Palestine – Conflict

ETC Situation Report #1
Reporting period: 07/10/2023 to 31/10/2023

The ETC was activated for the conflict crisis in Gaza on 31 October 2023. Situation Reports will be published frequently.

Highlights

- The humanitarian crisis has been unfolding in the Gaza Strip since 07 October 2023. The conflict has resulted in widespread damage to critical infrastructure in Gaza, significantly disrupting communication networks and impeding life-saving operations.

- The ETC was activated on 31 October 2023 for the humanitarian response in Gaza following the escalation of the telecommunications crisis in country. The cluster is coordinating the interagency ICT response for Gaza to maximize partner resources.

Air strikes have devastated much of the north of Gaza. Photo: UNRWA/Mohammed Hinnawi

- There is an urgent need to provide independent and reliable shared communications services for humanitarian organizations operating in Gaza to keep staff safe and to support the delivery of lifesaving assistance.

- Major constraints faced in the implementation of ETC services are safe access, shortages of fuel and power, and lengthy processes to obtain authorization to import and use ICT equipment in Gaza.

Situation overview

Armed conflict between Palestinian militant groups and Israeli military forces began on 07 October 2023. Since then, intense airstrikes and a complete siege in the Gaza Strip has resulted in a humanitarian crisis.

As of 30 October, more than 1.4 million people in Gaza have been internally displaced, with nearly 672,000 sheltering in 150 United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) facilities. The average number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) per shelter is over three times their intended capacity.

The Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Gaza is the only point open to deliver humanitarian relief items. Although 450 trucks per day are required to meet the basic needs of people in Gaza, a recent maximum of 26 trucks of humanitarian cargo can cross per day.

The Kerem Shalom crossing with Israel—which prior to the hostilities was the main entry point for goods, as well as the Erez passenger crossing connecting Gaza with Israel and the West Bank—have remained closed since the conflict started.

Since 11 October, Gaza has been under a full electricity blackout following the shutdown of Gaza's sole power plant. This has forced essential service infrastructure to rely on backup generators, which are

limited by the scarcity of fuel in the Strip. Goods entering Gaza since 21 October through the Rafah crossing have not included fuel.

As of 27 October, US$107.93 million worth of pledges have been confirmed in support of the inter-agency Flash Appeal launched on 12 October by the oPt Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). This represents 37 percent of the estimate required when the Appeal was first launched.

Telecommunications overview

The conflict in Gaza has resulted in widespread damage to critical infrastructure, significantly disrupting communication networks and impeding life-saving operations. The situation is exacerbated by the severe fuel shortages.

Only 2G services are enabled in Gaza, even before the conflict.

According to the Paltel Group, 83 percent of fixed line users, 54 percent of fixed line sites, and 50 percent of primary fibre-optic internet lines are currently non-operational due to infrastructure damage and fuel shortages.

The conflict has resulted in cuts in two out of three international fibre cables going out of Gaza, one of which was repaired after the Israeli authorities granted the company a two-hour window for staff to fix one fibre cable.

It has been identified that security communications services are not functioning in Gaza. UNDSS implementation of a new VHF digital radio Security Communications System (SCS) in Gaza had reached 90 percent completion before the conflict broke out. The system is not operable. One of the radio repeaters was located on the roof of a hospital, which has now been destroyed.

An analogue radio system with two repeaters is also present in Gaza but likely non-operational. UNDSS efforts to access the repeaters for assessment have so far not been possible.

Telecommunications in Gaza—including cellular lines and internet services—were shut down on the evening of 27 October resulting in complete communications blackout. The services were largely restored by the morning of 29 October. However, national providers have reported that the remaining networks, if not already damaged, are expected to run out of fuel. This impending blackout will further severely impact the affected population and humanitarian efforts.

Humanitarian items allowed into Gaza through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt are currently limited to four life-saving categories: food, water, shelter, and medicine. Telecommunications equipment is not considered as humanitarian cargo at this point.

ETC Activities

Coordination

Since the beginning of the conflict, WFP—as the Global ETC lead—has been engaged in coordinating ICT efforts with local and international partners, including telecommunications companies and mobile network providers.

The ETC was activated on 31 October 2023 for the humanitarian response in Gaza following the escalation of the telecommunications crisis in country. The cluster is now coordinating the interagency ICT response for Gaza to maximize partner resources.

The first Global ETC Teleconference for the response in Gaza was held on 29 October which gathered over 70 participants from 21 different organizations to share information and consolidate requests for support.

The ETC has submitted its budget requirements to OCHA of US$800,000 for planning to support access to connectivity in up to three common operational locations for the response in Gaza for input into the revision of the Flash Appeal, originally launched on 12 October.

The ETC is overseeing the coordination of requests for satellite devices to facilitate connectivity in Gaza—including for Starlink terminals—to consolidate demand and coordinate with the Egyptian and Israeli authorities under one approach. Starlink connectivity would be made available in Gaza for recognized humanitarian agencies as per the agreed terms. However, humanitarian organizations require clearance and authorization to import and use the devices in Gaza from both the Egyptian and Israeli authorities. Multiple partners have bases available to support satellite connectivity efforts, depending on the logistical possibilities of the response.

The ETC, OCHA, UNRWA, UNDSS, and WFP engaged with the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) on 28 October to advocate for the importation and usage of satellite communications and radio communications equipment for humanitarians in Gaza. The ETC and partners will continue to build on these discussions to advocate to the authorities to import the urgently needed telecommunications equipment into Gaza.

Services

There is a need to provide independent and reliable shared communications services for humanitarian organizations operating in Gaza to keep staff safe and to support the delivery of lifesaving assistance.

A dedicated ETC Concept of Operations (ConOps) is being developed to plan for the technical assessment and delivery of services in a staged approach, pending access and authorization for personnel and equipment.

In the scenario that the cluster can enter Gaza, the service priorities are:

- Provide independent and secure shared connectivity for humanitarians in key locations where humanitarians are operating;
- Support restoration of the security communications network for UN staff operating in Gaza;
- Support humanitarian organizations to deliver life-saving information on humanitarian assistance to the affected population;
- Provide helpdesk support to users.

Power is expected to be a major concern with existing limited access to fuel—therefore, alternative solutions such as solar power needs to be factored into any equipment setup.

While multiple partners have equipment prepositioned to deploy to Gaza, the main constraints are both importation of and authorization to use the equipment in Gaza.

Any provision of services will be carried out in close collaboration and coordination with local humanitarian actors, local service providers, and with local authorities to enable safe access.

Funding

The ETC is submitting a budget requirement of US$800,000 into the revised Flash Appeal for planning to provide services in up to three common operational locations to support the response in Gaza.

The interagency Flash Appeal has received US$107.93 million worth of pledges—37 percent of the funding required—to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Challenges

All humanitarian agencies and personnel are facing major constraints in providing humanitarian assistance due to safe access, movement restrictions, and shortages of electricity and fuel.

Telecommunications networks in Gaza can be shut down at any time, as seen recently.

There are lengthy processes to obtain authorizations to import and use ICT equipment in Gaza.

All humanitarian items going into Gaza need to be approved by the Egyptian Red Crescent who are the sole consignee of goods for the border crossing, as well as the Israeli authorities.

Only the Rafah border crossing is open to transport relief items into Gaza. The Kerem Shalom border crossing remains closed since the start of the conflict. Even before the crisis, ICT equipment important via this route took 4-5 months.

The reach of operations will remain limited without a humanitarian pause and significant funding for the humanitarian response.

The risk of cybersecurity issues in this emergency is considered high.

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