
10-07-2007 ICRC News

Gaza and West Bank – ICRC Bulletin No. 25 / 2007

Latest report on ICRC activities in the field

General situation

The situation has calmed since the heavy clashes that resulted in Hamas gaining control of the Gaza Strip. Basic goods are available in the markets, but trade between Gaza and the outside world remains limited. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), humanitarian aid is meeting 70% of the minimum food needs of the population in Gaza, and limited commercial imports have resumed, though at levels well below their usual capacity. Exports of commercial goods, mainly vegetables, fruit and fish, are still not possible, thus reducing farmers' income substantially.

Industry and agriculture are traditionally highly dependent on imports and exports. "In the medium term, entire production cycles could be severely affected if regular commercial exchange does not resume. This would increase poverty among Gaza's already vulnerable population," says Christoph Driesse, the ICRC's coordinator for economic security programmes in Gaza and the West Bank.

Gaza crossings remain largely closed to general public

However, one of the biggest concerns currently is the severe restriction on movement for the general public, blocking Palestinians wishing to return to Gaza on the Egyptian side of the Rafah area and preventing people from Gaza leaving the Strip.

The ICRC, in cooperation with the Egyptian Red Crescent Society, is closely monitoring the situation on the Egyptian side of the border, and the Egyptian Red Crescent is ready to assist Palestinians waiting to cross if needed. The ICRC is in contact with all authorities concerned with a view to facilitating the passage of people with the most urgent need to return home or to travel elsewhere to receive medical treatment.

The ICRC continues to facilitate medical transfers through the Erez crossing (between the Gaza Strip and Israel) for people in need of medical treatment in Israel. Between 19 June and 8 July, it arranged for the transfer of more than 250 patients and 60 ambulances.

The Israeli authorities suspended the ICRC Family Visit Programme (which enables Palestinian families to visit their relatives detained in Israel,) on 6 June and currently the programme remains suspended, affecting some 900 detainees from Gaza held in Israeli prisons.

Decaying medical infrastructure

"One of the major challenges in Gaza today is the decaying infrastructure," said Thomas Walker, an anaesthetist with an ICRC surgical team that has just concluded a two-week assignment in Gaza. The team examined over 200 patients wounded by weapons and visited the major hospitals and the physical rehabilitation centre in Gaza.

"Our medical colleagues in Gaza have done a great job and have managed to perform war surgery of a very high standard," he said. "But they have to use equipment in urgent need of maintenance, so they can't do as much as they were able to just a few years ago." Essential equipment in most hospitals in the Gaza Strip could not be replaced or be properly repaired, partly because of sanctions imposed on the Palestinian Authority after the Hamas election victory in 2006. "Anaesthetists have to devise new methods," said Walker, "because the ordinary methods depend on machines that have broken down."

"The next step now," according to Eileen Daly, the ICRC health coordinator, "is to focus on people's physical rehabilitation needs. Most of the injuries caused by the recent fighting affected the legs. The younger patients, especially, need physiotherapy to help them build up their muscles to make proper use of their prostheses."

Children reunited with their parents

The ICRC managed to organize the transfer of three children from the West Bank town of Qalqilia to Gaza, where they rejoined their mother. The children had been separated from her and had been living alone for over a year.

The ICRC also helped two disabled children attending special schools for the deaf and blind in Hebron and Bethlehem to return to Gaza to spend their summer holidays with their parents.

ICRC response to urgent needs

Over the past month, the ICRC:

- delivered antibiotics, other drugs, dressings and other medical supplies to hospitals in Gaza;
- facilitated the transport into Gaza of urgently needed goods, including special baby formula, laboratory consumables, blood products, X-ray film and prosthetic components for Ministry of Health hospitals and charitable and private facilities;
- purchased or located spare parts for essential hospital equipment;
- provided food and water for Gaza hospitals;
- repaired and upgraded three medical facilities.
- facilitated repairs to the main drain in Beit Lahia.

The ICRC continues to collect information on alleged violations of international humanitarian law and will be raising its concerns with the appropriate authorities. It has also resumed its visits to Palestinian places of detention in the Gaza Strip.

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