
OPT: Gaza's energy crisis close to the tipping point

GAZA CITY, 20 February 2012 (IRIN) - An energy crisis is currently hitting the Gaza Strip's public services hard and could lead to a severe humanitarian crisis if a sustainable solution is not found soon.

"If the power plant does not resume its work in the next days, some hospitals will be left without electricity," Mahmud Daher, officer-in-charge of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Gaza, told IRIN. Gaza's only power plant was forced to shut down on 14 February due to a lack of fuel, which has previously been imported in amounts of up to one million litres a day from Egypt.

"The current crisis is a political problem that started six years ago. The Israeli occupation, the Palestinian Authority's refusal to provide the Gaza Strip with funds, and the policy of Egypt which is dealing with Gaza out of security calculations, have all contributed to the current situation," said Hamas government spokesman Fawzi Barhoum.

"Ismail Haniyeh, [prime minister of Gaza] is in Egypt at the moment to discuss the crisis and to find a quick solution... But so far... no progress has been made... The whole of Gaza has been without electricity since last night," he added.

Since the power plant stopped working, public hospitals and clinics have been running on only 20 percent of the 440,000 litres of fuel usually needed per day to supply the health system with electricity, Daher said, adding: "Some hospitals might withstand the crisis for one more week, some others no more than one or two days."

Some fuel entered the Gaza Strip over on 18-19 February via tunnel from Egypt, but the amount was not sufficient for resumption of operations at the power plant, which requires more than 400,000 litres of diesel a day, and produces 80-85 megawatts (MW).

The Gaza Strip also receives around 120 MW of electricity from Israel. With the power plant shut down, the overall electricity deficit has reached more than 60 percent of normal supply.

A threat to the most vulnerable

Hassan Khalaf, Gaza's deputy health minister, said Gaza had only had six hours of electricity a day for the past two weeks. "The nurseries, the ICUs [intensive care units], the operation rooms are all severely affected by that. The crisis is becoming a danger for the most vulnerable."

Among the hospitals most severely affected is Shifa, which is the largest medical complex in the Gaza Strip. According to an as yet unpublished report by WHO, it had fuel for only 54 hours of full operation at the end of last week. Equally, the al-Aqsa hospital and the Psychiatric hospital are at high risk, with less than 50 hours of fuel supply left as of 16 February.

"Theoretically, we could reach point zero at any time soon," Daher warned, adding: "In the worst case, the crisis could lead to a stop in vital services for about 100 newborn children, could endanger about 60 people currently in intensive care and about 400 patients who are dependent on life-saving dialysis." In addition, non-urgent operations will have to be cancelled, and laboratory services, the kitchen and laundry services might be affected.

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Critical elements such as intensive care units have a double back-up system of large Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS) generators. But they can only function for short periods, while the main hospital generators are meant to supply electricity for long-term use. Many of the generators are not suitable for constant use and need frequent repair or replacement.

The situation in hospitals has also been worsened by an unusually cold winter, which has increased energy demand. Forced to reset priorities, many hospitals have refrained from heating. Only the heating systems in stations with newborn children and immune-compromised and elderly patients, who are at risk of hypothermia, have remained intact.

Water pumps not working

The lack of electricity has also affected water supplies.

"Water pumps have lost 40 percent of their capacity to transport water into the wells," Omar Shatat, technical manager at the Gaza Strip's Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMMU), told IRIN. Before the power plant closed down, pumps delivered about 220,000 litres of water a day. "Now there are hardly able to pump 150,000 per day", he said.

The situation is further worsened by the 12-18 hour electricity cuts households in the Gaza Strip currently face.

Most households use water pumped by CMMU into tanks. But in order to retrieve the water from there, another pump is needed. "Because they don't have

electricity, the water cannot be delivered into their homes", Shatat explained.

For now at least, drinking water could be supplied to the entire population. "But if things continue for another three or four days, we could also face a serious problem here," he added.

Unreliable supply

The Gaza Strip began to import fuel from Egypt through underground tunnels after Israel imposed a tight blockade on the Strip in mid-2007, including heavy restrictions on the movement of goods.

"This blockade made us depend on Egyptian fuel for the last years. But the Gaza Strip's reliance on this single source was a solution of a very complex problem, created by the interruption of Israeli fuel supply in 2009," Ahmad Abu al-Amreen, director of public relations at the Gaza Energy Authority, told IRIN.

Despite the partial easing of Israel's blockade in June 2010, the underground tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip continued to serve as the main channel for importing fuel at a price significantly cheaper than that imported from Israel.

In the weeks prior to the shutdown of the Gaza Power Plant on 14 February 14, the level of fuel supplied through the Rafah tunnels from Egypt to the Gaza Strip has declined gradually, falling to on average 100-150,000 litres per day, or 20 percent of the daily amount of fuel that entered into Gaza in the previous weeks, says a report by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

The exact reasons for the decline remain unclear. But "there are reportedly distribution problems affecting fuel in Egypt, as well as other issues, which are impeding deliveries to the border with Gaza," the report explains.

"People are very frustrated. They have a government that cares little and puts responsibility on the shoulders of everyone else but not on itself. The current crisis was created through dependence on unreliable tunnels, a system in danger of collapsing at any time," a humanitarian aid worker from Gaza, who asked to remain anonymous, told IRIN.
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