



SITUATION REPORT FROM THE HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR

4 January 2009 as of 17:00

The Israeli military operation and heavy bombardment of the Gaza Strip has entered its ninth day, with an Israeli military ground operation commencing as of approximately 20:00 on 3 January. The ground incursion was preceded by intensive shelling along the entire length of the border inside Gaza. Israeli forces are now deployed in several areas of the Gaza Strip with clashes taking place between Israeli forces and militants. Damage and destruction of roads, infrastructure and buildings has been reported, including to a large gas storage facility.

The military incursion compounds the humanitarian crisis following more than a week of shelling and an 18-month long blockade of the territory. There is an increased threat to civilians due to combat in densely populated urban areas. Hospitals continue to be overstretched because of the large number of casualties that have accumulated since the beginning of Israeli attacks, and ambulances and medical personnel face difficulties in accessing casualties. Electricity and telecommunications are down over much of the Strip. Food distributions have been suspended and all crossing points remain closed.

VIOLENCE

Since the beginning of the ground operation itself, at least 25 people (mostly civilians including women and children) have been killed throughout the Gaza Strip. The number is expected to be higher to include those people who did not make it to a hospital. This morning, an ambulance of Al Awda hospital in the north was shelled, seriously injuring 4 medical staff. Palestine Square in central Gaza City was also hit, reportedly killing 5 civilians and injuring another 40 persons. Prior to the ground incursion, 15 Palestinians were killed and more than 25 injured when the Israeli Air Force bombarded the Ibrahim Al Makadima Mosque in Beit Lahiya.

As of this evening, the MoH reports casualty figures since the beginning of the Israeli military operation on 27 December of 491 dead and approximately 2,400 injured, out of which figures, at least 20 percent of the fatalities and 40 percent of the injuries are women and children.

Palestinian militants have continued to fire missiles towards Israeli cities, towns and advancing ground troops. As of the morning of 3 January, the Israeli Magen David Adom reported 46 light injuries (5 moderate, 4 severe) and 4 fatalities over the past week.

FUEL / ELECTRICITY / TELECOMMUNICATIONS

There is an almost total blackout in the governorates of Gaza, North Gaza, Middle Area, and Khan Yunis. Most of the telephone network (both land lines and cell phones) in Gaza is also not functioning since it now depends on back-up generators with dwindling fuel stocks.

HEALTH

All of Gaza City hospitals have been without mains electricity for 48 consecutive hours, depending entirely on back-up generators. The hospitals warn that the generators are close to collapse. At the Shifa hospital, collapse would have immediate consequences for 70 intensive care unit (ICU) patients including 30 in the neonatal care who are connected to machines. ICUs throughout the Gaza Strip are overloaded. The security situation is also preventing medical staff from reaching hospitals.

Ambulances are experiencing difficulty in reaching the injured because of continuous fire. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society continues to work around the clock in order to assist the population. From Friday to Saturday midday, its ambulances transported 78 wounded to hospitals. Fifteen fatalities were also transported.

Today, UNRWA has had to close four out of its 18 health centers because of hostilities in the vicinity. For the second consecutive day, Israeli authorities have refused to allow an ICRC emergency medical team into Gaza to help the staff of Shifa.

An Emergency Operational Room was set up by the PA Ministry of Health (Ramallah) in collaboration with WHO to follow up the health situation in Gaza. The operation room will provide assessments of requirements (pharmaceuticals, consumables, equipments and spare parts), follow up on the response of international community, and address referrals of injured and other patients.

SHELTER

PRCS estimates that thousands of homes have been damaged and it has become increasingly difficult for their residents to stay in them given the cold weather. Prior to the onset of the IDF ground operation, the Save the Children Alliance and Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights had estimated that more than 13,000 people (2,000 families) have been displaced in the Gaza Strip during the course of the Israeli military operation. This figure is expected to increase following the ground incursion. The majority of these families have sought shelter with relatives and neighbors while an estimated 1,200 people currently staying in five emergency shelters run by UNRWA.

FOOD

UNRWA food distribution was cancelled today due to Israeli military activity, except in southern Gaza where the situation is calmer. UNRWA reports that it is facing significant difficulties obtaining food for their emergency distributions since most bakeries are closed and movement is too dangerous. WFP was able to distribute bread to 13 hospitals throughout the Gaza Strip today. CHF, one of WFP's main implementing partners, distributed food yesterday in North Gaza but have not been able to distribute today in Khan Yunis due to security reasons and movement restrictions.

Due to the lack of cooking gas in Gaza, 23 bakeries are no longer operating. The number of operational bakeries is down to 10. The remaining 14 are partially operating, depending on the availability of electricity.

WATER AND SANITATION

According to CMWU, Gaza's water utility, approximately 70% of the Gaza Strip population has no access to water, in particular Gaza City and northern Gaza due to the electricity cuts and lack of fuel for back-up generators. CMWU fears that continued shelling near the Beit Lahiya waste water treatment plant may hit the west side of the sewage lagoon which contains 3 million cubic metres of waste water. If this happens, a large part of Beit Lahiya will be flooded by sewage.

UNRWA has donated 75,000 liters of fuel to CMWU, though only 35,000 liters has so far been distributed due to the fear of moving fuel tanks in the current security situation. The situation remains critical: in northern Gaza, for example, the water and sewage networks have enough fuel to continue operations for 2-3 days only.

CROSSINGS

All Gaza goods crossings with Israel are closed today. No fuel, aid supplies or other commodities will be allowed entry to Gaza today¹. Both Erez and Rafah crossings are closed today meaning that no medical supplies or medical evacuations will be permitted entry / exit to or from Gaza. The World Health Organization reports that 105 patients have been transported through Rafah for treatment outside of Gaza since the beginning of Israel's military operation on 27 December.

FUNDING

A number of donor partners have pledged contributions to the Humanitarian Emergency Response Fund

1. The Nahal Oz fuel pipeline and Karni conveyor belt used for grains were last opened on 26 December 2008

(HRF) in recent days. Funds are already being disbursed for urgent projects in the Gaza Strip, including \$250,000 to WHO for the procurement of surgical kits, \$200,000 to Islamic Relief to provide food and blankets to eight hospitals, and \$130,000 to a PARC project to provide Gazans with torches, batteries and dry food.

PRIORITY NEEDS

Fuel: Industrial fuel is needed to power the Gaza Power Plant, which has been shut down since 30 December. Replacement of ten transformers which were completely damaged is also urgently needed to restore electricity supply to 250,000 people in central and northern Gaza. All water, sanitation and other utilities, which provide basic services to the population, as well as hospitals and the general population are affected by the outages; some areas have now experienced power outages more than 48 hours. Nahal Oz crossing 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. This crossing remains closed.

Wheat grain: Essential to provide flour for local bakeries and humanitarian food distribution to the population of Gaza. Karni Crossing conveyor belt is the only mechanism which can facilitate the import of the amount of grain required in the Strip at this time. This crossing remains closed.

Cash: Has still not entered the Gaza Strip and is urgently needed, including for the UNRWA cash distribution program to some 94,000 dependent beneficiaries, as well as its “cash for work” program.

Internal movement within the Gaza Strip: It is essential that patients and ambulances are able to reach hospitals, that agencies are able to access warehouses in order to conduct distributions. Currently movement within the Strip is severely challenged.