
ISRAEL-OPT: How Gaza gets power - analysis

GAZA, 3 December 2008 (IRIN) - Gaza's sole power station supplies about 30 percent of Gaza's electricity; 10 lines from Israel supply about 62 percent; and two lines from Egypt about 8 percent.

The station supplies about 65MW of electricity, and is functioning at half capacity after its transformers were bombed by Israel in June 2006, according to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) field officer Hamada al-Bayari in Gaza.

The plant supplies roughly 40MW to Gaza City, 10MW to northern Gaza and 15 MW to middle Gaza.

The sole source of industrial fuel for the power station is funded by the European Commission via a European aid programme called PEGASE, covering development projects in partnership with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, bypassing Hamas.

Theoretically, Israel allows the transfer of 2.5 million litres of industrial fuel to over 200 distribution points in Gaza each week via PEGASE, monitored on the ground by financial firm Price Waterhouse Coopers.

"The power station requires a minimum of 400,000 litres of industrial fuel per day to produce 65MW," according to OCHA's al-Bayari, and since 12 November only two shipments of industrial fuel have reached the station - 440,000 litres on 24 November and 437,000 litres on 26 November.

Ten power lines that run from Israel to Gaza supply about 120MW via the Israeli Electrical Corporation. Two lines from Egypt supply about 17MW, but only to the Rafah area in the south.

"Israel does not permit fuel to enter Gaza via the sea, the airspace, or the border with Egypt," according to the World Bank. "Gazans have only a single entry and exit point at the Karni/Al-Mountar Border Crossing for the export and import of all goods needed to sustain an economy of nearly 1.5 million people."

Israeli Defence Ministry spokesperson Shlomo Dror said: "Seventy percent of Gaza's electricity is still flowing even when the power plant shuts down." He also said electricity from the 10 Israeli lines could be redistributed to areas normally supplied by the Gaza power station.

Gaza City's electricity grid is split in two - half supplied by the power plant and half supplied by four of the 10 Israeli lines.

"The lines [to Gaza City] can be shared, but the transfer of electricity is done locally and manually," said al-Bayari. "Gaza Electricity Distribution Company teams go to the streets and manually switch the transformers."

Disproportionate effect

"When the power plant shuts down it disproportionately affects Gaza City, since the available power is less than 50 percent of what is normally available," said director of the Palestinian Energy and Natural Resource Authority (PENRA), under the PA in Gaza, Hussein Al-Nabih.

The daily supply from the four lines to Gaza City is about 45MW. Estimated daily demand will surge to 100/110MW in the coming weeks due to the cold weather and the fuel shortage, said Al-Nibah.

Because electricity is available such a limited time, when it is available people operate everything at once: "When the demand on one particular line is too heavy it disconnects."

PENRA engineers must contact the Israeli Electrical Corporation to reconnect, which takes time.

Tardy repairs

"Last week there was a problem with one of the lines coming into Khan Younis on the Israeli side and it took 10 days for the Israeli company to receive a permit for the repair," said Al-Nibah.

If the problem occurs on the Gaza side, there are no materials for maintenance in stock, and transformers to distribute the electricity are also more likely to fail during a surge.

Gaza residents purchase fuel for personal consumption from a private Israeli company, Dor Alon, thanks to an agreement with the PA in the West Bank. The fuel is transferred to local Gaza distributors through underground pipes at Nahal Oz on the Gaza-Israel border. (The fuel the EU brings in via PEGASE is a separate deal. It can only be used for the operation of the power station, not for personal consumption.) "It has been five weeks since a shipment of diesel or benzine [gasoline] entered Gaza," said Petroleum and Gas Station Owners Association chairman Mahmoud Khozendar.

Tunnels

About 100,000 litres of diesel on average are coming into Gaza from Egypt daily through the network of tunnels used to circumvent the Israeli blockade, according to Khozendar, but "society is still paralysed and the quality is low, meaning it can't operate small engines."

Supplies through the tunnels are highly erratic, and in any case nowhere near enough to meet personal needs, according to Khozendar.

"Today [November 26] 70 tonnes of liquid petrol gas [cooking gas] came through, but people are still scavenging for gas... Chicken farms, bakeries, and the fishing industry are shutting down. Meanwhile, prices are doubling for an already poor population."

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