs, visit:

http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_gaza_crisis_cap_funding_2009_english.pdf

PRIORITY NEEDS

Opening of crossings: The number of trucks allowed into the Gaza Strip needs to be increased. It is key that Sufa crossing is opened for basic construction materials to allow repair of public infrastructure and of private homes. Chronically ill patients who were accessing care outside of the Gaza Strip prior to the conflict urgently need to resume their treatment.

Cash/liquidity: Cash has still not entered the Gaza Strip (except for the staff of a few international organizations) and is urgently needed to reactivate the private sector and prevent increasing dependence on aid. The lack of cash prevents access to basic supplies. A system must be urgently established that ensures the regular and predictable monthly transfer of the necessary cash.

Supply of fuel: Nahal Oz crossing must remain open as it is the only crossing which can facilitate the transfer of sufficient amounts of fuel to maintain operation of the power plant, and restock other types of fuel needed in the Gaza Strip.

Operational security for humanitarian agencies working in Gaza: Explosive remnants of war are limiting the access of humanitarian workers to certain areas. Security, including the marking and clearance of UXO, is essential to ensure efficient delivery of humanitarian assistance to the population.