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Entry of emergency fuel urgently needed to avoid closure of hospitals and overflow of sewage in Gaza streets

Today, the Humanitarian Coordinator, Mr. Jamie McGoldrick, called on the Israeli authorities to immediately allow the entry of UN-purchased emergency fuel into the Gaza Strip.

“Restricting the entry of emergency fuel to Gaza is a dangerous practice, with grave consequences on the rights of people in Gaza,” said Mr. McGoldrick. “The well-being of two million people, half of whom are children, is at stake. It is unacceptable that Palestinians in Gaza are repeatedly deprived of the most basic elements of a dignified life.”

Health, water and sanitation partners indicate that at least 60,000 litres of emergency fuel should be delivered immediately to some 46 critical facilities across Gaza in order to ensure the basic functioning of main hospitals and essential water and sanitation services for the coming four days. The fuel, which is available and awaiting entry by the Israeli authorities, is needed to power back-up generators required in the context of Gaza’s chronic energy crisis.

At around 40 out of 132 water and sanitation facilities, fuel stocks are currently enough for only 1-2 days. 1.2 million Palestinians are at imminent risk of possible sewage overflow around the 41 main sewage pumping stations in the Gaza Strip.

In order to avoid sewage flooding into populated areas, the Municipality of Gaza City has been reportedly forced to direct over 10,000 cubic metres of sewage each day, the equivalent of four Olympic-sized swimming pools, towards a storm water lagoon in the northern part of the city, placing the surrounding communities at heightened risk of an overflow. In addition, sewage treatment at Gaza city’s waste-water treatment plants have reduced operations and solid waste collection, the latter leaving around 15,000 tons of garbage accumulating in the streets. The reduced functioning of water and sanitation facilities risks an increase of waterborne disease and outbreaks.

Hospitals and other critical health services are reducing operations, with five hospitals facing possible closure in the coming three days, if emergency fuel is not allowed in. At highest risk, currently, are over 2,000 patients in Gaza’s hospitals, who rely on electrical devices. Medical services for over 1.6 million other Palestinians may suffer from the lack of emergency fuel at the 54 main health facilities.

Compounding the situation, funding for emergency fuel will run out for all critical facilities in mid- August, with US$4.5 million required to ensure that a minimum level of essential services can continue to run through the end of the year.

“Gaza desperately needs longer-term solutions so we can move past this cycle of repeated or worsening crises, including that Palestinian authorities prioritize provision of fuel for essential services,” said Mr. McGoldrick. “Until that happens, Israel must reverse the recent restrictions, including on the entry of emergency fuel, and donors must step in and fund emergency fuel, in order to avoid a disease outbreak or other major public health concern,” he concluded.

Background

Since 2 August, the Israeli authorities have prohibited the entry of fuel into the Gaza Strip, in the context of tightened import and export restrictions. This followed an early restriction on the entry of fuel that lasted from 16 – 24 July. According to the Israeli authorities, the intensified measures come in response to the launching of incendiary kites from Gaza into Israel, which has caused extensive property damage.

An average of 950,000 liters is distributed by the UN each month for back-up generators at around 250 critical hospitals and health clinics; water and sewage treatment sites; and solid waste collection services. The deliveries ensure that a minimum level of life-saving services can be maintained in the midst of the dire electricity shortage facing the Gaza Strip, with energy demands at their highest during summer months. At present, the nearly two million Palestinian residents of Gaza, over half of whom are children, receive electricity for no more than four hours each day. Over 60 per cent of the emergency fuel is consumed by some 54 health facilities. Given that Kerem Shalom has been the only regularly-open crossing point for imports to Gaza for years, there is currently no alternative system in place that would enable the procurement and entry of UN-purchased emergency fuel from another destination, including Egypt.

The recent developments have exacerbated the existing humanitarian crisis driven by 11 years of Israeli blockade that has raised concerns over collective punishment and human rights violations, alongside an unresolved internal Palestinian political divide.