

Occupied Palestinian Territory: The humanitarian impact of reduced access between Gaza and Egypt

Situation Report (as of 23 September 2013, 0800 hrs)



This report is produced by OCHA oPt in collaboration with humanitarian partners.

Highlights

- Largely related to the long-term restrictions imposed by Israel on the movement of people and goods to and from the Gaza Strip through Israeli-controlled crossings, the economy and the population in Gaza have become dependent upon the illegal tunnel trade, stemming from smuggling tunnels under the border with Egypt, and the Egyptian-controlled Rafah Crossing, which has become the primary passenger entry and exit point to the outside world.
- Recent action to counter illegal activities and insecurity in the Sinai have included imposing severe restrictions on movement of people through the Rafah Crossing with the Gaza Strip and closing down smuggling tunnels under the Egyptian-Gaza border. At the same time, there have been only limited easings of the ongoing restrictions imposed at legitimate crossing points from Israel. Consequently, an already fragile humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip has worsened.
- On average, fewer than 398 people per day have crossed the Rafah Crossing in both directions since July 2013, about 29 per cent of the numbers who crossed in the first half of 2013 (1,353).
- Fewer than ten smuggling tunnels are believed to be operating, down from approximately 300 tunnels prior to June; these were the main channel for the supply of construction materials and fuel.
- The Gaza Power Plant (GPP) has been forced to reduce electricity production and may shut down completely, if adequate fuel supplies are not urgently made available.
- Fuel shortages and increased power outages are significantly impacting the provision of essential services, shortages of construction materials are impeding maintenance and rehabilitation of essential service infrastructure, and restricted access for people through Rafah Crossing is impeding access to specialized health services abroad.
- On 17 September, it was confirmed that the Government of Israel would permit 50 truckloads a day of construction material for the Gaza private sector through the Kerem Shalom Crossing, in addition to the 20 truckloads that has been allowed in daily since December 2012. These imports began on 22 September.

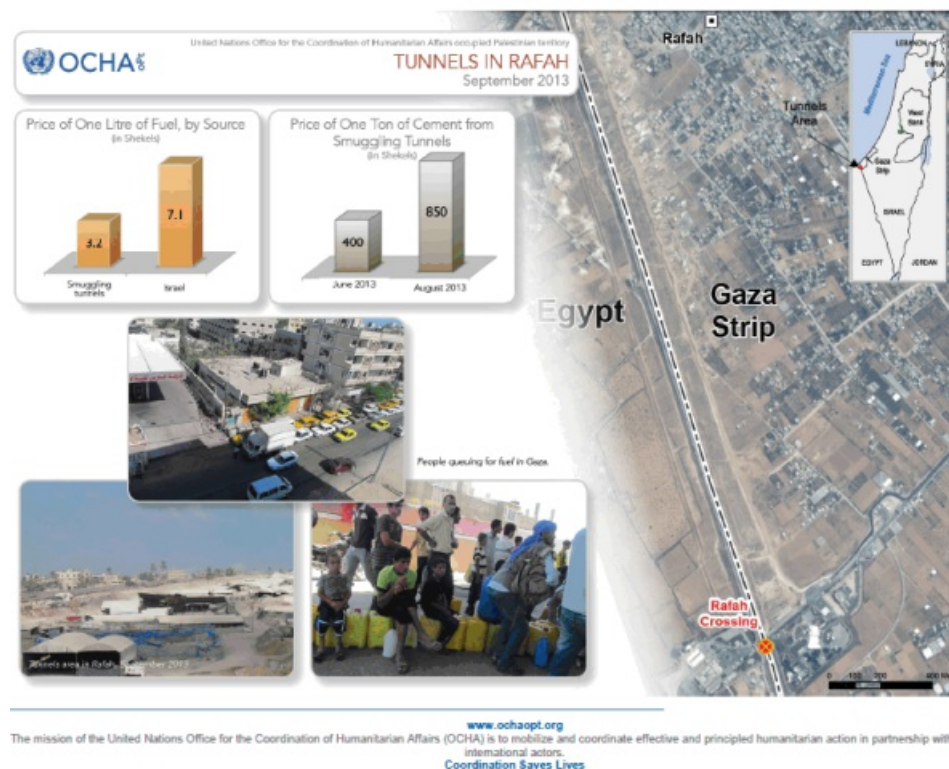
1,700,000 Affected people in the Gaza Strip (approximately)	71% Decrease in travelers through the Rafah Crossing per day, down from nearly 1,400.	10 Of the illegal smuggling tunnels are partially operational	12 hours Of electricity outages per day	1,000,000 People are affected by food insecurity (approximately)	250 Average number of travelers exiting Erez Crossing per day (approximately), up from 199
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Situation Overview

- Since early June, the Egyptian authorities have intermittently closed the Rafah Crossing, Gaza's main gateway to the outside world. When open, the operating hours have been reduced to four hours per day, six days per week, from nine hours, seven days per week. Only authorized travellers have been permitted to cross, including foreign nationals, people holding visas, and patients officially referred for medical treatment abroad. As a result, the vast majority of Gazans, who do not meet these criteria, are unable to cross. On average, fewer than 400 people per day have crossed in both directions since July 2013, about 29 per cent of the numbers who crossed in the first half of 2013. The Crossing was closed on 11 September, following another security incident on the Egyptian side of Rafah, and remained so until 18 September, when it temporarily reopened for the same categories of travellers; the Crossing has again been closed since 20 September, with approximately 600 people from Gaza allowed to pass into Egypt during the period of partial re-opening.
- There has been an increase in the number of people leaving Gaza through Erez Crossing with Israel in recent months. Between 1 July and 19 September, an average of 252 people crossed Erez into Israel per day, up nearly 27 per cent from the daily average (199) during the first six months of 2013. This increase, however, has not offset the overall drastic reduction in passage through Rafah and it is less than one per cent of the people who crossed daily through Erez Crossing prior to September 2000. Nearly all people in Gaza continue to be ineligible for passage through Erez.
- Most of the illegal tunnels under the Egyptian-Gaza border have been shut down. As of 21 September, only an estimated ten tunnels were believed to be operating, down from approximately 300 prior to June. The tunnels had provided access to construction materials, which are largely prohibited from import via Israeli crossings, and Egyptian fuel, which is far cheaper (due to subsidies) than fuel purchased from Egypt. Consequently, Gaza has become reliant on fuel smuggled from Egypt to operate schools and hospitals, water and sanitation facilities and to fuel the Gaza Power Plant.
- Fuel is available from Israel but currently at more than twice the cost of smuggled fuel (7.1 shekels per litre compared to 3.2 shekels per litre, in general, and at a lower rate for the GPP, which does not pay a tax generally imposed by authorities in Gaza; 3.86 litres from Israel compared to 1.8 from Egypt) and thus is

unaffordable for families and service providers.

- Electricity supplies to the Gaza Strip have consistently remained below what is required in recent years – 210 Mega Watts (MW), compared to the 350MW that are required. The GPP provides 60MW and feeder lines from Israel and Egypt provide 120MW and 30MW, respectively.
- On 9 September, the Palestinian Energy Authority in the Gaza Strip alerted the humanitarian community to the imminent shutting down of the GPP due to lack of fuel. Since then, small amounts have been received reportedly via Egypt but in an irregular manner, allowing it to continue limited function: since the beginning of September, on average 180,000 litres per day were received (compared to 400,000 litres per day before the current situation), enabling functioning of two of the four turbines. Resulting power outages have increased to 12 hours per day, in most areas, and up to 16 hours per day in some locations. The threat of complete shut down of the GPP in the coming days remains high. There are also reports of a significant voltage drop in Egyptian electricity supplies in the Gaza Strip, as a result of the current security conditions and disruption in the power lines in Egypt.
- The closure of the tunnels has also drastically reduced the smuggling of construction materials: less than 100 tonnes of construction materials (mainly cement) entered each day in the last week, compared to a daily average of more than 7,500 tonnes (approximately 214 truckloads) in June 2013, according to the Palestinian Federation of Industries. The resulting shortage has triggered sharp increases in the prices of building materials; the price of cement has more than doubled.
- On 17 September, it was confirmed that the Government of Israel would permit 50 truckloads a day of construction material for the Gaza private sector through the Kerem Shalom Crossing, in addition to the 20 truckloads that has been allowed in daily since December 2012. These imports began on 22 September with the entry of 70 truckloads (approximately 2,800 tons) of construction materials, including 40 of aggregates, 20 of cement and 10 of steel bars. The Ministry of National economy in Gaza estimates that Gaza needs around 6,000 tons of gravel, 4,000 of cement and 1,500 of steel bars per day.
- In noting that the construction sector accounted for more than 80 per cent of Gaza's growth during the first quarter of 2013, and that most construction material was smuggled into Gaza from Egypt through the tunnels, the World Bank recently warned that "recent measures by the Egyptian authorities to reduce tunnel activity are expected to result in a significant decline in the construction sector's output over the coming months. This will likely, in turn, cause an overall decline in growth in Gaza especially given the important role that this sector has played in driving growth in recent years."



Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

- From the beginning of the current crisis in Egypt, the Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMMU) and Gaza Municipality have raised concerns over the rapidly diminishing fuel stocks at approximately 290 WASH facilities (205 water wells, 42 main sewage pumping stations, 15 districts sewage pumping stations, four wastewater treatment plants, ten water desalination plants and 15 water lifting stations) across the Gaza Strip. With further deterioration in the current fuel situation, WASH cluster and partners indicate that an estimated 600,000 people within the Gaza Strip may not have access to adequate and safe water and sanitation services as a result of increased power outages and lack of fuel.
- Due to the limited electricity power supply, CMMU has relied heavily on stand-by generators to run water and wastewater services. In recent weeks, CMMU has focused its limited budget on purchasing Egyptian fuel, as it is cheaper than Israeli fuel. However, due to fuel shortages and its difficult financial situation, CMMU is encountering difficulties in securing even the minimum amount of fuel to keep WASH facilities operational. Also, if further supplies are not made available urgently, CMMU will not be able to run 25 desalination units, and, consequently, more than 195,000 people (more than 10 per cent of the total population of Gaza) will have to purchase water from private, unregulated vendors. In addition, approximately 150,000 people who currently rely on 12 water wells operated by only standby generators are at risk.
- Sewage pumps are unable to function effectively due to the lack of fuel. The CMMU reported that Berket Abu Rashed sewage pump station in Jabalia was flooded with 15,000 m3 of sewage, which was evacuated to the nearby storm water lagoon. A similar situation occurred when the Khalaf storm water lagoon in Jabalia flooded with sewage from Talza'ater sewage pump. Additionally, the Beit Hanoun Municipality reported that one of the sewage pump stations released its sewage into open areas and valleys (*wadis*), due to the lack of fuel to power the standby generators for sewage evacuation to the treatment plant.

There are serious public health and environmental concerns as a result of the situation - sewage will infiltrate the soil, contaminating groundwater, and sewage may also start to flow through manholes in the streets.

- The lack of fuel is also impacting the operation of solid waste collection vehicles that transport more than 1,500 tons of waste a day throughout Gaza to landfills.



- Thirty (30) per cent of essential medicines and 51 per cent of medical disposables are at zero stock in the Gaza Ministry of Health (MoH) Central Drug Store. More than half of chemotherapy drugs and ophthalmic drugs are at zero stock. Medical supplies, donated by international actors and which had previously been transferred directly through the Rafah Crossing, are no longer entering via this route. Private pharmacies in Gaza are reported to hold very low stocks of certain critical drugs, such as chemotherapies, epilepsy and neural-cerebral medicines, which are in high demand due to government hospital shortages; one pharmacy reported the highest shortages since 2006. It is not yet clear what impact there is on private drug stocks.
- Only 129 patients passed through the Rafah Crossing between 1 and 10 September. The Crossing was closed from 11 to 18 September, when it temporarily re-opened for two days. By comparison, in June, almost 4,000 persons travelled through Rafah for medical need, with or without MoH referrals. The situation at the border is extremely fluid, and conditions of travel and treatment are described as difficult. In August, referrals to East Jerusalem hospitals (509 referrals) and to Israeli hospitals (382 referrals) were the highest numbers of the year to date, while referrals to Egypt through Rafah (113 referrals) were the lowest.
- The MoH hospitals are functioning with only 15 per cent of diesel fuel reserves - between 3-7 days' supply - to power hospital generators, on which they are ever more reliant due to reduced output of the GPP. The de facto authorities in Gaza began issuing fuel ration coupons for authorized vehicles, including Emergency Medical Service (EMS) vehicles and other critical MoH transport. So far, a crisis has been averted by small donations of fuel from charitable and private sources. Hospitals are using other coping measures, such as postponing elective surgeries to save power. However, any further deterioration in the current situation will have potentially life-threatening consequences, including reduced functioning of cardiac and neonatal care, hemodialysis, operating rooms, X-ray and other diagnostics, Primary Health Care, cold-chain facilities for vaccines and transport for patients. There is an expectation on the part of the MoH that international organizations will provide emergency supplies of fuel for the main hospitals.



- As a result of the shortages in building materials and fuel, thousands of workers employed in the construction, transport, fishing and agriculture sectors, as well as in tunnel smuggling, have recently lost all or part of their income.
- Prior to July, an average of 118 tonnes of fish was transferred into Gaza via the tunnels per month, but fish imports from Egypt have halted completely (also due to increased activity by the Egyptian navy: see Protection section). The price of fish has risen, with the price of shrimp doubling. The sardine season is also about to start but the decrease in the availability of cheaper Egyptian fuel will increase fishermen's costs: of the 20 small 'purse seiner' vessels in operation before the recent crisis, only five are now active. There are insufficient supplies of affordable diesel to run the 6,000 agricultural wells across the Gaza Strip which will impact cultivation of existing crops and the imminent planting season.
- WFP's monitoring of market prices shows that food commodity prices have been consistent thus far. However, owners of bakeries have been urging the de facto authorities to raise the price of bread due to the increase of the production costs caused by the shortage of cheaper Egyptian fuel. WFP estimates that in the event of a complete closure of the tunnels it will have to be ready to meet the needs of an additional 50,000 - 60,000 people.



- Shortages of fuel and anticipated electricity cuts may lead to a halt in pumping by sewage stations and provision of drinking water to schools. UNICEF, in cooperation with the WASH Cluster, is monitoring the situation. According to the WASH Risk Response Matrix, six school compounds (with about 1,800 school children) have been identified as at risk due to their proximity to sewage stations.
- Due to the impact of the shortages of construction materials, ongoing construction has stopped in 13 Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) schools and the tendering and signing of contracts for another 26 new schools has had to be postponed. Furthermore, the rehabilitation of the 76 kindergartens that were damaged during the escalation in hostilities in November 2012 are likely to be delayed or postponed, and the construction of a new building at Al Aqsa University has stopped. Construction work on eight new schools funded by KfW continues because of agreement with the Israeli authorities to allow passage of their construction materials through Kerem Shalom Crossing.
- The provision of school furniture to five new schools is pending due to the lack of raw materials in Gaza: the MoEHE is also not allowed to transport school furniture from the West Bank to six schools in Gaza.
- Access to schools by pupils and teachers is also impacted by the lack of transportation due to fuel shortages; the lack of electricity supply has meant that many schools cannot operate sanitation facilities. The closure of Rafah Crossing has also meant that around 500 students who are registered at universities abroad have not been able to leave to take up their places during the new academic year.



- In July, the Egyptian navy prohibited fishing activity off the coast of Northern Sinai, including Rafah, citing security reasons. Fishermen from Rafah have since reported that it has been very difficult to access Egyptian waters as they were accustomed to, and fishermen are frequently warned by the Egyptian navy through loudspeakers to vacate the area. There have been two violent incidents involving the Egyptian navy recorded within the last several weeks, both reportedly within Gazan waters.
- On 30 August, two fishermen were injured when the Egyptian navy opened fire, without prior warning, at their boat which was reportedly in Palestinian waters close to the Egyptian border; five other fishermen were arrested and reportedly charged with crossing the Egyptian maritime border and sentenced to one year imprisonment by a military court. On 14 September, two Egyptian naval boats shot at a Palestinian fishing boat, destroying its engines and also

damaging its fishing nets. It is also reported that the Egyptian navy assaulted and injured the fishermen.

Funding

- Overall, the CAP is 60 per cent funded with \$239.2 million of \$400.8 million requested funds received. Projects targeting only Gaza or Gaza and the West Bank jointly have together received \$184.1 million out of \$301.6 million requested (i.e. 61 per cent), which leaves a shortfall of \$117.5 million. The average funding level for clusters is 56 per cent, however, only three clusters have received more than 50 per cent funding and a number of clusters are significantly under-funded. WASH has received only 26 per cent of requested funds meaning that a number of key interventions to address poor water quality, limited access to sewage facilities, and poor WASH facilities in schools are still pending funding. For Health, lack of funds (49 per cent received) continues to result in shortages of drugs and medical disposables and continues to limit delivery of health services, while the Education cluster has received only 31 per cent of requested requirements. Within the Food Security Sector, the Agriculture and Cash-for-Work sectors have received only 42 per cent and 47 per cent of requested funds respectively.