
ISRAEL-OPT: Gaza food supplies strangled by 1,000-day blockade

RAMALLAH, 30 May 2010 (IRIN) - The amount and quality of food available to the estimated 1.5 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip has been severely restricted by more than 1,000 days of a near-complete blockade, states a UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) report.

"Sixty-one percent of the Gaza population is food insecure," said Sarah Leppert, FAO's communications adviser for the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "There is a diverse range of foods available in Gaza; the problem is people do not have the means to purchase the food due to rising poverty and unemployment, now nearly 39 percent."

Israel's import and access restrictions continue to suffocate the agriculture sector in Gaza, directly contributing to rising food insecurity, said acting Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt), Philippe Lazzarini, in a [joint statement](#) with humanitarian aid agencies, and the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA), representing more than 80 NGOs on 25 May from Gaza.

Protein-rich foods such as meat and poultry are especially difficult for Gazans to afford. Families have resorted to coping mechanisms including borrowing money and relying on aid from humanitarian agencies operating in Gaza, said Leppert.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is concerned by rising malnutrition indicators - increased cases of stunting, wasting and underweight children - and continuing [high rates of anaemia](#) among children and pregnant women.

A [poverty survey](#) conducted by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) shows that the number of Palestine refugees unable to access food and lacking the means to purchase even the most basic items, such as soap, school stationery and safe drinking water, has tripled since the imposition of the blockade in June 2007.

"Thirty eggs used to cost seven NIS [Israeli shekels, about US\$1.83], and now they cost 14 NIS [about \$3.65]," said shop-owner Mahmoud Alkhor, 22, in Gaza City.

Without a change in policy, aid dependency is only likely to grow, warns UNRWA, which is providing basic sustenance to nearly 80 percent of the Gaza population.

Furthermore, the reduction in electricity supplies to Gaza as part of the Israeli blockade causes significant damage to vegetable crops due to the lack of refrigeration, as well as adding to production costs, says the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)).

Health risks

Goods coming through the tunnels from Egypt, sold at inflated prices and inaccessible to most Gazans, are not a viable solution, according to aid agencies in Gaza.

"FAO is particularly concerned about the possible health risks posed by the unregulated entry of livestock and veterinary medicines to Gaza from Egypt via tunnels," said Leppert, fearing possible animal diseases in Gaza and transboundary disease outbreaks in the region.

Since January 2009, Israeli naval forces have restricted the access of Gaza fishing boats to only three nautical miles from shore, often reduced to as much as 2nm in practice. Between 2008 and 2009, the total fishing catch decreased by 47 percent, and is insufficient to meet the demands of Gaza's growing population, according to FAO.

However, according to Israel's Gaza District Coordination Office (DCO), there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

"Israel allows the passage of basic goods, building materials [for UN projects], products for agriculture; for example, Israel allowed 15 farmers to leave the strip two months ago for an education programme on farming in the Arava Institute [for Environmental Studies]," the DCO said. "Israel does not ration the amount of goods into Gaza provided they are on the list of permitted items; we also transfer vaccinations and other products for the farming sector. We work in cooperation with merchants and farmers and are attentive to their needs."

Head of the DCO, Colonel Moshe Levi, told reporters on 26 May: "We do not know of a shortage in any field, and we enable the entrance of various different goods, and also the export of agricultural products from the Gaza Strip. Anything that would help Hamas to increase its military power is obviously not permitted to enter."