

## GAZA SITUATION REPORT 137

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• The UNRWA Gaza Rehabilitation Centre for Visually Impaired (RCVI) in March 2016 introduced tablet computers for 51 visually impaired RCVI students and 166 students with low vision integrated in UNRWA schools, to increase their opportunities to learn, study and develop. Prior to the introduction of the tablets, UNRWA trained 31 RCVI and Special Education Needs teachers on the use of the tablets and the "Voice Dream Reader" - software to support and encourage their students. To be able to use tablets, visually impaired people use text-to-speech software to access electronic text documents. This technology has markedly improved with time, and the Voice Dream Reader, developed by the independent Voice Dream company, is a self-voicing app for operating system (OS) devices that can open and read aloud a wide variety of file formats, ranging from Portable Document Format (PDF) files to Power Point presentations. Through this project, UNRWA aims at bringing the latest technology to visually impaired children and braille users. The goal is not to replace braille, but to supplement and enrich the educational values and benefits that braille offers. The RCVI is part of the UNRWA Relief and Social Services Programme (RSSP) and offers education and recreational activities for children with visual impairments (blindness or partial sight), aged six to twelve. It is the only centre in Gaza providing these services service for the visually impaired. Both Palestine refugees and non-refugees are accepted for enrollment at the RCVI.

• With a view to help address unemployment among youth, on 20 March, under the "Improving the exercise of young graduate women's right to work in Gaza Strip through professional internships" project, the UNRWA Gender Initiative (GI) started the first of three rounds of work placements for female graduates who successfully completed the three-month Young Women Leaders Programme (YWLP) training. In the first placement round, 83 graduates will start their professional internships in the public or private sector – including in Non-Governments and Community-Based Organizations. The second and third rounds of placements will be conducted over the course of 2016; in total, the project will offer work placements for 227 YWLP graduates. The YWLP is designed to empower and build the capacity of unemployed young female graduates between 22 to 28 years old through training and work placements. It also aims to close the skills gap between the labour market ensuring women are developing transferrable skills and experience. Through leadership and self-development coaching, advanced training in computers, English and management - combined with work placement schemes - the programme enhances the employability and self-confidence of young women graduates. With this project, the GI contributes to the UNRWA strategic goal of improving employability of Palestine refugees in Gaza.

• In June 2016, the blockade on Gaza will enter its tenth year. Severe restrictions of movement of goods and people related to the blockade have crippled the enclave's once thriving trade-based economy. Prior to the blockade, in 2000, an average of 1,271 truckloads of vegetables, textiles and/or furniture exited Gaza for Israel, the West Bank and the world per month; this number declined to 432 in 2007, and stood at 176 in February 2016 (with only 0.3 per cent of the export goods being non-food items), according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). The Israeli-imposed restrictions on the movement of people and goods related to the blockade have pushed a large part of the population into unemployment, poverty, aid dependency and food insecurity. According to the [2015 Socio-Economic and Food Security \(SEFsec\) report](#) by the Food Security Sector in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) - the only report that measures food insecurity in the oPt for refugees and non-refugees alike - the blockade has led to a general food access decline in Gaza. The report states that 47 per cent of households in Gaza were food insecure in 2014, a two per cent increase compared to the previous year. According to UNRWA analysis, high food prices and volatility of the economy have also reportedly contributed to food insecurity in Gaza. Data from PCBS shows that price fluctuations of certain staple food items were significant during 2015; the price of fresh vegetables for example increased by 17 per cent, fresh meat by 18 per cent, and rice by 15 per cent during 2015. UNRWA Gaza Field Office also monitors the price of the 'cheapest' commodities available in the market to capture changes in the costs of food for the poorest households. The UNRWA food price index currently stands at 9.3 per cent above the June 2013 level, before the closure of the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt, meaning that the price of the cheapest commodities increased by this percentage over the past three years. In addition, according to PCBS, in Gaza increasing prices are combined with falling wages, which also decreases the purchasing power of those employed. One of the ways through which UNRWA has responded to rising food insecurity in Gaza is by continuing to assess needs and provide food to those who need it most. In the year 2000, the Agency provided approximately 80,000 refugees in Gaza with food assistance. This number has increased to over 950,000 today, or about half the population in Gaza.

• UNRWA will introduce its new and improved food baskets for Palestine refugees in Gaza in the second food distribution round this year - from April to June 2016. Earlier this year, the Agency launched an extensive refugee community outreach campaign on its improved food baskets to ensure that all questions and concerns of UNRWA staff, beneficiaries as well as other community representatives and leaders are addressed in a pro-active way. This strategy is aligned with the humanitarian sector's [Community Engagement](#) approach. One of the main improvements of the new UNRWA food baskets is the inclusion of lentils and chickpeas, selected due to their nutritional values and macro- and micro-nutrients. As part of the outreach campaign to communicate with Palestine refugees in Gaza, the Communications Office is currently also producing a cooking show which includes innovative, healthy and low-budget recipes based on the items in the new food baskets. In addition, it is also developing an animation video that explains the new food baskets in detail. Both shows will be broadcast on UNRWA TV and its corresponding YouTube channel during the second food distribution round April-June 2016 when over 950,000 beneficiaries are scheduled to receive the new food assistance.

• The sixth annual agency-wide UNRWA Gender Task Force meeting was held in Amman from 22 to 24 March. During the meeting, the task force revised and validated the first draft of the 2016-2021 Gender Equality Strategy as well as a needs assessment for e-learning on gender and gender-based violence in emergencies. A roundtable event in relation to International Women's Day (8 March), was also held. A video on International Women's Day celebrations in Gaza is currently being broadcast on UNRWA TV and its corresponding YouTube channel. In the week prior to the task force meeting, a consultant visited Gaza Field Office to meet with various UNRWA programme and project representatives and with community groups. The consultant also visited UNRWA installations. The visit was for field research in developing the 2016-2021 Agency-wide Gender Equality Strategy and the

consultant is involved in similar missions and meetings with other UNRWA fields of operation. The new UNRWA Gender Equality Strategy will include three main points: means and processes to improve the quality of services through gender mainstreaming; an accountability framework clarifying roles and responsibilities; and a gender action plan for the next five years.

- In the context of Gaza's dire socio-economic situation characterized also by a lack of economic opportunities, the UNRWA Sulafa Embroidery Project aims to provide meaningful and sustainable incomes for women and provide them with access to the local and international market. To create awareness in Gaza about the hand-made designs, Sulafa is currently organizing weekly bazaars in selected popular restaurants in Gaza city to exhibit and sell products, including pillows, shawls, handbags, small purses and ornaments. The Sulafa Centre has been supported and operated by UNRWA since 1950 and brings income into the homes of 300 Palestine refugee women through the production and sale of embroidery goods. In 2015, sales for the first half of the year were 90 per cent higher than in 2014, and 10 per cent higher than Sulafa's best-ever start to the year.

#### GENERAL

**Operational environment:** Regular demonstrations were held in Gaza during the reporting week, predominantly regarding the alleged pumping of water by the Egyptian authorities along the Gaza-Egypt border, requests for shelter, perceived service cuts and the pace of the Gaza reconstruction process.

Demonstrations were also held in support of Al Aqsa mosque and the situation in the West Bank (see also Summary of Major Incidents). On 25 March, approximately 5,000 persons participated in a solidarity rally in Jabalia camp, northern Gaza.

On 22 March, Hamas members also gathered in Gaza city to mark the 12th anniversary of the assassination of Hamas leaders Ahmad Yasin and Abded Al Aziz Al Rantisi. On 27 March, Al Ahrar movement held a military funeral procession in Gaza city for one of its members who died in a car accident. Approximately 500 persons attended the funeral.

On 23 March, a 16-year old Palestinian boy died reportedly due to an electrical shock in his house in Gaza city. On the same day, a fire broke out in a commercial store close to the UNRWA West Distribution Centre in Rafah, southern Gaza, which resulted in extensive damages. The flames threatened to spread to the UNRWA Distribution Centre, however, this was prevented due to swift action from UNRWA guards. No injuries were reported.

#### UNRWA RESPONSE

“WITH THE TABLET, I FEEL LIKE A TEACHER IS ALWAYS WITH ME”  
UNRWA REHABILITATION CENTRE FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED PROVIDES TABLETS FOR ITS STUDENTS



13-year old Mariam Abu Shawish is studying with a tablet in the UNRWA Rehabilitation Centre for Visually Impaired in Gaza city. © 2016 UNRWA Photo by Tamer Hamam

In the beginning of March 2016, the UNRWA Rehabilitation Centre for Visually Impaired (RCVI) in Gaza city introduced computer tablets for 51 of its own students, and 166 students with low vision integrated in UNRWA schools, under the vision project. The vision project aims at developing and increasing the possibilities of visually impaired students to learn and study and therefore contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals number 4 – ensuring quality education – and number 10 which refers to working towards reducing inequalities.

13-year old Mariam Abu Shawish is one of the students in the RCVI who recently started to work with a computer tablet.

“The tablet makes it easier for me to study and learn, also because now I do not have to carry around heavy books and notebooks every day,” she said proudly. “With the tablet, I feel like a teacher is always with me,” she added. When she graduates from RCVI, Mariam hopes to complete her education in one of the universities in Gaza and become an Arabic teacher, the same as her sister who also graduated from RCVI and today works as a teacher.

“I turn on my tablet and choose the lesson I want to study, and then I choose different voices to read the material out loud for me,” Mariam explained.

To be able to use tablets, visually impaired persons rely on text-to-speech software to access electronic text documents. The students in RCVI use the Voice Dream Reader app, a remarkably well developed self-voicing app for operating system (OS) devices that reads documents in many different formats out loud.

The tablet and the Voice Dream Reader app provide visually impaired students with a new chance to develop their skills, particularly the ones who were once visually impaired and over time fully lost their sight and face difficulties with using braille, explained senior RCVI teacher Hatem Hamdan. “The tablet reduces time and effort for the students to read and study,” he added.

Prior to the introduction of the tablets, UNRWA also trained 31 RCVI and Special Education Needs teachers on the use of the tablets and the “Voice Dream Reader”- software to support and encourage their students.

After graduation, all students will be fully granted a tablet computer once they have developed the appropriate skills and knowledge via the trained teachers on how to use it independently, also in their homes.

The RCVI is part of the UNRWA Relief and Social Services Programme (RSSP) and offers education and recreational activities for visually impaired children aged between six and 12 years old. It is the only centre in Gaza providing these types of services to a total of 465 students studying in the RCVI and in UNRWA schools.

The main donor to the vision project is the registered UK charity Interpal.

#### SUMMARY OF MAJOR INCIDENTS

During the reporting week, Israeli forces fired towards Palestinian areas along the perimeter fence and towards Palestinian boats on a daily basis.

Protests in support of Al Aqsa mosque and the situation in the West Bank were held across Gaza and in the vicinity of the perimeter fence. Protests near the perimeter fence, involving approximately 270 persons, predominately youth, took place east of Bureij camp in central Gaza, east of Gaza city, and in the vicinity of the Erez crossing. During these

protests, some participants approached the perimeter fence and reportedly threw stones towards Israeli observation posts. Israeli security forces reportedly responded with gunfire and tear gas. As a result, the Ministry of Health reported that six Palestinians were injured, two of them from gas inhalation.

On 22 March, five Israeli bulldozers reportedly entered approximately 50 metres into northern Gaza to conduct a levelling and excavation operation; they withdrew on the same day.

Also on 22 March, four Israeli bulldozers and four Israeli tanks reportedly entered approximately 50 metres east of Bureij camp into central Gaza to conduct a clearing and excavation operation and four Israeli bulldozers and tanks reportedly entered approximately 50 metres east of Deir El Balah in central Gaza to conduct a clearing and excavation operation. They all withdrew on the same day.

On 22 March, Gaza security forces reportedly conducted a military training in police and security forces premises in northern Gaza. Live ammunition was reportedly used and loud explosions were heard. No injuries were reported.

On 22 March, militants reportedly fired one test rocket from southern Gaza towards the sea. No injuries were reported.

On 23 March, seven Israeli bulldozers reportedly entered approximately 100 metres into northern Gaza to conduct a clearing and excavation operation. They withdrew on the same day.

## FUNDING NEEDS

UNRWA is confronted with an increased demand for services resulting from a growth in the number of registered Palestine refugees, the extent of their vulnerability and their deepening poverty. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions and financial support has been outpaced by the growth in needs. As a result, the UNRWA Programme Budget, which supports the delivery of core essential services, operates with a large shortfall, projected for 2016 to stand at US\$ 81 million. UNRWA emergency programmes and key projects, also operating with large shortfalls, are funded through separate funding portals.

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. UNRWA urgently appeals to donors to generously contribute to its emergency shelter programme to provide displaced Palestine refugees in Gaza with rental subsidies or cash assistance to undertake repair works and reconstruction of their damaged homes.

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.

Read more in the [2016 oPt emergency appeal](#).

## 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 22 to 24 March and from 27 to 29 March. On 25 March it was open for pedestrians only. It was closed on 26 March.
- 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 22 to 24 March and from 27 to 29 March. It was closed on 25 and 26 March.

<http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/emergency-reports/gaza-situation-report-137>