

# Palestine – Conflict

## ETC Situation Report #17

Reporting period: 15/02/2024 to 21/02/2024

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was activated for the conflict crisis in Gaza on 31 October 2023. Situation Reports are published weekly.

## Highlights

- UN WFP has announced that it is pausing deliveries of food aid to northern Gaza due to security issues. WFP stated that it will seek to resume deliveries as soon as possible and reiterated that it is committed, “to urgently reaching desperate people across Gaza but the safety and security to deliver critical food aid - and for the people receiving it - must be ensured.”
- The ETC met with the UN Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) for the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) along with other clusters on 20 February to advocate for the release of more communications equipment, further to the recently approved 30 Very High Frequency (VHF) handheld radios which are being prepared for transportation to Gaza.
- The ETC visited an UNRWA shelter in north-east Rafah on 20 February to assess the public address system for community messaging. The system was reconfigured and tested and is now able to deliver recording and podcast-type content for wider dissemination of materials from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Arabic service to communities in Gaza.



The ETC tests satellite phone coverage across different locations in Rafah, Gaza. Photo WFP/ETC

## Situation overview

Intense Israeli bombardments from air, land, and sea continues to be reported across much of the Gaza Strip, resulting in further civilian casualties, displacement, and destruction of civilian infrastructure. Widespread ground operations and heavy fighting between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups also continue to be reported, especially in Gaza city, Khan Younis, and Deir al Balah.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reports that 1.7 million people (more than 75% of the population) are displaced, some multiple times and more than 60% of the infrastructure has been destroyed or damaged across Gaza strip. The streets in Rafah, Gaza are overcrowded with people with little to no shelter, lack of clean water, and minimal access to food and healthcare.

UN WFP has [announced](#) that it is pausing deliveries of food aid to northern Gaza. This follows incidents on 18 and 19 February when WFP convoys were unable to deliver aid as planned, largely due to a breakdown in civil order, leading to the looting of trucks and staff endangerment. WFP stated that it

will seek to resume deliveries as soon as possible and reiterated that it is committed, “to urgently reaching desperate people across Gaza but the safety and security to deliver critical food aid - and for the people receiving it - must be ensured.”

## Telecommunications overview

The voice services of Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) Jawwal and Ooredoo are operational in Rafah, although the network is congested due to increased users and few operational telecommunications towers. Since December, the waiting time for calls to connect and SMS delivery has significantly increased, from an average of two minutes to up to four hours. Satellite phone services are operational but also extremely slow in connecting.

Since 06 February, Paltel Internet Service Provider (ISP) had restored internet services in parts of Rafah, although intermittent connectivity persists. However, internet services from both MNOs remains down across Gaza strip.

Satellite phone voice services are operational across the Gaza Strip.

Recurrent telecommunications shutdown in the Gaza Strip restricts people from accessing life-saving information and impedes other forms of humanitarian response. Telecommunications blackouts have occurred 10 times since the onset of hostilities on 07 October 2023. The electrical power issues remain critical with the ongoing conflict. Electricity to charge devices is limited in certain areas that have generators and solar power solutions. Other locations are completely without power since the shutdown of Gaza’s sole power plant by Israeli authorities on 11 October.

## ETC Activities

### Coordination

The ETC continues to engage, coordinate, and support all humanitarian local actors, UN agencies, and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) in Gaza with technical needs and advice to ensure that the limited communications resources on the ground can be used effectively.

Since 09 January when ETC personnel arrived in Gaza, the ETC has conducted 16 ICT assessments in 13 locations in Rafah, and supported 17 humanitarian agencies with ICT repairs, technical advice, and guidance on the use of ICT equipment.

The ETC met with the UN Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) for the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) along with other clusters on 20 February to address and advocate for the release of more communications equipment, further to the recently approved 30 Very High Frequency (VHF) handheld radios (see below). This includes advocating for the approval of satellite-based connectivity equipment, which is currently prohibited.

It remains a priority for humanitarian responders to obtain authorization to set up independent and reliable shared services for telecommunications to ensure coordinated humanitarian service delivery to the population of Gaza.

### Equipment importation

ETC efforts have been underway since 03 November 2023 to obtain the authorization to import telecommunications equipment to set-up and provide an independent platform for humanitarian communications in Gaza.

On 12 February, the UN HC received approval from the Israeli Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) to import 30 digital VHF handheld radios for the use of UN agencies in Gaza and solar solutions to power radio repeaters. The ETC is engaging with UNDSS in Jerusalem to coordinate the arrival, configuration, assignment of call signs, and the distribution process of the approved 30 VHF radios to UN agencies upon their arrival in Gaza.

### **Data connectivity**

The internet services from the ISP Ajyal are very limited and connectivity remains a challenge across Rafah city, significantly affecting humanitarian responders to access critical information and coordinate the response.

There is a need to increase access to reliable internet connectivity services for the 300 humanitarians operating in Rafah's Joint Humanitarian Operations Centre (JHOC) and guesthouse, as well as those working at the Rafah crossing. Further, when operational, the JHOC connectivity network is heavily congested resulting in slow download and upload speeds. The ETC is assessing options to enhance signal strength and ensure stable internet connectivity.

Some refugees are returning to the mid and northern regions of Gaza, prompting the humanitarian response to potentially expand or relocate. However, crucial data connectivity is non-existent for supporting humanitarian responders in these areas. Satellite communications services are needed to meet this need for connectivity, which as above are currently prohibited.

### **Security communications systems (SCS)**

The UNDSS-managed digital VHF radio network was previously installed in Gaza before the outbreak of conflict. It was due to become operational at the same time as the conflict started. Now, only one out of the two VHF radio repeaters are working. The first repeater in Kahn Younis is completely non-operational because there is no power and it is not possible to obtain safe access to the site. The second repeater located in the Al Shaboura Clinic in Rafah is working but only for five days a week from 0730 until 1600 due to limited generator power. The ETC has locally procured a solar power solution which will be installed from 22 February to provide 24/7 power for the VHF radio repeater. The 30 recently approved VHF handheld radios will be usable on this network for UN staff in Rafah, once received.

### **Access to information for communities**

The ETC visited an UNRWA shelter in north-east Rafah on 20 February to assess the public address system for community messaging. The system was reconfigured and tested and is now able to deliver recording and podcast-type content for wider dissemination of materials from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Arabic service to communities in Gaza.

Following an assessment of local FM radio broadcasting in Gaza, the ETC has identified that there are no longer any radio stations functional across the Strip. Therefore, all broadcast information in Gaza comes from external sources. There is an AM BBC radio station which is broadcasting in Gaza from Cyprus which is receivable but at a weak strength signal. The ETC is in contact with the BBC to explore options to strengthen the signal so that communities in Gaza can access information.

### **Staffing**

There are four ETC staff deployed in the response. The ETC Coordinator is based in Rafah, Gaza, since 31 January. The Deputy ETC Coordinator provides remote support from Cairo. An ICT Specialist is on break and due to return to the operation in mid-March. A recently onboarded Information Management Officer (IMO) through the Standby Partner (SBP) mechanism is based in Cairo since 13 February.

## Dashboard

See the [ETC Dashboard](#) for an overview of planned and operational services.

## Funding

Currently, the ETC is 64% funded out of the US\$800,000 requested in the updated Flash Appeal to undertake its activities and address the immediate needs in Gaza. The Government of France allocated EUR250,000 to the ETC out of a EUR 3 million contribution to the WFP Palestine operation in December 2023 and the Government of Luxembourg allocated a further EUR250,000 to the ETC response in Gaza in the same month. The funds are currently enabling the ETC to carry out essential coordination and information management activities, as well as be ready to deploy shared communications services in up to two locations for two months, pending the evolution of the situation.

The [updated Flash Appeal](#), which was launched in October 2023 and updated in November 2023, requests US\$1.2 billion to meet critical needs of 2.7 million people across the oPt. The Appeal has been [extended](#) until the end of March 2024.

## Challenges

The intensity of hostilities has spread further south to the outskirts of North Rafah, limiting the movements of humanitarian responders. Limited access to electricity, fuel, and telecommunications services continues to hamper the humanitarian response in Gaza.

Several media reports have adversely impacted humanitarian operations, significantly restricting the ETC's ability to travel safely and access various locations.

The Egypt-Gaza Rafah Border crossing and recently the Israel-Gaza Kerem Shalom border crossing are the only two points open to deliver humanitarian relief items. The cross-border operations are extremely restricted due to ongoing shelling, security checks, and the lack of fuel.

Importation of telecommunications equipment into Gaza is lengthy and extremely challenging.

All items going into Gaza need to be approved by the Israeli authorities. Any items brought in via Egypt also needs to have importation permits from the Egyptian authorities and agreement with the Egyptian Red Crescent, who are the sole consignee of goods for the Rafah Border Crossing.

The reach of operations will remain limited without a prolonged ceasefire, safe access, and significant funding for the humanitarian response.

The issuance of Gaza entry visa for staff intending to deploy to Gaza remains lengthy.

The risk of cybersecurity issues in this emergency is considered extremely high. Caution in using technology platforms applies, including the use of social media and press platforms.

## Meetings

The next Global ETC Teleconference with partners on the response in Gaza will be held on **06 March 2024 at 13:00 UTC**.

The previous Global ETC Teleconference was held on **21 February 2024**. All minutes are uploaded [here](#).

## Contacts

NAME	POSITION	LOCATION	CONTACT
David Pickering	ETC Coordinator	Rafah, Gaza	<a href="mailto:david.pickering@wfp.org">david.pickering@wfp.org</a>
Hossam Metwally	ETC Deputy Coordinator	Cairo, Egypt	<a href="mailto:hossam.metwally@wfp.org">hossam.metwally@wfp.org</a>
Bipin Jha	Information Management Officer	Cairo, Egypt	<a href="mailto:bipin.jha@wfp.org">bipin.jha@wfp.org</a>

Further information related to the ETC operation can be found on the website:

[www.etcluster.org/emergency/palestine-conflict](http://www.etcluster.org/emergency/palestine-conflict)

For more information or to be added or deleted from the mailing list please contact:

[Palestine.ETC@wfp.org](mailto:Palestine.ETC@wfp.org)