

Strangled

Gaza collapsing in the grip of a humanitarian crisis

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Euro-Med Monitor
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

It has been nine months since Israel agreed to a ceasefire that ended its third and most massive military offensive against the 1.8 million residents of the Gaza Strip. However, despite promises by Israel to loosen its nine-year blockade, by Egypt to facilitate further negotiations and by the international community to fund the massive reconstruction needed, none of those promises have been kept.

Today, the Israeli army continues to regularly shoot at fishermen, or confiscate their boats, when they merely are trying to make a living. In April alone, 15 shooting incidents, including one that ended in injury and property damage, were documented.

Likewise, although the estimated cost of relief, recovery and reconstruction due to last summer's war is \$4 billion, and international donors pledged \$5.4 billion for Gaza's reconstruction, only \$954 million had been disbursed as of early April.

It's not surprising, then, that UNRWA has suspended its cash-assistance program for repairs and rent due to lack of funds, and that the Israeli organization Gisha reports that of the 5 million tons of construction materials required, only 9 percent of that total has actually entered Gaza.

To add insult to injury, Egypt has closed the Rafah crossing was closed for 70 percent of the time since 2007. Moreover, the Rafah crossing has been completely closed since the beginning of 2015, marking the longest closure since 2009.

The consequences are predictable. Unemployment has soared to 43 percent, and according to the International Monetary Fund, the Strip's gross domestic product plunged 24 percent in the third quarter of 2014. This, in an economy that already was on life support.

With the exception of solidarity activists such as those aboard the trawler Marianne, now steaming its way toward Gaza from Sweden, most of the world's attention has shifted away to other pressing issues. However, Gaza remains a crisis in the making that will blow up into another war, or at the very least cause large-scale and socially immoral suffering, if the international community does not re-shoulder its responsibilities.

The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor therefore urgently calls on the international community to:

1. Bring all available pressures to bear on the Israeli government to end the blockade of Gaza.
2. Call on the Israeli government to end the targeting of innocent fishermen, farmers and other citizens, a practice in violation of the 1949 Geneva Convention.
3. Prevail upon the Egyptian government, using foreign aid as a lever, to open the Rafah crossing, without any restrictions.
4. Investigate and hold the Israeli government accountable when it is charged with war crimes and ongoing violations of human rights. No barriers should be placed that hinder the ability of Palestinians or others to seek relief from third parties such as the International Criminal Court.
5. Support the Palestinian call for a commercial seaport in Gaza that guarantees the free import and export of goods and private international travel.

Israel has a long history of isolating the Gaza Strip, with many closures since the 1990s. However, the blockade imposed in 2006 is an unprecedented form of collective punishment in its severity and length. In September 2007, Israel declared Gaza a “hostile entity” and ruled that, “Additional sanctions will be placed on the Hamas regime in order to restrict the passage of various goods to the Gaza Strip and reduce the supply of fuel and electricity. Restrictions will also be placed on the movement of people to and from the Gaza Strip.”

Under international humanitarian law, Israel remains an occupying power despite its removal of 8,000 “settlers” from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Israel continues to control entry and exit into Gaza from its territory, as well as the Strip’s airspace and sea. Likewise, it controls Gaza’s population registry, telecommunication networks and many other aspects of its daily life and infrastructure—making it nearly impossible for residents to support themselves and build a productive future. Israel thus is violating the absolute prohibition on collective punishment in international humanitarian law, penalizing the entire population of Gaza for the acts of a few.

In addition, since 2008, the state of Israel has launched three military offensives against the Gaza Strip, devastating its already-fragile infrastructure and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis created by a strangling blockade imposed for nine years.

Key facts

- The assault killed 2,147 Palestinians, including 530 children, compared to 70 Israelis.
- 10,870 Palestinians were injured, including 3,303 children. 730 Israelis were injured.
- One-third of the injured children will suffer long-term disabilities.
- Thousands of vital buildings were damaged or destroyed, including 58,000-89,000 homes (depending on the source of statistics).

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas on earth, in large part because it is hermetically sealed off on both borders. Over the course of 50 days, an estimated 60,664 raids by air, land and sea killed 2,147 Palestinians, including 530 children and 489 females (144 families lost three or more members in a single incident). The year 2014 proved to be the deadliest for Palestinians since 1967, according to OCHA, with a death toll reaching 2,314 compared to 39 in 2013.

In addition, 10,870 Palestinians, including 3,303 children (with one-third of them expected to suffer long-term disabilities) and 3,537 females, were injured. In contrast, 70 Israelis were killed, including 64 soldiers and six civilians. Additionally, more than 485,000 Palestinians were internally displaced.

Meanwhile, the assault destroyed or severely damaged as many as 89,000 housing units, leaving an estimated 108,000 Palestinians homeless. It's important to remember that before the summer offensive, there were 12,000 Palestinians still living in temporary shelters due to prior Israeli assaults and a shortage of 71,000 housing units. As of the end of May, nearly 10,000 people are living in UNRWA-run schools, with many suffering from skin conditions, intestinal diseases and food poisoning. Shelters often lack the main necessities of daily life, including privacy,

security and stability. Consequently, nearly every displaced person suffers anxiety, fear, malnutrition and/or trauma.

Exacerbating the displacement of people is the damage to infrastructure, such as wastewater treatment systems and hundreds of vital buildings, including hospitals, schools, government agencies and businesses, were reduced to rubble.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 22 schools were completely destroyed and 118 others were damaged. With the education sector already overstretched before the assault, learning was disrupted for all 474,000 children enrolled in government, private and UNRWA-run secondary schools; 55,003 children enrolled in kindergartens; and 30,002 university students.

Additionally, 17,000 hectares of cropland, including greenhouses, animal farms, fodder stock and irrigation systems, were damaged. An initial damage-assessment report by the Coastal Municipalities Water Utility documented that nearly 12 percent of wells, in addition to more than 33,000 meters of water and wastewater networks, were destroyed or damaged.

The result is a dire economic situation in which nearly half of the population is unemployed.

On August 26, an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian armed factions took effect, bringing a fragile end to the conflict. What exactly were the terms was never officially revealed in any detail. Based on the fragments of information available, however, the terms approved by both Hamas and the Israeli government included:

- The cessation of all Israeli hostilities against the Gaza Strip by land, sea and air.
- The cessation of all hostilities against Israel and Israelis from the Gaza Strip.
- The opening of Israeli crossings into and out of Gaza, and the facilitation of the movement of persons and goods – including a speedy entry of humanitarian aid and reconstruction supplies.

- Permission for Palestinian fishermen to sail up to six nautical miles out in the Gaza harbor.
- Negotiation of other issues one month after signing.

To date, none of those terms have been satisfied. Israeli forces have continuously terrorized Palestinian fishermen, the entry of desperately needed construction supplies has been a mere trickle of the need and no further progress has been made on discussing long-term, festering issues such as the blockade itself and the more than 6,000 Palestinian political prisoners now held in Israeli jails.

In fact, in the aftermath of the attack, Israeli authorities brazenly declared they would not cooperate with any commission of inquiry charged with investigating the summer offensive and has denied entry to international experts and officials, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Rachida Manjo.



Gaza Reconstruction |

To ease the plight of displaced persons living in shelters following the destruction wrought by the summer offensive, a donor conference on the reconstruction of Gaza was held in Cairo in October, where the international community pledged \$5.4 billion—about half for Palestinian Authority support and half for reconstruction on the ground in Gaza.

The conference was held following the establishment of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) by the United Nations, which was designed to speed entry of materials to rebuild homes, construct 26 schools and complete massive repairs to infrastructure. GRM was proposed by UN Special Envoy Robert Serry and includes an elaborate process for monitoring the distribution and use of materials such as concrete to ensure that Palestinian armed factions cannot use them for military purposes. Unfortunately, the process not only shares highly personal information for each person and business requesting materials to the Israeli government (which undermines the trust of Palestinian residents traumatized during the assault), but also has proven to be cumbersome and slow.

The estimated cost of relief, recovery and reconstruction is \$4 billion; as of early April, reportedly only \$954 million had been received due to the “political environment.”

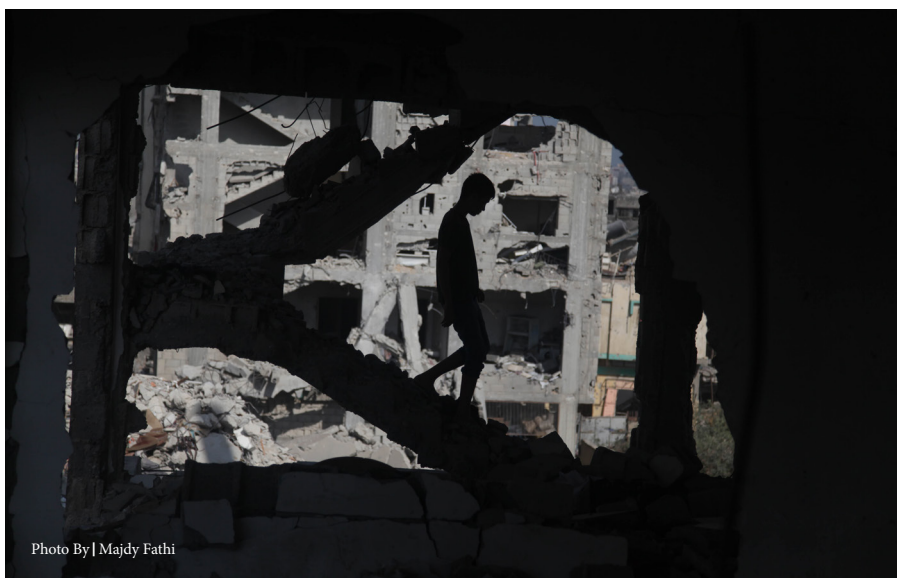


Photo By | Majdy Fathi

Three months after the donor conference was held, UNRWA declared it must suspend its cash-assistance program for repairs and rent due to lack of funds.

According to the Israeli organization Gisha, 462,926 tons of construction material entered the Strip between August 26 and the end of February. Fifteen percent of that amount was permitted as a part of the GRM, whereas the rest was allowed in for international organizations or projects funded by the Qatar government. Five million tons of construction materials are needed for rebuilding; the amount of materials that has entered Gaza since late August represents about 9 percent of the total need.

During his visit to Gaza in December, Serry expressed concern about the pace of reconstruction amid the dire conditions, saying, “The difficult issues, coupled with insufficient financial assistance from donors, have only worsened the atmosphere in an already devastated Gaza.”

In its Gaza Situation Update issued in December, Oxfam described the volume of the three essential construction materials, known as ABCs (aggregates, steel bars and cement), entering Gaza as a “drop in the ocean.” The volume of these materials allowed into the Strip in the three months following the August ceasefire constitutes approximately 4 percent of what entered prior to the imposition of the blockade in 2007 (52,351 tons compared to 178,281). At the present rate, the organization predicted, it would take 23 years to rebuild Gaza.

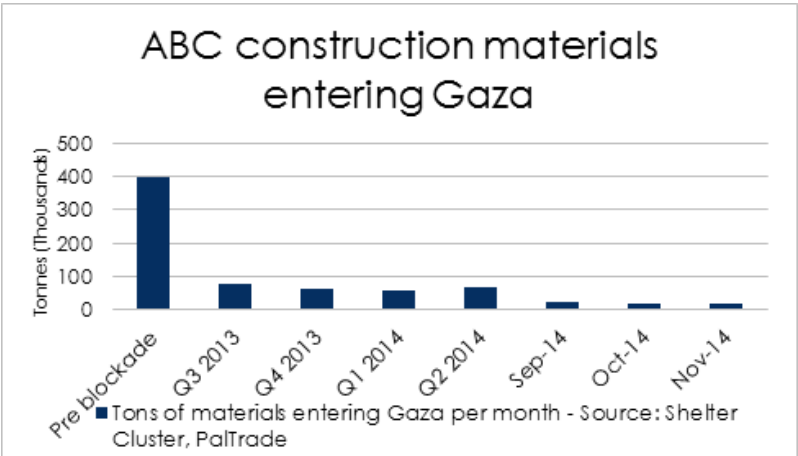


Figure (1): ABC construction materials entering Gaza 2013-2014

The Palestinian “unity government,” established in April 2014, was tasked at the donor conference with managing reconstruction. However, the coalition continues to struggle with internal disagreements and remains incapable of assuming leadership.

In March, Serry said, “We need a government capable of living up to its responsibilities,” adding that donor countries are reluctant to fulfill their pledges while Gaza remains under Hamas governance. However, equally significant is the international community’s unwillingness or inability to pressure Israel to end its blockade, allow construction materials and other vital goods into the Strip, and stop shooting at fishermen who must sail beyond six nautical miles to catch decent-sized fish.

The only alternative to Israel's border crossings with Gaza is Egypt's Rafah terminal, which has closed frequently in the past few years, worsening the already fragile humanitarian situation in the Strip. Not only has this situation further restricted the movement of people in and out of the territory, but it also has triggered fuel shortages, forcing the Gaza Power Plant to reduce electricity production, including its complete shut down several times a year.

Since Israel first imposed its blockade, Rafah border has been closed 70 percent of the time, allowing passage only for certain types of people such as patients, internationals and residents with foreign visas.

In 2014, Egyptian authorities cited security as the reason for closing its border with Gaza during Israel's 50-day military operation. When a ceasefire deal was reached between Israel and the Palestinian armed movements in late August, the crossing was opened to allow limited categories of travelers to leave the Strip.

However, two months later, from October 25 to December 20, the border was closed for a record 57 days, allowing transit only by returning Palestinians who had been stranded in Egypt or third countries.

That trend has continued. The Rafah crossing has been closed since the beginning of 2015, except for five days. This has been the longest closure since 2009.

Even when allowed to cross into Egypt, Gazans are treated harshly. According to Gaza's border crossings authority, 90,000 Gaza residents registered to leave the Strip via Rafah for medical treatment and other purposes since July 2013. Male Palestinians between 17 and 50 years old suffer the most during transit: Their passports are taken once they cross into Egypt and they are sent by bus directly to Cairo International Airport. They are confined to a small room until the time of their flight, often for many hours or days, and treated like prisoners. Food and medicine are rationed.

Month	2012	2013	2014	2015
January	32,834	42,897	4,316	2,727
February	32,037	33,596	6,993	0
March	29,925	37,918	6,607	2,443
April	30,500	39,247	6,479	-
May	32,573	35,244	4,949	-
June	32,573	55,995	9,325	-
July	51,660	16,295	7,292	-
August	29,380	11,242	12,149	-
September	42,916	6,503	19,991	-
October	37,009	11,641	13,728	-
November	37,479	5,952	2,688	-
December	30,489	5,238	4,316	-

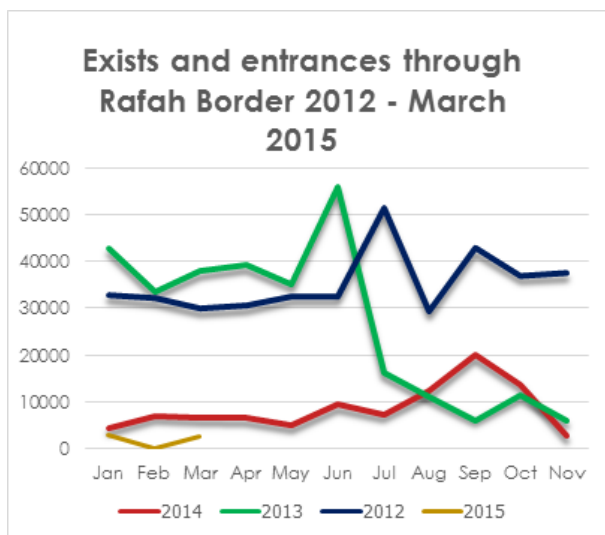


Figure (2): Exits and entrances through Rafah 2012-March 2015. Source: Gisha

Israel's array of restrictions on trade and human traffic, coupled with regular Israeli attacks, prompted Palestinians to construct tunnels from Rafah city on the Gaza side into the Egyptian Rafah town and thus allow goods to go in and out. Vital supplies such as construction materials and fuel were moved through the tunnels, as well as daily supplies that were otherwise unavailable or could be obtained only from Israel at a higher, unaffordable price. Many workers put in 12-hour shifts six days a week—or more—in cramped spaces. Gas explosions, electrocutions, cave-ins and air strikes were killing nearly 300 workers since 2007. Yet these risks were considered necessary.

However, concerned about the infiltration of fighters and weapons, the Egyptian army destroyed the majority of the tunnels by the end of July 2013, triggering a severe shortage of fuel.

In late 2014, following an upsurge in deadly attacks against Egyptian military and police personnel, the government declared a state of emergency and the army began implementing a buffer zone along the border with the Gaza Strip, 1,000 meters deep and extending 13.5 kilometers (8.4 miles). Border crossing rules were tightened still further, deepening the recession for Gaza's economy.

The resulting shortage of diesel fuel also forced closure of sewage-treatment plants, causing serious pollution and threatening environmental disaster.

10 Facts about the Economic Strangulation of Gaza

- Gaza's economy entered into recession even before the breakout of the conflict in 2014. (World Bank)
- Gaza's GDP shrunk by 28.4 percent between the second and third quarters of 2014. (UNRWA)
- Labor productivity remains lower in Gaza than in the West Bank.
- Nearly 80 percent of the Gazan population is dependent on international aid.
- The rate of Palestinians living in poverty in Gaza is 2.5 higher than that in the West Bank.
- Since 2007, more than 75,500 workers supporting half a million families have lost their jobs.
- Unemployment reached 42.8 percent in the fourth quarter of 2014. (PCBS)
- Israel's restrictions forced 90 percent of enterprises to cease operations. (B'Tselem)
- Israel's summer attack resulted in the complete or partial destruction of 936 enterprises.

Due to both the military offensives and the ongoing blockade, Gaza's economy has witnessed a steady decline during the past decade, leaving more than 80 percent of the population dependent on international aid.

Small and medium enterprises in Gaza were affected the most by the recent assault, resulting in the destruction or damage of 936 enterprises. Dozens of other businesses have been forced to close or curtail hours

of operation because they cannot afford power generators to make up for the perpetual electricity shortages.

Due to these limitations, as well as firms' inability to invest in capital goods or sell to traditional markets such as Israel and the West Bank, Gaza's labor productivity is significantly lower than in the West Bank. According to the Palestinian economic monitoring report issued by the World Bank in September 2014, Gaza's economy entered into a recession even before the summer conflict, due to the closure of the tunnels to and from Egypt, which were the main trade channels.

The report documented that the deterioration of the Palestinian economy continued in 2015, with an average yearly growth of minus 1 percent in the first quarter.

Moreover, by the end of 2014, poverty in Gaza was 39 percent, nearly 2.5 times higher than that in the West Bank at 16 percent.

Gaza Situation Report 82 issued by the UNRWA in March 2015 revealed that Gaza's economy was on standby, leading to a gross domestic product (GDP) shrinking by 28.4 percent (from \$480.9 million to \$344.2 million) from the second quarter to the third quarter of 2014 where the summer attack was launched. The decline particularly affected the agriculture (-74.8 percent) and construction (-75.2 percent) sectors.

As Israel's restrictions prevent raw materials from entering Gaza since 2007, 90 percent of the enterprises in the Strip were forced to cease operations. Moreover, 3,500 businesses have closed down and nearly 80,000 workers who support half a million dependents have lost their jobs.

The Gaza Strip's economy will never be able to reach its full potential as Israel continues to restrict external trade, including with Israel, and transfers to and from the West Bank. Israel limits the access to agricultural land and fishing waters. Current constraints discourage investment, prevent sustainable growth, and perpetuate high levels of unemployment, food insecurity and aid dependency.

Following Palestine's decision to sign the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Israel has been freezing nearly \$127 million per month in tax revenues which it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA), leading to a financial crisis that deprived the PA from more than two-thirds of its money budget, excluding foreign aid, and prevented it from paying its 180,000 employees, including 70,000 in Gaza.

Unemployment in the Gaza Strip also continues to be at unprecedented levels reaching 43 percent in the first quarter of 2015, with youth unemployment amounting to 60 percent by the end of 2014.

Before Israel's implementation of a full siege on Gaza in 2007, there were six official crossings into Gaza: Erez, Karni, Nahal Oz, Kerem Shalom and Sufa with Israel, and Rafah with Egypt. Prior to 2007, an average of 70 truckloads of exports left Gaza a day, and 583 truckloads of goods and humanitarian supplies came in. The majority of goods passed through Karni, in the North-East of the Gaza Strip. The main pipeline for the import of fuel (such as for the power plant in Gaza) was based at Nahal Oz. Since June 2007 Karni has been shut down, apart from a conveyor belt which delivers grain over the huge concrete perimeter wall. Sufa was closed entirely in September 2008. Most goods allowed into Gaza now enter through the much smaller Kerem Shalom crossing point in the South, which only functions partially. In the first two years of the blockade, an average of just 112 truckloads per day – one-fifth of previous levels – were allowed into Gaza.

Exports have been banned with the exception of several small shipments. Erez crossing in the North has facilities to process large numbers of people entering and exiting Gaza, but now only deals with small numbers of foreign visitors like aid workers and journalists, and the handful of Palestinians permitted out in exceptional cases, mainly for medical treatment or study abroad.

a. Naval restrictions threaten fishermen's livelihoods

Under the 1994 Oslo Accord signed by the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Israel, Palestinians living in the coastal strip should be allowed access to 20 nautical miles, i.e. 37 Km of the Gaza coast. However, Palestinian fishermen were always pushed back to less than 12 nautical miles.

In 2002, Palestinians were allowed access up to 12 nautical miles before the limit was shrunk to 10 nautical miles in 2006, shortly after the Hamas party won the elections. The limit was then shrunk again to 6 nautical miles in October 2006, and to 3 nautical miles in 2009 after Operation "Cast Lead". Following the ceasefire agreement after Operation "Pillar of the Cloud" in November 2012, Palestinians were allowed access back to 3-4 nautical miles, a limit that was to be increased to 6 nautical miles and then gradually to 12 nautical miles later in 2014 following the ceasefire agreement in August. Nevertheless, between August 26, 2014 and May 9, 2015, Israel violated the agreement in 752 incidents where its navies opened fire toward fishermen and fishing boats within the six-nautical-mile limit.

Because of the restrictions imposed on fishermen, fish catch dropped from 3,650 metric tons in 1999 to 1,938 metric tons in 2012; nearly 47 percent of catches were lost per year. Data from UNOCHA indicated that between 2000 and 2013, the number of fishermen dropped from approximately 10,000 to 3,500, nearly 95 percent of whom are dependent on international aid.

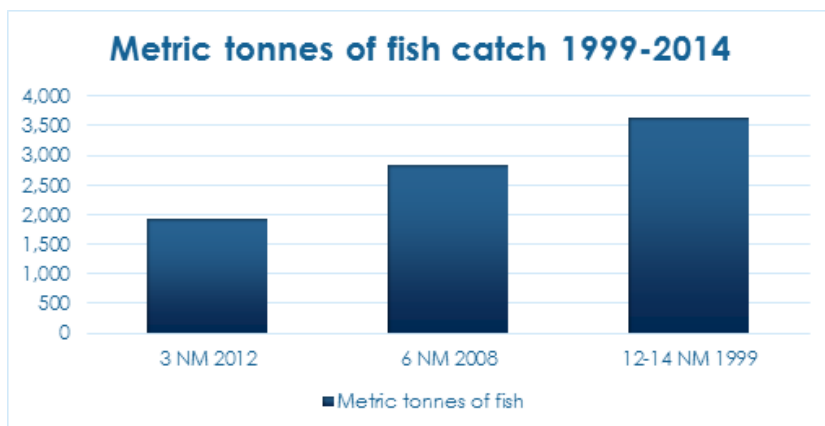


Figure (3): Metric tonnes of fish catch 1999-2014

b. Israeli buffer zone cuts off Palestinians from farmlands |

With restrictions on access to land imposed by Israel to address its security concerns in Gaza creating a 3 Km-deep buffer zone, approximately 35 percent of the agricultural lands have been swallowed, rendering investment in such areas nearly impossible since farmers are constantly at risk as a result of the methods of enforcement imposed by Israel, including the use of live ammunition, leveling the agricultural lands, and detention of farmers.



Over the past decade, farmers endured losses of their source of income and livelihoods, including destruction of green houses, damage to agricultural land, leveling of trees, and death of animals. Consequently, approximately 89 percent of households in the Strip have resorted to “negative coping mechanisms to meet their food needs” according to a joint report compiled by the World Bank, the EU, the UN and the Palestinian government in the first quarter of 2015.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), the Israeli restrictions preventing farmers from reaching their own lands have cost the local economy US\$60 million. In addition, an estimated 6,000 acres (nearly 20 percent of the fertile farmland in Gaza) have been abandoned by farmers due to the methods of enforcement imposed by Israel to create the buffer zone.

Furthermore, farmers were forced to abandon their farms for nearly two months during the recent hostilities, which resulted in substantial direct damage to 17,000 hectares of croplands and infrastructure. Therefore, with stocks of some imported products being dwindled, prices became sky-high rendering the majority of the population unable to afford them.

Key Facts

- By the end of July 2013, nearly 27% (128 items) of essential medicines were at zero stock
- During the summer attack, hospitals operated with only 40% of their workforce.
- The majority of patients do not receive appropriate medical care due to the blockade.
- Registered cases of cancer along the Strip have significantly increased, reaching 73.1 per 100,000 residents. (MoH)
- Male patients referred for treatment in Israel are often blackmailed and required to submit to Israeli security interviews.
- Child mortality rates are significantly higher in Gaza compared to the West Bank.

Being already riddled with deficiencies, Gaza's vulnerable health system has been deeply affected and is on the point of collapse due to the Israeli restrictions imposed both on access of essential medical supplies as well as on patients' travel in and out of the Strip.

The public health system in Gaza has been severely affected by the Israeli blockade and by the political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Severe shortages of essential drugs and medical supplies, unstable power supply and lack of fuel for generators, and inadequate maintenance capacity and spare parts for medical equipment, have contributed to deterioration in the quality of care.

The blockade inflicts other enormous difficulties on the health system including a chronic shortage of specialized medical personnel and access to training. More than 1000 patients are referred monthly for specialized care to health facilities outside the Gaza Strip, but their access to East Jerusalem and the West Bank hospitals, and to Israel and Jordan, is restricted by the Israeli permit system.

In its July 2013 Humanitarian Report, UNOCHA revealed that at the end of July 2013, nearly 27 percent (128 items) of essential medicines were at zero stock in the Central Drug Store in Gaza, and that 16 percent (68 items) were at low stock (between 1-3 months' supply)

In 2014, Israel's operation "Protective Edge" has had disastrous consequences for the health sector with hospitals unable to deal with the overwhelming number of victims due to shortages of equipment, workers, drugs, beds and emergency rooms.

In many cases during the attack, corpses brought into their facilities had entire organs completely separated from the bodies; in other cases, organs were actually found scattered about on the ground. These are very unusual circumstances, raising the likelihood that Israeli forces used unconventional and internationally prohibited weapons.

Additionally, premature births have increased by 15-20 percent due to the stress caused by the attacks. Dozens of women who could not reach hospitals due to the intensive bombardment were forced to give birth at home or in shelters, where the basic needs, such as sanitation and vaccines for the infants were not available. Obstetric units also suffer from a severe lack of medical equipment and supplies due to the blockade. This crisis became a lot worse during the attack, when hospitals had to give priority to ER and ICU patients. Medical personnel were in short supply due to their inability to leave their homes when they were under continuous Israeli attacks. As a result, hospitals operated with only 40 percent of their workforce.

A recent report issued by the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) in March 2015 revealed a sharp increase in the number of registered cases of cancer along the Strip which reached 73.1 per 100,000 residents, resulting from the pollution caused by the use of chemical weapons by Israel. The majority of patients do not receive appropriate medical care due to the blockade and the lack of needed equipment and medications. Thus, many of them are forced to travel abroad for proper treatment.

The Ministry of Health routinely refers patients in Gaza for treatment at hospitals in Israel or Egypt. Those referred to Israel, especially male patients aged 18-45 are often blackmailed and required to submit to Israeli security interviews, during which they have to answer questions concerning Palestinian armed factions.

Since the healthcare system in Gaza has a very limited capacity to meet the needs of nearly 1.9 million citizens, many patients are referred to Egypt for treatment. With Rafah border being subject to openings and closings depending on the unstable political situation, patients are increasingly forced to delay their medical treatment in Egypt. Additionally, although urgent cases and cancer patients are usually given priority to travel, their access is impeded by the limited hours of crossing when it is open. Consequently, the Palestinian Ministry of Health requests already registered patients to renew their registration in order to prioritize urgent cases and hundreds of patients usually stop registering new requests despite their need to travel.

According to B'Tselem, the number of Palestinians who died following an infringement of the right to medical treatment in the Gaza Strip significantly increased reaching 21 in 2007 and 2008 compared to only one in 2005 and 2006.

More than one-quarter of drug supplies of the MoH are usually received via Rafah border which remains closed most of the time, forcing hospitals to restrict X-rays and the limit certain drugs to emergency use only because of low supplies. Moreover, the closure consequently halts medical missions and supply of donated medicines to the MoH.

Refugee Crisis: UNRWA failing to provide basic needs |

Despite the assistance programmes provided by UNRWA to more than one million refugees in the Gaza Strip, the agency is still unable to provide food security for the majority of them. A 2012 UNRWA survey revealed that 57 percent of households in Gaza, or nearly 1.04 million people were considered food insecure.

A UN report titled “Gaza Initial Rapid Assessment” indicated that nearly every refugee in Gaza faces some kind of urgent need for basic protection, healthcare, water, shelter, food, education, or even security.

According to the agency, the number of refugees in the Strip was 800,000 in 2000, a number that rose to 1.2 million in 2013 and is expected to reach 1.6 million by 2020.



As the number of refugees increases every year, the agency remains incapable of providing the basic needs to the majority of them. As a result, over the past few years, the number of needy Palestinian refugees in the Strip has increased reaching 800,000.

Moreover, the household food insecurity level or vulnerable to food insecure reached 70 percent of households with nearly 66 percent of the population receiving food assistance prior to the conflict.

The biggest effect the blockade has had on UNRWA, according to the agency's spokesman, is the resulting collapse of the private sector and the growing number of unemployed refugees who are increasingly requesting aid and work opportunities, which exceeds UNRWA's capacities.

As a result of a record budget deficit of 65 percent, the agency announced cuts in the number of beneficiaries of its food aid and other assistance programmes, removing 34,000 refugee families from the food programme.

In October 2014, UNRWA announced cuts to cash assistance programme that provided about 40 USD to the members of about 21,000 refugee families in Gaza. In addition, the agency had to reduce the number of families receiving urgent food assistance by 65 percent.

In January 2015, UNRWA said it had provided "over \$7 million to 66,000 Palestine refugee families to repair their homes or find temporary alternative". During the same month, four Palestinians, including three children, died of hypothermia as a winter storm hit the vulnerable Strip bringing freezing weather and causing heavy flooding in areas where the leaky caravans provided by UNRWA to those displaced were useless.

The UNRWA Commissioner General, Pierre Krähenbühl, said during a meeting with the EU foreign affairs committee in Brussels, in March 2015, that EU member-states have already reduced their humanitarian aid for Palestinians to UNRWA. Consequently, the agency had to suspend the shelter assistance programme and the cash assistance programme supporting repairs and providing rental subsidies to refugee families in Gaza due to lack of funds. Moreover, dozens of refugees whose houses were completely destroyed during the summer attack were informed by the agency that they would not receive aid to rebuild their houses as they were directly targeted by Israel.

Additionally, during the recent conflict, attacks exacerbated the crisis leading to a significant shortage in water services with nearly 1.2 million people lacking access to water and sanitation services and more than 80 percent of water wells not functioning, according to a PA-led assessment.

The Palestinian Water Authority revealed that approximately 95 percent of the water in Gaza does not meet WHO standards for human consumption. According to a United Nations report, the water situation for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip is “critical” as the aquifer could become unusable as early as 2016, with the damage irreversible by 2020. According to B’Tselem, some 30 percent of the population is currently denied regular water supply due to power shortage. Over 80 percent of Palestinians buy their drinking water. However, poor and very poor families cannot afford to buy enough water to cover all their needs.

UNRWA-run schools, serving more than 240,000 refugee students in Gaza, constitute nearly 55 percent of the total number of schools in the Strip. With the growing number of refugee students, the agency remains incapable of providing quality education due to the increasing challenges facing both teachers and students. Repairing and building new schools are currently impossible because of lack of funds and restrictions on the entrance of construction materials. According to the agency, ninety percent of the 252 UNRWA schools in Gaza are run on a double shift basis, and some even on a triple shift, effectively reducing the school day to four hours only. Consequently, many students face academic difficulties because they usually receive truncated education, with many others experiencing disruptive behaviors and attention deficit.

The freedom of movement including to travel, work, study, and visit family members abroad continues to be denied to Palestinians. The ban on movement applies also to travel between Gaza and the West Bank – including East Jerusalem –together recognized as a single territorial unit by the international community and Israel as signatory parties to the Oslo accord. Such movement would be essential for a normal functioning of the Palestinian society. According to Gisha, approximately 31 percent of Gaza's residents have relatives in Israel, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank

According to UNOCHA, the restrictions on movement of people and goods between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are part of a “policy of separation” adopted by the Israeli authorities. As a result, people in Gaza are denied access to West Bank universities; cannot market their products or seek work in the West Bank; and cannot maintain normal family or cultural ties with Palestinians in the West Bank.

Despite the Israeli authorities' commitment in 2010 to streamline entry and exit permits to and from Gaza for medical and humanitarian reasons and for aid workers, there has been so far no tangible improvement in practice. On the contrary, there has been a decrease in the rate of permit approvals for entry or exit of UN agencies' national humanitarian staff. Permit policy for aid workers and medical patients remains arbitrary, unpredictable and time consuming.

Fuel imports |

- By the end of July 2013, the Egyptian army had destroyed all the tunnels, leading to a stern crisis in fuel supplies that threatens to close almost 200 petrol stations in the besieged territory upon which most Palestinians rely.
- Severe restrictions on fuel imports still in place.
- Due to shortages of fuel, Gaza Power Plant (GPP) operates at approximately 46 percent of the estimated demand.
- GPP was frequently forced to shut down completely, resulting in scheduled blackouts of up to 16 hours a day.

Despite the Agreement on Movement and Access signed by Israel and the Palestinian Authority in September 2005 where Israel agreed to let out 400 trucks per day, the number of trucks allowed out remains significantly low, and exports are still virtually blocked from Gaza to the West Bank and must be destined to a third country.

Ban on exports continues. Except for the humanitarian activity of exporting a small amounts of fruits, vegetables, and furniture.

According to data compiled from OCHA's Protection of Civilians weekly report issued in March 2015, an average of three truckloads of exports have been allowed out of Gaza per week in 2014, compared to nearly 240 allowed out per week before the blockade was imposed in 2007. The total number of trucks allowed out of Gaza in 2014 is only about half of the weekly average before the siege.

Exports of agricultural produce from Gaza have fallen in the last year to just 2.7 percent of the level before the blockade was imposed.

CALL ON THE ISRAELI AUTHORITIES TO LIFT ITS ILLIIGAL BLOCKADE ON GAZA

The humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding in the Gaza Strip is a disgrace to humanity, and to all those witnessing silently how poverty, lack of resources, and Israeli assaults have destroyed a population of 1.6 million people, of which 50 percent is younger than 18 years old.

As the occupying power, Israel has a duty under International Humanitarian Law to ensure the welfare of the population of Gaza without discrimination. Israel has failed to uphold the population's human rights, including the rights to health, to education, to work and to an adequate standard of living, which includes the rights to food and adequate housing. Israel should be held accountable under international law for the collective punishment of an entire population.

The Euro-Mid Observer for Human Rights therefore urgently demands the International Community to help alleviate immediately the blockade on the Gaza Strip.

6. First, we demand the Israeli government to end the blockade.
7. Second, we call on the Israeli government to end the targeting of innocent citizens, a practice in violation of the 1949 Geneva Convention.
8. Third, we call on the Egyptian government to open the Rafah Crossing for passengers and goods, without any restrictions.
9. Fourth, we call on the international community to hold Israel accountable for its continuous human rights violations, and to economically sanction Israel until it respects Palestinians' human rights. The international community should be able to separate between the collective punishment of the Palestinians by Israel and the political conflict between Palestine and Israel.
10. Fifth, we call on the International community, the EU and the US in particular, to initiate and support the need for a seaport in Gaza that

guarantees the free import and export of goods and private international travel. Commitments for the seaport in Gaza not only address a priority and need of the Palestinians, but also serve as political support for their desire to gain independence.

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Euro-Med Monitor
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الأورومتوسطي لحقوق الإنسان

جميع الحقوق محفوظة

Maison des Associations, Rue des
Savoises 15, Ch- 1205 Geneve

جنيف – سويسرا



www.euromedmonitor.org



info@euromedmonitor.org