

GAZA SITUATION REPORT 81

26 February 2015

17 February - 24 February Issue 81

- 26 February marks six months since the ceasefire. It is also now four months since donors pledged millions of dollars for Gaza's reconstruction. Virtually none of this has materialized. Due to lack of funds, UNRWA in January 2015 was forced to suspend its cash assistance programme supporting repairs and providing rental subsidies to Palestine refugee families in Gaza. According to the initial Agency's assessment concluded in December, 96,000 Palestine refugee dwellings were damaged or destroyed during last summer's conflict. More than US\$ 720 million are required. The Agency extended a one week window between 21-25 December 2014, for those refugee families who were not visited by a social worker but who consider themselves eligible to apply for an assessment. It is expected that the number of effected homes will rise to over 100,000 when the appeal review concludes in March 2015. As of February, thanks to additional contributions from Japan, Saudi Arabia and Ireland, US\$ 175 million were pledged in support of the Agency's shelter and rental subsidies program leaving a shortfall of US\$ 545 million. US\$ 25 million of the pledges are foreseen for reconstruction which has not yet started under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM), leaving the Agency with no available funds remaining for rental subsidies and repairs. Funding for shelter repair and rental subsidies will be disbursed to affected Palestine refugees' families as soon as the money becomes available to the Agency. UNRWA urgently requires US\$ 100 million in the first quarter of 2015 to allow refugee families with minor damage to repair their homes and to provide ongoing rental subsidies, including to the thousands of families who left UNRWA-run Collective Centres (CCs) and found alternative rental accommodation. UNRWA is concerned that if it cannot continue to provide rental subsidies, large numbers of affected families may return to the CCs.
 - According to the initial Agency's assessment concluded in December, 96,000 Palestine refugee dwellings were damaged or destroyed during last summer's conflict and more than US\$ 720 million is required to address this need. The Agency extended a one week window between 21-25 December 2014, for those refugee families who were not visited by a social worker but who consider themselves eligible to apply for an assessment. It is expected that the number of effected homes – mainly minor damage – will rise to over 100,000 when the extended assessment process concludes in March 2015.
 - Six months on from 50 days of conflict, life in Gaza remains shattered and the hope amongst families is dwindling. "We need a home, not promises," is one quote from a beneficiary in an opinion piece by UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness. His [article](#), published in The Observer on 22 February, reminds the international community of its commitments and obligations to the people of Gaza: "People in Gaza need urgent change: they need all parties to the conflict to abide by their obligations under international law; the removal by Israel of all obstacles to the enjoyment of human rights; and the immediate lifting of the blockade, allowing imports and exports, a necessary step to enabling economic recovery. The rockets fired from Gaza must cease. There is an urgent need for Palestinian unity, so that the Palestinian Government of National Consensus can assume its governance and security functions in Gaza. The Middle East Quartet should exert effective political pressures, as the time for humanitarian action alone is long past." The article also reiterates that despite the tragedy of the current situation, change is still possible: "Gaza is not a natural disaster. It is man-made, the result of deliberate political choices. Different choices must now be made."
 - Gaza was again discussed at the United Nations Security Council on 18 February, when the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, [briefed the Security Council](#) on the Situation in the Middle East. Speaking of Gaza, and in the context of approaching the six-month mark since the end of last summer's conflict, he warned that the combination of the failure to rectify the persistent governance and security issues and the slow pace of reconstruction "has created an increasingly toxic environment." He called the fact that donors yet have to fulfill the vast majority of their pledges "frankly unacceptable" and "an almost unbearable strain on an already highly fractious environment." The Under-Secretary criticized the donors' hesitance to disburse funds even more in the light of a slow, but working reconstruction mechanism.
 - On 24 February, UNRWA [announced](#) a new EUR 5 million (US\$ 5.7 million) contribution from the European Union (EU) to the Agency's Job Creation Programme (JCP) in Gaza; the extra support comes in the wake of the destruction of agricultural assets and many Gazan businesses during last summer's conflict. The announcement was marked by a signing ceremony in Gaza. "This will provide short-term job opportunities for an additional 4,800 vulnerable refugees in Gaza," said EU Representative John Gatt-Rutter, who visited Gaza for the event. "But, as I have said, this alone it is not enough and this is not in any way a permanent solution," he added. The severe restrictions on movement and inaccess to markets imposed by the eight-year Israeli blockade, was noted in remarks made by UNRWA's Director of Operations in Gaza, Robert Turner. The impact this has had on families was highlighted: "People in Gaza are desperate to work, earn an income and provide for their families," he said. "Creating jobs is not only a way of relieving immediate economic hardship; it is also a way of creating hope," Mr Turner added. The JCP programme tries to mitigate the devastating consequences of the blockade by providing short-term employment opportunities of between three and 12 months. The EU has contributed almost EUR 19.5 million to the JCP since 2011 and more than 16'000 unemployed Palestine refugees will ultimately benefit from the entire EU funding.
 - A recent easing of the blockade by Israel that allowed for Gaza to export limited products to the West Bank, has been reversed for at least one agricultural product - straw berries. Israel banned the transfer of straw berries from Gaza to the West Bank in January this year after Gazan straw berries were [reportedly](#) found in Israeli markets. It is reported that in November 2014, Israel had started to allow the sale of agricultural products from Gaza to the West Bank for the first time since 2007. The Israeli-imposed blockade on Gaza, now in its eighth year, has resulted in sky-rocketing unemployment and poverty rates. Due to proximity and economic integration, the West Bank and Israel absorbed 85 per cent of the products sold outside the Gaza Strip before the closure. Israel allows goods from Gaza to transit through its territory en-route to other countries, but does not allow exports to Israel and transfers to the West Bank – Gaza's traditional markets. As well, the exploration of new markets is extremely difficult for Gaza since high transportation costs cripple the competitiveness of Gazan products.
 - The interest of foreign delegations in visiting UNRWA in Gaza remains high. In 2014, over 100 UNRWA field visits were planned. A total of sixty-nine visits were conducted – some for several days –, including the visit of the UN Secretary-General, the European Union High Representative For Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Foreign Ministers of European countries. Numerous VIP visits and parliamentary delegations were cancelled due to security reasons or non-approval by the Israeli authorities. As the largest UN agency operating in Gaza, UNRWA remains a crucial interlocutor for diplomats and politicians; however, bilateral briefings are in addition to the field visits recorded.
 - On 17 February, a delegation of eleven parliamentarians from Belgium visited Gaza and was briefed by UNRWA on the operational environment and its programme in Gaza. This was the first time since 2007 that the Israeli authorities permitted parliamentarians to enter Gaza through the Erez crossing. Swiss parliamentarians were denied entry into the Strip on 18 February. The rest of the delegation – representatives of Swiss aid organizations who organized the parliamentary visit – was allowed passage. The Swiss parliamentarians were ultimately briefed by UNRWA through a video conference on 18 February. Belgium and Switzerland are both reliable donors to UNRWA. Due to severe weather conditions during the reporting week, UNRWA decided, in accordance with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's decision, to close government schools on 12 • February, to also close its 252 schools on the same day. The so called "Janna storm" reportedly damaged nine houses in different refugee camps in the Middle Area. In Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, UNRWA social workers made home visits to eight affected families and distributed non-food items such as blankets, mattresses and kitchen tools to them. Minor damages were also reported in Khan Younis, just north of Rafah. In Gaza City and the northern area of the Strip, no problems related to the storm were registered. As a reaction to the storm and in cooperation with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UNRWA advanced fuel allocations to support continuing Coastal Water Municipalities Utility operations and to help with emergency needs in the affected areas.
 - During the reporting period, UNRWA closed the Shouka Prep Boys CC in Rafah on 20 February. The 138 affected families, living in the CC, were moved to the Ibn Khaldoun Prep Boys CC in Rafah, which now hosts 262 instead of 124 internally displaced families. UNRWA continues to provide shelter and other basic needs to the almost 10,000 internally displaced persons in 14 CCs across the Gaza Strip.
- GENERAL**
- Operational environment* : Gaza does not need promises, but actions. Donors have still not disbursed pledged funds. In Gaza not only tens of thousands of houses remain shattered, but also tens of thousands of lives. The political and security situation grows tenser with each passing day. According to diverse media outlets and local human rights organisations, the crime rate – including shootings, bombings, theft and robbery, kidnappings and car burnings – is on the rise. Increasing civil unrest is a very real threat. As long as the causes and consequences of last summer's conflict remain unaddressed, and all relevant actors – including the international community – rely on "quiet for quiet", more violence in the future is inevitable. The cold and stormy weather over the past days has caused additional misery to an already vulnerable population. During the reporting period, protests and civil unrest continued outside UN installations and INGO offices and several UNRWA personnel and installations were directly affected. On 17

February unidentified persons wrote Islamic State logos on the outside wall of the east Relief and Social Service Programme (RSSP) Office in Gaza city. On 18 February three children were injured while playing with an Explosive Remnant of War (ERW) in North Gaza. On 19 February two men physically assaulted an UNRWA social worker at Khan Younis' RSSP east office while he was answering the beneficiaries' inquiries. The social worker received injuries to his face and was transferred to hospital. Police were called and arrested the perpetrators. On 20 February an Independent Explosive Device (IED) exploded at the western gate of Al Quds Open University in Beit Lahia. No injuries were reported. On the night of 22 February, three persons armed with knives and crowbars infiltrated into Jabalia Prep girls C school in North Gaza for theft. Two guards who confronted them suffered injuries and had to be transferred to the hospital. Most protests during the reporting week were regarding demands for the provision of housing and the release of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons. In Beit Hanoun, in North Gaza, the popular committee held a protest and a press conference against the death of an infant that was found dead after a fire in an UNRWA Collective Centre during the previous week.

UNRWA RESPONSE

AMID CRITICAL EMPLOYMENT SHORTAGE, UNRWA'S JOB CREATION PROGRAMME GIVES RARE OPPORTUNITY TO GAZA WOMEN

It is deathly quiet when you first enter the industrial food packing centre in Al-Tufah, downtown Gaza City. Neat piles of bulging white bags of rice and flour stamped with the blue UNRWA logo, stretch high towards the tin roof. Men touting clipboards walk slowly between the sacks of food, marking off stock.

Midway across the large warehouse the faint sound of laughter and chatter starts to permeate through the still, cold air. Following the sound, takes one into a second store room, also piled high with sacks of dry food. The laughter and chatter is louder there, and its source is clear; five women standing shoulder to shoulder measuring, weighing and packing sugar as part of the UNRWA Job Creation Programme (JCP).

The scene is remarkable because of their gender and the nature of the practical work they are doing in the Gaza Strip. These women's jobs have been freshly created amid an economy where female unemployment rates stand at 59.3 per cent, according to Palestinian Central Bureau Statistics for the second quarter of 2014. Focused just on the 18-24 year-old bracket, the scene is more dire, with over 85 per cent of women in Gaza found to be unemployed.

"When I first started my job I was scared, but quickly I became relieved and proud of my achievements," said Palestine refugee Umm Ramzi Ayda Helles, who said she never believed she could ever earn her own salary. "Now, when my children ask me for food, school supplies or clothes I feel good that I can buy them" she adds.

The mother of seven said her new salary has afforded the family means to pay rent enabling them to move out of an UNRWA Collective Centre where they had been living following the devastation of their home in the July/August 2014 conflict. Her husband is unable to work to support the family due to illness.

Despite working in a traditionally male dominated sector, 42 year-old Umm Ramzi said she is proud of her new packing job. "This has shown me we can work similar to men; I am now going to encourage my daughters to find work when they finish school so they too can share the financial burden of their families."

Along with 15 other Palestine refugee women employed at the packing centre in Al-Tufah, Umm Ramzi is on a three month cash-for-work job placement created by the UNRWA Job Creation Programme. This programme alone supported 9,589 vulnerable Palestine refugees across Gaza Strip with job contracts in January 2015 - an almost 40 per cent increase from the 5,494 jobs created by the program in the same month last year. This is a direct result of an increase in donor funding to the Programme, providing an opportunity to expand it. The impact the Programme has on individuals is no less compelling. "I may just be packing food with my hands, but to me it shows that I am here, that I can do it and that as a Palestinian I can be independent and resilient," said Umm Ramzi.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR INCIDENTS

During the reporting week, IDF opened fire towards Palestinians near the fence and at Palestinian boats on an almost daily basis. Several test rockets fired by militants in Gaza towards the sea were also reported. No injuries were registered.

FUNDING NEEDS

US\$ 175 million has been pledged in support of UNRWA's emergency programme, for which a total of US\$ 720 million is required. This leaves a current shortfall of US\$ 545 million. UNRWA urgently requires US\$ 100 million in the first quarter of 2015 to allow refugee families with minor damage to repair their homes and to provide ongoing rental subsidies.

On 9 December 2014, UNRWA launched the oPt Emergency Appeal in Geneva. For its 2015 emergency operations in Gaza, the Agency is seeking USD 366.6 million, including USD 127 million for emergency shelter, repair and collective centre management, USD 105.6 million for emergency food assistance, and USD 68.6 million for emergency cash-for-work. More information can be found [here](#).

CROSSINGS

- The Rafah Crossing remained closed during the reporting period.
- The Erez crossing was open for National ID holders (humanitarian cases, medical cases, merchants and UN staff) and for international staff during the reporting week. On 20 February Erez crossing was open for pedestrians only. It was closed on 21 February.
- Kerem Shalom was open between 17-19 February and 22-24 February. It was closed on 20 and 21 February.