gaza situation report

a weekly update from unrwa

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the next update will be issued on Wednesday 3 February 2016

- During the reporting week UNRWA commenced the distribution of Non-Food Items (NFIs) such as tarpaulin, blankets, mattresses, heaters and other items for displaced and other vulnerable Palestine refugees as part of the Agency's annual winterization campaign, launched under the hashtag #shareyourwarmth. Whilst the needs assessment is ongoing, as of 26 January the UNRWA logistics team had arranged the distribution of one tarpaulin sheet and a 30 square metres nylon sheet to 500 refugee families in Rafah, southern Gaza, to help them cope with the harsh winter conditions. The UNRWA logistics team organizes the distribution of NFIs in partnership with the UNRWA Chief of Area Offices that assess and advise on each governorate's needs. For the winterization campaign NFI distribution, UNRWA is hiring 35 support personnel for short-term employment opportunities primarily through its Job Creation Programme, including 25 labourers, five clerks and five storekeepers, to support UNRWA warehouse personnel across the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in cooperation with various governorates of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and Palestinian Civil Defense, and with the cooperation of humanitarian organizations and UN agencies (including UNRWA), built up an online winter storm portal that supports the documentation and tracking of needs emerging from emergencies by relevant agencies in a timely manner, alongside the response provided and outstanding gaps. In Gaza, a system built on the same platform is used as initial joint assessment tracking platform.

- UNRWA started the second semester of the 2015/2016 school year on 27 January, in line with government schools which remained closed on 25-26 January; the start of the semester was delayed for two days due to the storm weather conditions, including heavy rain and flooding Over 250,000 UNRWA students will return to 257 UNRWA elementary and preparatory schools across Gaza and more than 400 refugee youths will start the new semester in the UNRWA Vocational Training Centres in Khan Younis and Gaza. Additionally, the UNRWA school parliaments will start their activities again, ranging from launching health promotion and disease prevention days, organizing theatre sketches on human rights, and improving conditions in school cafeterias, as described in the UNRWA school parliament good practices booklet.

- The blockade on Gaza is responsible for a chronic energy crisis in the coastal enclave, impairing service delivery, students' educational outcomes, the functioning of hospitals and medical equipment and the operation of more than 280 water and waste water facilities, as stated by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Over recent weeks, conditions have further worsened and brought increased hardship for the people of Gaza, with the electricity schedule currently on "between 4 and 8 hours on" and "12 hours off" schedule, as also reported by Al Jazeera. The electricity crisis often disproportionately affects women who traditionally spend the largest amount of time in their now mostly dark and cold homes trying to complete daily household work. In addition to creating hardship, the lack of regular electricity is life-threatening particularly in regards to the Gaza Strip's health infrastructure, where for example the lack of light in emergency rooms can have dire consequences for patients, as reported in the media. Gaza's hospitals not only lack electricity, but it is reported that the entire health care system lies in ruins due to Israeli restrictions on the import of medical equipment and travel restrictions for doctors to pursue further training and specialization outside of Gaza, according to information from the Israeli Human Rights organization B'Tselem in its press release on 12 January. According to B'Tselem, as a rule Israel allows patients to receive medical care abroad only in life-and-death cases, involving a lengthy bureaucratic process. This leaves many Palestinians in Gaza suffering from severe orthopedic problems, visual and hearing impairments or other grave illnesses without access to required medical care.

- Under the title "A smile of hope" the UNRWA Relief and Social Services Programmes (RSSP) launched a two-day initiative on 20 and 21 January, implemented by its Community Development Social Workers of the RSSP office in Jabalia camp, northern Gaza. The initiative took place at the Beit Lahia Development Association in northern Gaza and targeted 25 children and their mothers who lost their father/husband, aiming at raising awareness on early childhood and psychosocial support for children as well as to conduct recreational activities such as community games for the children as a social integration measure. During the reporting week RSSP, through its Community Development Social Workers in Rafah, southern Gaza, also launched an event titled "My story", targeting 32 women and mothers who lost their husbands, encouraging them to exchange thoughts and share their experiences on how they cope with their difficult socio-economic situation. The event had the purpose of providing vulnerable women with a platform for networking and stress release.

- The slow pace of recovery in Gaza has been insufficient to make up for the 2014 recession and conflict. Timid signs of growth in the first quarter of 2015, driven by the reconstruction process, came to a halt in quarter three. According to the International Monetary Fund, the Gaza economy is not expected to reach its 2013 annual level until the end of 2017. Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita stood at only US$ 244 in quarter three of 2015, an average of US$ 2.6 per person per day, equal to less than half of the GDP in the West Bank. According to UNRWA analysis, the contraction was mainly caused by the construction sector, whose added value decreased by 20 per cent. Also the agricultural sector declined considerably (- 21 per cent), primarily caused by a drop in olive oil production as a consequence of the last conflict, where olive trees accounted for approximately 50 per cent of damaged trees, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture (PMoA). The PMoA also reports that it is worth noting that the agricultural sector declined despite the increase in export of Gaza produce, meaning that the easing of trade restrictions in November 2014 onwards by Israel had little impact on the crippled Gaza economy. The decline of the agricultural sector, impacted the number of jobs held by women, with the female unemployment rate increasing by 8 per cent between quarter one and quarter three of 2015, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). The overall unemployment rate in quarter three of 2015 went up to 42.7 per cent, according to PCBS, a slight increase from the previous quarter.

- UNRWA started its regular quarterly food distribution round this week, to run from January to March 2016, providing over 920,000 Palestine refugees with food assistance such as flour, rice, sunflower oil, milk powder, canned meat and sugar. Beneficiaries are assessed through the Agency's reformed tablet-based Poverty Assessment System, launched in May 2015. A video explaining procedures and eligibility criteria of the PAS is broadcast on UNRWA TV. The number of beneficiaries who receive UNRWA food assistance has increased over time due to deteriorating socio-economic conditions in Gaza related to the Israeli blockade. While in the year 2000, roughly 80,000 people in Gaza were reliant on UNRWA humanitarian assistance, the figure has risen to over 920,000 today.

- Years of blockade and recurrent conflicts have eroded basic infrastructure, service delivery, livelihoods and coping mechanisms in Gaza, states the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in its 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) which is part of the Global Humanitarian Overview launched in December in Geneva. The local launch of the HRP is scheduled for 10 February in Ramallah. The HRP requests US$ 571 million for a range of interventions from legal assistance and the safe disposal of unexploded ordnance to the provision of health care and water. The HRP includes three main strategic objectives: protecting the rights of Palestinians under occupation and in accordance with international humanitarian law; ensuring acutely-vulnerable Palestinians under occupation in Gaza and the West Bank have access to essential services; and the strengthening of the ability of acutely-vulnerable Palestinian households to cope with protracted threats and shocks. Overall, the context in 2016 for the occupied Palestinian territory remains the same, namely that of a protracted protection crisis driven by lack for international law, and a lack of accountability for violations. For Gaza, the report states that particularly the Israeli restrictions on what it considers "dual use" items (both civilian and military) continue to impede basic service delivery and hamper reconstruction activities for internally displaced persons. Further, the report states that the situation is exacerbated by the continuous closure by Egypt of the Rafah passenger crossing since October 2014, confining the vast majority of Palestinians in Gaza. According to the report an estimated 95,000 internally displaced persons remain homeless as a result of the 2014 hostilities, the majority of them being UNRWA registered refugees of whom 78,000 continue to need temporary support.

- The restrictions imposed on the people in Gaza by Israel also continue to undermine livelihoods in Gaza, such as the traditional fishing livelihoods by restricting the fishing areas to 3- 6 miles and by import restrictions on items needed to maintain the fishing fleet, such as fiberglass and engine spare parts, which Israel classifies as "dual use items", as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported. Israel also continues to restrict the import of wood planks thicker than one centimetre, which, according to the Wood Industry Union in Gaza, has caused shrinkage of over 30 per cent in furniture production and a rise in prices.

- To help meet reconstruction-related challenges, UNRWA is actively engaged in coordination efforts with other UN agencies and international Non-Government Organizations (INGOs) to ensure an efficient and effective response via a new body called the United Nations (UN) Gaza Recovery and Reconstruction Coordination Group (GRRG) which is chaired by UNRWA and co-chaired by the United Nations Development Programme. The GRRG was established on 4 September 2015 to strengthen government planning, coordination and monitoring of reconstruction and recovery activities in Gaza; the Group works in support of the efforts led by the National Consensus Government in the area of reconstruction and recovery. At the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) meeting on 22 January the UNCT endorsed the GRRG's Terms of Reference.

- In quarter four of 2015, UNWRA expended US$ 16.8 million across contracted projects and self-help assistance, generating a total of 4,931 full-time job-equivalents (FTEs) over three months. Self-help intervention – for which US$ 6.1 million were disbursed in quarter four – contributed to 1,816 FTEs while the remaining US$ 10.6 million expended on construction projects generated 3,155 FTEs. Compared to the previous quarter, total expenditures and related FTEs decreased by 50 per cent as a result of lack of funding and slow progress of reconstruction due to lengthy and onerous requirements. UNRWA estimates that each additional US$ 1 million allocated to the self-help shelter repair programme can create up to 193 formal and informal jobs in the construction industry, and many more in transport, trade or manufacturing.

Shelter update:

This week

- During the reporting week, UNRWA was able to disburse approximately US$ 1.89 million in funding available for reconstruction (US$ 1.52 million) and severe repair works (US$ 360,959). The funds will reach a total of 256 refugee families across the Gaza Strip. The families will be able to access this assistance through local banks next week.

Overview of assistance disbursed

- The UNRWA shelter assessment confirmed 141,559 Palestine refugee houses as impacted during the 2014 conflict; 9,117 of them are considered totally demolished. 5,355 shelters have suffered severe, 3,700 major and 123,387 minor damages.

- Since the start of the 2014 emergency shelter response, the Agency has distributed over US$ 144 million (excluding Programme Support Costs) to Palestine refugee families whose homes were damaged or demolished during the 2014 summer conflict.

- UNRWA has completed the payments to over 66,300 Palestine refugee families – more than half of the caseload – for minor repair works, to 1,499 families to repair their severely damaged shelters, to 12 families for major repair works and to 33 families for reconstruction. Payment transfers for over 10,800 refugee families to continue repair works of their shelters and for 219 families to continue the reconstruction of their shelters are ongoing.

- 13,250 families have received a rental subsidy payment to cover the period from September to December 2014. Disbursement of subsequent instalments entailed further eligibility checks through which over 9,900 families have received the relevant rental subsidy payments during the period from January to December 2015.

Funding gaps and needs

- Due to lack of funding, as of 26 January 2016, over 60,300 refugee families have not received any payments to undertake repair works for their minor damaged homes (total estimate repair costs: US$ 68.2 million). Further, 3,200 families have not received any payments to repair or start repairing their major damaged homes (total estimate repair costs: US$ 28.8 million), 3,380 families have not received payments to repair or start repairing their severely damaged homes (total estimate costs: US$ 30.4 million). Out of these, UNRWA has processed the documents of over 47,000 families with damaged shelters and could disburse payments to these families immediately upon receipt of funding.

- 17 months after the last conflict ended, 7,148 refugee families have not received any payments to start repairing their totally demolished homes; the total costs of reconstructing their homes amounts to approximately US$321.6 million.

- Due to lack of sufficient funding also approximately 8,000 displaced refugee families have not received transitional shelter cash assistance (TSCA) to cover the first quarter of 2016. UNRWA budgeted approximately US$ 23.3 million in TSCA to cover the 2014 conflict emergency caseload in 2016.

General

Operational environment: The desperate socio-economic conditions in Gaza, now worsened by harsh winter conditions and a deepening electricity crisis, continue to generate anger and frustration amongst families in the coastal enclave. During the reporting week, protests by hundreds of Palestinians, mainly youth, against developments in the West Bank and at Al Aqsa Mosque continued. Protests also took place in solidarity with the West Bank journalist Mohammad Al Qeeq, who went on a hunger strike in an Israeli jail, by cancer patients for permits to travel through Erez crossing, and against UNRWA by beneficiaries requesting employment and food assistance.

Since 1967, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip have been unable to move freely in their own land. Al Jazeera has exemplified the various restrictions Palestinians face by an interactive platform published during the reporting week. The platform shows how for most Palestinians to go to work, see family, go to school or received life-saving medical care, remains a challenge.

On 24 January, due to heavy rainfall in Gaza, the tin roofs of three houses collapsed in Nuseirat camp and Deir El Balah camp, central Gaza; thirteen persons had to be evacuated by the Civil Defense. One day later two other houses submerged in southern Gaza, also due to the heavy rainfall. Seven persons had to be evacuated.

On 25 January, an internal explosion in a house in southern Gaza led to four persons being injured.

UNRWA's response

Refugee women launch initiative to increase safety and security in their community



Two women from the initiative-committee during a discussion on the next steps of their campaign to improve the safety and security in their community. Gaza Photo credit: ©UNRWA Gaza 2016. Photo by Tamer Abu Hamam

A group of approximately 10 refugee women in Deir El Balah launched an initiative to improve the safety and security in their neighbourhood following an accident on Salah El Din Street – one of the main highways leading through Gaza - in which one of their close friends died, presumably also due to lack of street lights on the highway; the highways does not run through the Deir El Balah camp.

The initiative-committee regularly gathers at the Community-Based Organisation (CBO) Rawafed in Deir El Balah which provides them with organizational and technical advice, and the provision of space and campaign material. The Rawafed CBO is supported by the UNRWA Gender Initiative (GI) through various projects.

“When we heard that our friend had died, we immediately suggested launching an initiative, and we started to collect signatures from community members to support us,” recalls initiative-member Warda Abu Rus. “The first challenge we faced is that people said no one would support us or listen to us, especially because we are women,” added her colleague Fatima Abu Safar.

But giving up was not an option for the campaigners, and very quickly the women realized that they needed to be more organized if they wanted to be taken seriously in their efforts to increase the safety for their children and families in the community. While initially it was difficult for them to make their voices heard, over time they have gained the support from community leaders as well as from their own families. Many of their husbands who were opposed to the idea at first now also actively participate in the initiative and provide support.

Besides collecting signatures, the initiators are also sending letters to relevant ministries as well as to the Gaza Electricity Company asking for the provision of street lighting on the part of Salah El Din Street; further, officials of the Gaza Middle Area municipality are now helping them to contact the traffic police to set up speed control check points as well as to organize awareness sessions on safe street crossing for school children and beneficiaries attending CBO activities.
The female campaigners have found themselves empowered through their community work, and many are very grateful for the support they get from the CBO – not just now, but also in the past.

“Without the CBO, you would not find us here today. The CBO helped us to become stronger and gain self-confidence,” explained Amal Khatab, who also participates in the initiative. “When I heard about the accident, I wanted to do something, to act. I visit the CBO regularly; here is where I learned how to write and read. Now I participate in a grass root initiative!” commented Sahar Abu Amra, who actively participates in the GI educational forum activities provided through CBOs, proudly.

Beside the street light initiative, the women also advocate for other issues in their community, such as improving the attitude towards divorced or abandoned women.

“We launched this initiative to improve the safety in our community, but we also want to empower ourselves and other women to become decision makers and advocate for more change,” summarized campaigner Elham Abu Hamad.

UNRWA supports the development and empowerment of women through various programmes, particularly through its Gender Initiative (GI). Out of the 101 CBOs the GI works with through its various projects, 30 CBOs across Gaza provide social and recreational spaces for women – including the Rawafed CBO - , such as IT, sport, and educational forums for women. Besides these activities, the CBOs are also seen as friendly and safe spaces for women, many of whom feel empowered by doing activities outside their home, establishing networks, participating in public life and taking matters into their own hands.

Summary of Major Incidents

During the reporting week, Israeli forces fired towards Palestinians near the perimeter fence and towards Palestinian boats on a daily basis. On 20 January, a Palestinian was injured as the result of fence fire from Israel. On 22 January, a Palestinian boat was reportedly damaged following shooting from an Israeli patrol boat; no injuries were reported in this incident.

Regular protests in support of Al Aqsa mosque and the West Bank were held in the vicinity of the perimeter fence. Protests, involving approximately 400 persons, predominately comprising of youths, took place east of Bureij camp in central Gaza, east of Gaza city, in the vicinity of the Erez crossing and in Khan Younis. During these protests, some participants approached the perimeter fence and threw stones towards Israeli observation posts. Israeli security forces responded with gunfire and tear gas. The Ministry of Health in Gaza reported that a total of 14 persons were injured due to Israeli gun fire and four suffered from gas inhalation.

On 19 January, three Israeli bulldozers entered approximately 100 metres into southern Gaza and conducted a clearing operation, in which two explosive devices were discovered and detonated in the area. On the same day militants fired three test rockets from north of Khan Younis towards the sea.

On 20 January, three Israeli bulldozers entered approximately 100 metres into southern Gaza to conduct a clearing operation. They withdrew on the same day. On the same day militants reportedly fired three test rockets from north of Khan Younis towards the sea.

On 22 January, militants fired two test rockets towards the sea.

On 23 January, militants opened fire towards Israeli troops near the perimeter fence east of Gaza city. Israeli troops responded with heavy fire towards Palestinian areas. No injuries or damage were reported. On the same day militants fired one rocket towards Israel; the rocket dropped short and landed on a house close to the perimeter fence, resulting in minor damage to the house; no injuries were reported.

On 24 January, militants fired five test rockets towards the sea and one rocket towards Israel; the rocket landed in an open area inside Israel. No injuries or damage were reported. As a result of the rocket fire to Israel, the Israeli Air Force responded in the early hours of 25 January by firing one missile targeting a Hamas training site in central Gaza as well as two missiles targeting a militant training area in northwest Khan Younis, southern Gaza. No injuries or damages were reported. Later on the same day militants fired five test rockets towards the sea

Funding Needs

Following the 2014 conflict, US$ 247 million has been pledged in support of UNRWA's emergency shelter programme, for which an estimated US$ 720 million is required. This leaves a current shortfall of US$ 473 million.

As presented in UNRWA's occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) Emergency Appeal for 2016, the Agency is seeking US$ 403 million to meet the minimum humanitarian needs of Palestine refugees in the oPt. The Agency requires US$ 355.95 million for programme interventions in Gaza, including US$ 109.7 million for emergency food assistance, US$ 142.3 million for emergency shelter assistance, US$ 60.4 million for emergency cash-for-work assistance,US$ 4.4 million for emergency health/mobile health clinics and US$ 3.1 for education in emergencies. More information can be found here:

http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/2016_opt_emergency_appeal.pdf

Crossings

Longstanding restrictions on the movement of people and goods to and from Gaza have undermined the living conditions of 1.8 million Palestinians in Gaza. Israel prevents all access to and from the Gaza Strip by sea and air. Movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza is restricted to three crossings: Rafah crossing, Erez crossing and Kerem Shalom crossing. Rafah crossing is controlled by the Egyptian authorities and technically allows for the movement of a number of authorized travelers, Palestinian medical and humanitarian cases only. Erez crossing is controlled by Israeli authorities and technically allows for the movement of aid workers and limited numbers of authorized travelers, including Palestinian medical and humanitarian cases. Kerem Shalom crossing, also controlled by Israeli authorities, technically allows for the movement of authorized goods only.

- Rafah crossing remained closed during the reporting week.
- Erez crossing is usually open six days a week. It was open for National ID holders (humanitarian cases, medical cases, merchants and UN staff) and international staff from 19 to 21 January and from 24 to 26 January. On 22 January it was open for pedestrians only. It was closed on 23 January.
- Kerem Shalom crossing is the only official crossing open for the transfer of goods into and out of the Strip and is usually open five days a week. It was open from 19 to 21 January and from 24 to 26 January. It was closed on 22 and 23 January.

Background

On 7 July 2014, a humanitarian emergency was declared by UNRWA in the Gaza Strip, following a severe escalation in hostilities, involving intense Israeli aerial and navy bombardment and Palestinian rocket fire. Hostilities de-escalated following an open-ended ceasefire which entered into force on 26 August.

The scale of human loss, destruction, devastation and displacement caused by this third conflict within seven years was catastrophic, unprecedented and unparalleled in Gaza.

UNRWA mounted an extraordinary response during the 50 days of hostilities which highlighted its unique position as the largest UN organization in the Gaza Strip and the only UN Agency that undertakes direct implementation.

The human, social and economic costs of the last hostilities sit against a backdrop of a society already torn by wide-spread poverty, frustration and anger, heightening vulnerability and political instability within the occupied Palestinian territory.

The Israeli blockade of Gaza entered its 9th year in June 2015 and continues to have a devastating effect as access to markets and people's movement to and from the Gaza Strip remain severely restricted. The economy and its capacity to create jobs has been

devastated, with the majority of the population becoming dependent on humanitarian aid to meet basic needs. The number of Palestine refugees relying on UNRWA for food aid has increased from fewer than 80,000 in 2000 to almost 877,000 today.

Despite the immense daily challenges, and through the dedication of its staff, UNRWA's operations continue to sustain approximately 1.3 million refugees surviving a broken economy, political divide and devastated infrastructure.

Gaza: Facts and Figures

- 1.3 million refugees out of 1.8 million total population (71 per cent)
- 8 refugee camps
- Almost 12,500 staff
- 257 schools for almost 251,000 students
- 21 health centres
- 16 relief and social services offices
- 3 micro-finance offices issuing 111,243 loans valued at US$ 143,524,910 since 1991
- 12 food distribution centres for almost 877,000 refugees
- Living under a tight land and sea blockade since 2007
- Long standing restrictions on movement of people and goods has led to a de-development of Gaza
- Potentially unliveable place by 2020, including a potentially unusable aquifer by 2016.

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight.

The Arabic translation of the Gaza weekly situation reports can be found here.

unrwa الأونروا united nations relief and works agency for palestine refugees in the near east

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