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## **Deadly sewage spill in Gaza prompts UN relief operation**

28 March 2007 – United Nations humanitarian agencies have begun offering aid to the victims of yesterday's sewage disaster in the Gaza Strip, where the wall of a cesspool collapsed and waste flooded the nearby village of Um Al Nasser, killing at least four people, injuring many others and destroying or damaging dozens of homes.

The relief operation got under way as the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warned that there could be another collapse at the same waste water treatment plant, putting hundreds more homes in jeopardy from potential flooding.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) said that Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) shelled the area around the large cesspool during a military operation last year, and unexploded ordnance that fell into the reservoir is now feared to have spread with the floodwater.

UNRWA has dispatched 300 tents, six water tanks, blankets, mattresses and hygiene kits to the affected area at the northern end of the Gaza Strip.

The materials have been sent following a preliminary needs assessment about the requirements of the 250 to 300 families from Um Al Nasser who have been relocated to a temporary camp situated on higher ground.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Environment Unit of OCHA remain on standby to provide specialized assistance in the clean-up operation, while other UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have identified relief supplies for dispatching to victims.

UN agencies are concerned about the possible spread of communicable diseases given the lack of basic sanitation facilities and the prevalence of sewage-infested homes.

In total, some 1,500 people were forced to flee their homes, and as many as 11 people are missing or unaccounted for following the flooding. Local residents are still searching for bodies in the rubble of destroyed homes in Um Al Nasser.

UNRWA social workers described scenes of panic during and after the flooding, with residents detailing levels of sewage rising to more than one metre high.

The flooding followed the collapse of a reservoir wall in an emergency filtration basin at the waste water treatment plant in Beit Lahia, which was built in 1976 to serve up to 50,000 residents in the surrounding district. But the area is now home to more than 200,000 people.

A press statement from OCHA said the combination of an ever-increasing volume of waste water and insufficient capacity has led to effluent overflowing the filtration basins into nearby sand dunes, creating a lake that has grown to cover at least 110 acres. Previous floods on a smaller scale occurred in 1989 and 1992.

The emergency filtration basin was completed last September to relieve the existing seven basins, and OCHA said today that the western side of the main effluent lake is believed to be weak and could collapse – threatening about 800 homes – if not reinforced immediately.