

OPT: Tunnel closures exacerbate Gaza housing crisis

GAZA, 8 November 2012 (IRIN) - Ayman Subhi, like the other 1.6 million residents of the Gaza Strip, is often a victim of international developments beyond his control.

When he graduated from college two years ago, he planned to build a home large enough for the family of six he supports (including his grandfather, parents and siblings) who currently share 90 square metres on the ground floor of a three-story home split among seven families.

But in August, an attack on an Egyptian army outpost in Sinai, a few kilometres from the Gaza border, put his plans on hold.

The attack, blamed on extremists from Gaza (Egyptian investigations are still ongoing), killed 15 Egyptian soldiers and led Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi to start [shutting down the network of underground tunnels](#), through which smugglers send commercial supplies, aid, and allegedly arms and fighters between Egypt and Gaza.

The tunnels supply most - 80 percent according to one estimate - of Gaza's construction materials, which are officially restricted by Israel and Egypt's six-year blockade of the coastal territory.

The closure of some of the tunnels (the percentage is uncertain) has exacerbated an existing housing crisis in Gaza caused by rapid population growth and extensive damage and destruction of homes during Israeli military operations, but most of all by Israeli restrictions on imports of construction materials, aid workers say. Egypt also tightly controls its border with Gaza.

According to Hassan Madhoun, manager of the Association of Engineers in Gaza, construction activities have decreased 40 percent since the tunnel closures, signalling "a possible threat to the future of the sector", which employs 75,000-150,000 people (no official numbers exist).

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said the flow of construction materials through the tunnels had reportedly largely halted in early August but has reportedly gradually increased since then. It is now at about 70 percent of previous operating capacity, OCHA said, which is still about 45 percent more than what enters through the official Israeli crossing at Kerem Shalom.

"What I need is to get a house for me and my family," Subhi told IRIN. "Closing tunnels - with no viable and sustainable solution - is diminishing dreams of a young Palestinian generation to own a house."

Shelter gaps

Gaza currently needs more than 71,000 housing units - about 23 percent of the total housing in Gaza - to meet its gaps in shelter, according to the Unified Shelter Sector Database (USSD) managed by a grouping of aid agencies working on shelter in Gaza, known as the Shelter Sector. More than 15,000 Gazans are still displaced as a result of an Israeli military operation in 2008-09 called Cast Lead.

“ Why is the world silent on the suffering of more than 1.5 million living in besieged Gaza, who are prevented from living normal lives? ”

Israel implemented some minor easing of its blockade in 2010, but still considers construction materials like aggregate, steel and cement to be "double-use" items, which it says can be used for dangerous purposes. It allows their entry only through international aid projects, but Israeli procedures are so "slow, bureaucratic and costly", according to aid organizations, that the international community has played a limited role in construction projects.

In March, the head of the UN Relief Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) [said](#) Israel had denied all UNRWA's requests to implement construction projects since mid-2011. In late September, the Israeli authorities announced the approval of 14 UN housing and civilian infrastructure projects; the average review process for each project was 20 months.

The tunnel closures have added to the usual constraints.

Stresses and strains

Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. "Overcrowding is now a major issue," says the most recent [fact sheet](#) by the Shelter Sector. This is leading to increased domestic and gender-based violence, a general breakdown of social and cultural norms, and the building of lower quality homes that raise "serious concerns of disaster risk reduction in a region vulnerable to future conflict or natural disasters such as earth quake or flooding," the factsheet said.

Families that have been hosting those displaced by Operation Cast Lead are now at "breaking point", the Shelter Sector says, after providing assistance to friends and relatives for over three years. Due to a lack of funding, international assistance to those host families has now stopped. (The UN appeal for US\$415 million for aid projects in the occupied Palestinian territory in 2012 is one-third under-funded).

In an environment where many individual Gazans could not afford to buy construction materials from the tunnels before the Sinai attack, OCHA said prices are now 15-20 percent higher. Some items, like gravel, have at times as much as doubled in price, according to Osama Kuhail, head of the Palestinian Contractors' Union.

The reduced availability and higher prices have cut profits, decreased and delayed construction projects (with contractors fined for not completing projects on time) and led some companies to start laying off workers, Madhoun and Kuhail said.

Markets are turbulent, with contracting companies increasingly feeling they are at the mercy of the status of the tunnels: "They're closed, they're open; the supplies enter Gaza, no they don't," as Kuhail put it.

"We do not want more than what is our right - the right to have a house," Madhoun told IRIN. "Why is the world silent on the suffering of more than 1.5 million living in besieged Gaza, who are prevented from living normal lives like the rest of the people in the world?"

New aid channels

Meanwhile, some countries, like Qatar and Turkey, which for domestic political reasons may wish to send stronger signals to Israel, have started to dispatch aid through Islamic NGOs or directly purchase local products in a bid to circumvent Israeli restrictions.

The Emir of Qatar, in the first visit of a foreign head of state to Gaza since Hamas was elected in 2006, last month pledged \$400 million in aid, including two housing complexes (one of them includes 3,000 housing units and other related facilities such as schools, mosques, recreation and parking areas in Khan Younis in the southern part of the Strip).

But for now, Subhi, the 24-year-old college graduate, is still waiting to build a house: "I have faith that this situation will not last, and things will get better," he said.

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