



FIELD UPDATE ON GAZA FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

13 January 2009, 1700 hours

“My message is simple, direct and to the point: the fighting must stop. To both sides, I say: Just stop, now. Too many people have died. There has been too much civilian suffering. Too many people, Israelis and Palestinians, live in daily fear of their lives. And in Gaza, the very foundation of society is being destroyed: people’s homes; civic infrastructure; public health facilities; and schools.” (Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, Press Conference, 12 January)

The Israeli military operation has entered its eighteenth 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 humanitarian crisis is intensifying and the number of Palestinian civilian casualties is increasing. Israeli bombardment is causing extensive destruction to homes and to public infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip and is jeopardizing water, sanitation and medical services. Increasing numbers of Palestinians are fleeing their homes as Israeli forces penetrate deeper into the Gaza Strip. Hospitals are overstretched as medical staff attempt to cope with the high number of casualties, many of whom have multiple injuries. Of particular concern are children, who make up 56 percent of the Gaza population.

On 13 January, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed its deep concern ‘at the devastating effects that the current military engagement in Gaza is having on children.’

In response to allegations of the looting of food aid, the humanitarian agencies (UN and partners) involved in the delivery and distribution of food supplies affirm that there has been no reported theft or misuse of these supplies. They emphasize that careful mechanisms for monitoring aid flows are in place, although the ongoing conflict makes such monitoring difficult.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

The Israeli military remains present in the north, east and Rafah border areas. Aerial bombardment, artillery shelling and naval firing continued throughout 13 January, with Israeli ground troops backed by artillery and helicopters advancing further into populated areas in the outskirts of Gaza City. Intense military activity was reported overnight, particularly in the Tel al Hawa neighbourhood north of Gaza and in Khuza’a village east of Khan Yunis.

With Israeli troops advancing deeper into the Gaza Strip, growing pockets of the population are trapped in their homes. Areas affected include Siyafa, Al Atatra, Al Isra, As Salateen, east and north of Beit Hanoun, east of Jabalia (North Gaza); southeast Az Zaitoun (southeast of Gaza Governorate); and At Tuffah (east of Gaza Governorate). Aid organizations have been unable so far to access these communities. The bodies of those killed in the Al Samouni house in Az Zaitoun on 5 January have still not been recovered, despite appeals to the Israeli army for access to the home.

ATTACKS ON MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Security for health care workers and access to medical facilities continues to be extremely difficult. On 12 January, an Israeli air strike on a house in Jabalia killed a doctor who was treating injuries, and wounded three medical staff waiting outside to evacuate the injured. Thirteen medical personnel have been killed since 27 December, and attacks on medical personnel and ambulances have hampered organizations’ ability to assist the injured.

In a joint public statement on 13 January, the ICRC and PRCS deplored the fact that ‘wounded people have been abandoned and left to suffer alone, unable to reach hospitals and inaccessible to ambulances and medical workers. Some wounded have even died because ambulances did not receive the required clearances to reach them in time.’ ICRC and PRCS reaffirmed that under International Humanitarian Law all parties concerned have a duty to collect, care and evacuate the wounded, without delay or discrimination.

CASUALTIES

Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) figures as of 1600 hours 13 January are 971 Palestinians dead, of whom 311 are children and 76 are women. The number of injured stands at 4,418, of whom 1,549 are children and 652 are women. The MoH reported on 12 January that the number of children fatalities has tripled since the beginning of the ground operation on 3 January (compared to the number of child fatalities from 27 December to 3 January). The danger to medical staff and the difficulty of extracting the injured from collapsed buildings makes proper evacuation and estimation of casualties difficult, including to determine the number of Palestinian male civilian casualties.

Since the onset of the military operations on 27 December, two UN staff and four contractors have been killed while on duty, and six staff and four contractors injured. Another two UN staff have been killed off duty. Additionally, on 27 December, nine trainees were killed near the Gaza Training Centre. On 5 January, three brothers were killed at the UNRWA Asma school while taking refuge there. On 6 January, 43 people were killed and 55 injured when shells fell outside an UNRWA school in Jabalia. At least 49 UN buildings have sustained damage, of which 28 reported damage in the first three days of the operation. One international NGO partner clinic is reported to have been destroyed and several of their compounds have been damaged. At least four incidents have been reported of aid convoys being shot at or near

Nine Israeli soldiers have been killed since 27 December. Palestinian militants continue to fire rockets and mortars from the Gaza Strip into Israel. According to the Israeli Police Spokesman, Israeli civilian casualties stand at four dead and 58 injured. (OCHA's casualty figures do not include the number of Palestinians or Israelis treated for shock.)

USE OF WHITE PHOSPHOROUS

Since 3 January, there have been numerous media reports about the alleged use of white phosphorous (WP). Human Rights Watch has stated that while the Israeli army appears to be employing WP as an 'obscurant' to hide military operations, 'WP also has a significant, incidental, incendiary effect that can severely burn people and set structures, fields and other civilian objects in the vicinity on fire. The potential for harm to civilians is magnified by Gaza's high population density, among the highest in the world.' The Israeli army has informed Human Rights Watch and reporters that it is not using WP in Gaza.

SHELTER

The number of people who have fled their homes in Gaza remains unknown, but is estimated in the tens of thousands. As of the evening of 12 January, UNRWA was operating 38 emergency shelters, with 35,520 displaced people, an increase of 7,404 people since 11 January. UNRWA has provided bread and drinking water to all shelters; tinned meat was provided to shelters in the three southern districts of Gaza. On 12 January, UNRWA sent five trucks of essential non-food items from its stores in the West Bank to Gaza.

ELECTRICITY

As of this morning, 60 percent of Gazans are not receiving any power. The rest receive electricity intermittently. In the Gaza Governorate, which is most affected by power cuts as it depends the most on the Gaza Power Plant, GEDCO, Gaza's electricity company, estimates that 20 to 30 percent of the population is without electricity; 40 percent has electricity between 8 and 12 hours per day; and 40 percent has up to 8 hours. As of 12 January, GEDCO estimates that 30 to 40 percent of recent damage to the electricity network has been partially repaired.

On the morning of 13 January, GEDCO discovered that its warehouse in Gaza City was hit. It estimates financial losses of at least \$400,000, including desperately needed spare parts for the electricity network.

HEALTH

Hospitals remain overloaded with the large influx of injured persons. WHO reports that the emergency room of Dorah Paediatric Hospital was directly hit on 12 January. Staff are continuing to work despite

the damage caused to the infrastructure. Dorah Hospital has been closed except for emergency services since 8 January, due to its proximity to fighting and earlier damage sustained to its infrastructure. Damage sustained by the Gaza European Hospital on 10 January has not been repaired. Danish Church Aid and Christian World Service reported on 12 January that the clinic of their partner Near East Council of Churches in Al-Shuja'ia was completely destroyed by Israeli missiles on 11 January.

28 of the 58 MoH Primary Health Care centres (PHC) are now closed due to shelling. WHO continues to be deeply concerned about the consequences of the disruption in vaccination programmes, antenatal care and nutritional surveillance due to lack of staff, electricity and dangerous conditions on the ground.

As of 11 January, 70 patients have been cleared for evacuation but have not yet been evacuated through Rafah because of the slow flow of evacuations.

On 12 January, UNRWA provided 10,000 litres of fuel to hospitals most in need of fuel throughout the Gaza Strip.

WATER AND SANITATION

Many water wells and sewage pumps are still not functioning due to the lack of electricity, diminished fuel supplies to operate back-up generators and lack of spare parts. The damage to the water and wastewater networks has not been repaired because of the danger in reaching affected areas. CMWU reports considerable damage to infrastructure in Khuza'a following military activity in the area. 55 out of 145 water wells are not functioning throughout the Gaza Strip (32 in Gaza; 20 in North Gaza; 3 in Middle Area).

500,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip still do not have access to running water. Even before the current military operation, 80 percent of drinking water in Gaza was not safe for human consumption, according to WHO guidelines. 29,952 bottles of drinking water (1.5 litres each) from UNICEF entered Gaza on 12 January and were provided to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society for distribution.

Sewage continues to flow in the streets in Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya. UNRWA was unable to deliver fuel to the Beit Lahia Wastewater Treatment Plant to alleviate pressure on the banks of the sewage lake containing three million cubic metres of raw and partially treated wastewater due to the precarious situation. The sewage lake is in danger of overflowing placing up to 15,000 at risk. CMWU needs urgent approval from the Israeli authorities to assess the impact of wastewater leakage from the Gaza City Wastewater Treatment Plant.

CMWU is unable to access any of its spare parts or engine oil which are located in its warehouse in Az Zaitoun area. CMWU urgently needs access to 1,000 litres of engine oil for its sewage pump stations.

FOOD

Many food items remain unavailable, including rice, flour, oil, meat, chicken, fish and milk. Bread is in short supply: only nine out of 47 bakeries are currently operational. On 12 January, UNRWA distributed food parcels to 1,916 refugee families throughout the Gaza Strip. Due to the security situation, WFP, who works through partners, has been unable to operate to its full capacity. WFP has reached more than 85,000 out of its regular 265,000 non-refugee beneficiaries since 27 December, and an additional 21,000 non-refugee beneficiaries have received an emergency distribution.

UNIFEM is concerned about the nutritional well-being of the civilian population, notably of the 56 percent under the age of 18 and the daily average of 170 new born and their mothers.

INTERNAL ACCESS

Access between northern Gaza and the rest of Gaza remains possible only via the coastal road west of the former Israeli settlement of Netzarim and is restricted to humanitarian relief assistance (including ambulances) following coordination with the Israeli authorities.

On 13 January, the humanitarian "lull" was activated between 0900 and 1200 hours.

CROSSINGS

Only Kerem Shalom and Rafah crossings were open on 13 January.

On 12 January, Kerem Shalom was open, and Rafah and Karni were partially open. 93 truckloads including 54 for humanitarian aid agencies entered Gaza via Kerem Shalom crossing (back-to-back transfer). 27 truckloads of wheat, lentils and animal feed entered Gaza via the open conveyer belt at Karni crossing. This was the first time Karni was partially open since 26 December 2008. 25 Egyptian ambulances (with medical staff) entered Gaza via Rafah to transport injuries from Shifa Hospital to Egypt; 14 trucks of medicine and 17 foreign doctors entered Gaza. Seven injuries crossed through Rafah to Egypt for treatment.

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, 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. Due to attacks on ambulances, medical staff are fearful of reaching these places. The evacuation of wounded and safe passage of ambulances and health workers are fundamental tenants 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.

Electricity is necessary 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.