Press release

EWASH: "LIFE UNDER BLOCKADE: 86% OF PROJECTS NECESSARY TO DEVELOP THE RAVAGED WASH SECTOR IN GAZA REMAIN AT RISK"

On World Water Day, a warning by the EWASH NGO coalition of the ever-worsening water and sanitation situation in Gaza, and of the impossibility of developing the sector while the Israeli blockade remains in place

An infographic: Let it flow: How the Israeli blockade has brought Gaza to the brink of a water and sanitation disaster

Gaza, 22/03/2016 – 96% of Gaza's sole water source is unfit for human consumption, while Eastern areas of the Strip — home to some 100,000 people and recently the subject of massive destruction — remain entirely disconnected from any water network, as the blockade makes it impossible to recover — let alone develop — Gaza's water and sanitation (WASH) sector. Left with no choice but to severely reduce water consumption and to rely upon desalinated water purchased from private vendors, 95% of Gaza's population may now be at risk of water-borne diseases, as 68% of this water is deemed bio-contaminated. Materials for the development of the sector are urgently needed — but as long as the blockade remains in place, there is no realistic prospect for water normalcy in Gaza.

This is the call launched today by the EWASH group on the occasion of World Water Day, March 22nd, through the publication of a new <u>infographic</u> outlining just what the illegal Israeli blockade means for Gaza's WASH infrastructure and its impact on the local Palestinian population's rights to access and make use of water.

"Through war after war, the existing and already poor water infrastructure in Gaza is repeatedly destroyed or damaged. With a near decade-long blockade, some of the WASH projects remain delayed, incomplete or inoperative as vital materials take months to reach the local market—if at all", said Maher Al Najjar, the Deputy General Director of the Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU). "The international community is putting much-needed funds into Gaza's recovery and development. And yet, the vigorous political action needed to support these financial commitments is not pursued. As a result — and lacking necessary international pressure — the Gaza water crisis worsens every day."

As part of its blockade on Gaza, the Government of Israel is imposing severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods into and from Gaza. Regarding the entry of materials, Israel imposes a "dual-use" list — identifying items that, according to Israel, could be used for military purposes.

Importing these items involves complex and costly procedures which also afford Israel an effective veto over all of Gaza's WASH projects. Moreover, the entry of such "dual-use" items is —when not outright denied — extremely time-consuming. Inconsistent with international standards, the "dual-use" list includes 70% of the items needed for Gaza's water sector, which is therefore particularly impacted. To date, 46 out 53 projects necessary for the recovery and development of Gaza's water sector are at stake.

The Sheikh Radwan water tank is a perfect example. Funds have been pledged for its construction and the project has obtained the necessary approval by Israel before the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism–through which projects are submitted for Israeli vetting—was established. Yet, none of the needed technical materials have entered Gaza thus far. Without the missing electromechanical equipment (i.e. pipes, pumps, fitting, valves, electro-motors, etc.), the water tank remains inoperative, leaving 75,000 people subject to severe water shortages.

Instead of being collectively punished as they are now, the people of Gaza must have their right to sufficient supplies of affordable, reliable and drinkable water fulfilled. Donors must act with this approach and goal in mind. At present, exceedingly few States are challenging the "dual-use" list or the blockade, and Israel is not being held accountable for its rights violations. **1.8 million people in Gaza are suffering under Israeli restrictions and from the inability or unwillingness of the International community to engage on these issues.**

Ends

Note to editors

EWASH is a coalition of local and international organizations and UN agencies working on water and sanitation in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). The group seeks to minimize the adverse effect of the political situation on the WASH sector. It does so by facilitating the advocacy, coordination and knowledge sharing among local and international non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and governmental bodies active in the WASH sector in the oPt, both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

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For further information

Water and sanitation are basic human rights. In Palestine, today, they cannot be fully enjoyed. The discriminatory water sharing agreements (Oslo II, 1995) and the Israeli permit regime in place in the West Bank (especially in Area C), as well as the near-decade long blockade on Gaza, deny Palestinians the control over their water resources and prevent them from developing adequate water and sanitation (WASH) infrastructure. In such circumstances, the enjoyment of those and other basic rights, as well as the sustainable development of Palestine, are at stake.

Israel, as the occupying power has an obligation under international humanitarian law to ensure the dignity and wellbeing of the population under its control. This includes obligations regarding the provision of and access to humanitarian relief and basic services, including water and sanitation.

Third States have an obligation under the Geneva Conventions to ensure respect for international humanitarian law. Moreover, all stakeholders including the donor community bear the responsibility of redressing this situation.

1.8 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip are in dire need of sustainable water solutions. **The** main challenges they face are:

1. THE BLOCKADE: The post-war reconstruction and the development of the WASH sector are delayed, when not hindered, by the nearly decade-long Israeli blockade on Gaza. The blockade has been condemned by the international community as a form of collective punishment.¹ As needed materials are not allowed into Gaza at a sufficient pace, nor are people able to move freely and build their capacity, projects are delayed for years, not running, if not cancelled. Today, 46 out of 53 WASH projects for Gaza are at stake.² The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) was set up to facilitate the entry of materials for the reconstruction and development of the Strip, in particular materials that Israel considers dual-use items considering that they could serve for military purpose. This dual use list is overly proscriptive and well out of line with relevant international standards. Although the GRM is indeed allowing large amounts of construction materials – such as cement – into Gaza, the entry of technical equipments for the WASH sector, 70% of which are considered as dual-use items, keeps being problematic. Very few of such materials made it into Gaza so far.

100,000 people across the Gaza Strip are still cut off from the water network³, and 28% of the Gaza population is not connected to the sewage network.⁴

- 2. **RECURRENT CONFLICT**: The already dire WASH situation was further deteriorated by the recent war as Israeli airstrikes caused approximately **USD 34 million damage to WASH infrastructure.**⁵
- 3. THE DEPLETION OF THE COASTAL ACQUIFER: Gaza's share of the Coastal Aquifer, the only available source of freshwater in the Gaza Strip, is not sufficient to serve alone the needs of the Gaza's population. The Aquifer is being over-exploited by up to three times its sustainable yield.⁶ Decades of over-pumping as well as the contamination resulting from the intrusion of wastewater, agrochemicals and saline water have put the aquifer in danger of irreparable damage. 96% of the water extracted from the Costal Aquifer is already unfit for human consumption.⁷ 95% of Gaza's population depends on desalinated water purchased from private vendors for drinking:⁸ 68% of this water contains bio-contaminants, yet its

¹As highlighted by multiple reports of the UN Secretary-General, the continued imposition of the blockade is unacceptable and punishes innocent civilians. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the blockade "constitutes a collective punishment imposed in clear violation of Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law".

² Data provided by CMWU, February 2016.

³ Data provided by CMWU, January 2016.

⁴ Data provided by CMWU, March 2016.

⁵ CMWU, Damage assessment Report, 2014

⁶ UNSCO, Gaza in 2020 - A Liveable Place?, 2012.

⁷ UNSCO, *Gaza in 2020 – A Liveable Place?*, 2012, and data provided by the Palestinian Water Authority, Jan 2014.

⁸ Data provided by the PWA, 2016.

price so prohibitive that the most vulnerable households in Gaza end up spending up to a third of their income on water. 9

4. **PEOPLE ARE LEFT WITH NO CHOICE BUT TO RELY ON CONTAMINATED WATER**: Given the multiple challenges impacting the pace of implementation of longer term alternative solutions to achieve water and the inability at the current time to access water resources under Israeli control, it has been recognized that private and public brackish desalination plants at present form an integral part of current supply of drinking water in the Gaza Strip.

The majority of water for drinking and cooking is produced by small scale brackish water desalination plants owned by the public sector, the private sector and some NGOs, and is distributed with water trucks and stored at household level in water storage tanks separate from the water for domestic use from the network. **9 out of 10 people in the Gaza Strip drink desalinated water. This water is produced by those desalination plants**. Concerns about its quality have been raised in the past, and a recent study by the PWA and other partners in the WASH sector confirmed those claims. The contamination of this water poses public health risks which need to be addressed.

Out of the existing 154 public and private desalination plants, only 48 of them are licensed by the designated authorities, posing issues to their monitoring.

The physical quality parameters for water include its colour and turbidity¹⁰ (cloudiness or haziness) which are immediate indicators for the quality of the water. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, safe potable water should be clear and colourless, include adequate level of minerals, and has a neutral pH level.

The biological quality parameters for water include Total Coliforms¹¹ (TC), Faecal Coliforms¹² (FC), and Faecal Streptococcus¹³ (FS) for the biological quality of water. These parameters and mainly TC are the industry standard for testing for biological contamination in water. Positive testing for TC, FC, and FS in water mean that the water may cause public health diseases (PWA, 2015). **Safe potable water should be absolutely free of TC, FC, and FS.** According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Total Coliforms (TC) are bacteria that are naturally present in the environment and are used as an indicator that other, potentially harmful, bacteria may be present. These bacteria may be harmful to human health if consumed. Although TC, FC, and FS are not pathogens in themselves, they do indicate the presence of pathogens.

Incidence of TC is as high as 68% at the household/supermarket storage level. In other words, **68% of the desalinated water currently being consumed in the Gaza Strip is susceptible to biological contamination** due to the combined effects of inadequate disinfection at the desalination plants, the improper handling during distribution, and poor user storage habits.¹⁴

The blockade preventing projects from being implemented, the recurrent conflicts destroying over and over vital infrastructure, and the ever worse quality of water of the Coastal Aquifer - the water situation in Gaza is a humanitarian crisis in need for political action and solutions.

For more information on the general water situation in Palestine:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/y7jeuiauz0mwip2/160314%20-%20WATER%20AND%20SANITATION%20IN%20PALESTINE.pdf?dl=0

¹³ Faecal Streptococcus (FS) are lactic acid bacteria in humans.

⁹ UNICEF, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Household Survey Gaza, April 2010.

¹⁰ Turbidity is the cloudiness or haziness of water caused by a large numbers of individual particles that are generally invisible to the naked eye.

¹¹ Total Coliform (TC) or coliform bacteria are a commonly used bacterial indicator of the sanitary quality of water.

¹² Faecal Coliform (FC) bacteria are bacteria that generally originate in the intestines of warm-blooded animals.

¹⁴ Information from the PWA and WASH partners analysis report "Desalinated Water Chain in the Gaza Strip 'From Source to Mouth'", September 2015.