



FIELD UPDATE ON GAZA FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

15 January 2009, 1900 hours

“The Red Cross is not managing to coordinate evacuation of wounded people. There are people right next to the Red Crescent hospital bleeding to death. We cannot get to them as the Israelis shoot at us.” (Palestinian medic)

“Today the UN compound in Gaza has been shelled again. I conveyed my strong protest and outrage to the Defense Minister and to the Foreign Minister... The time has come for the violence to stop and for us to change fundamentally the dynamics in Gaza.” (United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon)

January the fifteenth witnessed the most intense fighting to date, with Israeli ground forces advancing deeper into densely populated areas, particularly Gaza City with an estimated population of 500,000 people. Since the morning of 15 January, relentless shelling of the Gaza Strip has struck a number of buildings, among them the main UNRWA compound in Gaza City and three hospitals.

Large numbers of civilians are trapped in their homes while thousands more are seeking refuge with host families and in UNRWA emergency shelters. There are no safe places or bomb shelters within the Gaza Strip and the borders remain closed. Security for medical personnel and access to medical facilities remains extremely difficult.

Following a year and a half of blockade and almost three weeks of intense bombardment by land, sea and air, the Gaza Strip is witnessing a devastating humanitarian crisis. The casualty rate is rapidly rising; extensive damage has been incurred to public infrastructure and homes; and water, sanitation and electricity services are barely functioning. Supplies of essential commodities such as food, cooking gas, water and fuel are diminishing and increasingly hard to obtain. Children, who make up 56 percent of the Gaza population, continue to bear the brunt of the violence and account for a significant proportion of the dead and severely maimed.

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

The Israeli army remains present in the north, east and Rafah border areas. Aerial bombardment, artillery shelling and naval firing continued throughout 14 January, in particular in the Zaitoun, Tuffah, eastern Gaza and other suburbs of Gaza City. The Al-Arqam private school in Gaza City was shelled, as was the Sheikh Radwan cemetery, destroying many of the graves.

The fighting intensified in the morning of 15 January, with Israeli forces advancing deeper into Gaza City from all sides. Residential buildings, high rise buildings, three hospitals and the UNRWA compound were among the buildings hit.

As of 14 January, UNRWA was hosting 39,669 displaced Palestinians in 41 emergency shelters in Gaza, most of them in the Gaza Governorate (17 shelters with 13,884 IDPs) and in North Gaza (13 shelters with 16,282 IDPs).

MEDICAL FACILITIES

The Al Wafa Hospital east of Gaza City (the only rehabilitation hospital in the Gaza Strip), Al Fata Hospital west of Gaza City, and Al Quds Hospital were directly hit by the Israeli army. One Al Fata Hospital ambulance and two Al Quds Hospital ambulances were hit.

Around 0530 hours, at least 500 people living in Tel el Hawa sought refuge at the Al Quds Palestinian Red Crescent Society Hospital. From 1030 hours, shelling struck the administrative building and damaged the second floor of the hospital. A fire broke out, putting at risk the patients, staff and displaced persons in the hospital. The fire was eventually extinguished at around 1400 hours. As people were leaving the hospital, one fatality and four injuries were reported due to fighting in the area. At about 1800 hours, the 500 displaced people were evacuated to an UNRWA emergency shelter.

UNRWA MAIN COMPOUND

At approximately 1000 hours, Israeli shells struck the main UNRWA compound, injuring three persons. The shells caused a fire that destroyed a workshop and the main warehouse which housed hundreds of tonnes of humanitarian supplies, including those due to be distributed today, 15 January. Approximately 700 Palestinians were taking refuge in the compound at the time of the incident; they were eventually evacuated to a nearby emergency shelter.

MEDIA BUILDING

At approximately 0900 hours on 15 January, following intensification of shelling in the neighbourhood, journalists in Gaza City took refuge in the Al Shurouq Tower which houses the main offices and studios of various local and international media outlets. Despite assurances by the Israeli army that the building was not a target, the 13th storey of the building was struck by a shell at approximately 1115 hours. Two journalists from Abu Dhabi TV were injured. The explosion caused a fire which damaged transmission facilities.

CASUALTIES

Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) figures as of 1600 hours 15 January are 1,086 Palestinians dead, of whom 346 are children and 79 are women. The number of injured stands at 4,900, of whom 1,709 are children and 724 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, including the determination of the number of Palestinian male civilian casualties.

From 1600 hours on 14 January until 1600 hours on 15 January, a total of 73 Palestinians were killed, of whom 24 were children, and 340 were injured, of whom 109 were children.

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 Magen David Adom, the national society of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, Israeli civilian casualties stand at four dead and 78 injured since 27 December.

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

PRIORITY NEEDS

Ceasefire: While any mechanism that facilitates humanitarian assistance is welcome, only an immediate ceasefire will be able to address the severe humanitarian and protection crisis that the population of Gaza is faced with.

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. This includes the safe passage for evacuation of injured through Rafah crossing.