

Palestine – Conflict

ETC Situation Report #21

Reporting period: 14/03/2024 to 24/03/2024

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

Highlights

- On 20 and 24 March, the ETC assessed the Very High Frequency (VHF) radio repeater site in Rafah, finding a configuration issue which prevents data connectivity at the site from operating effectively. A reliable connection is needed with the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) server in Jerusalem for the security communications system in Rafah to function. A solution is being sought with partners.
- The 30 digital VHF handheld radios approved for importation by the Israeli Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) are ready for dispatch to Jerusalem. The ETC is collaborating with COGAT through United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to secure a certificate of approval to ensure the swift release of the 30 pre-approved radios upon their arrival at Tel Aviv Airport.
- COGAT has streamlined the importation approvals process for technical equipment into Gaza through the availability of an online form to be completed by organizations intending to import equipment.



VHF radio repeater at Al Shaboura Clinic in Rafah is operational 24/7. Photo WFP/Burak Sezgin

Situation overview

Significant obstacles such as such as limited entry points, complicated border controls, difficult road conditions, high tensions and desperation currently [hinder](#) the sustained scale-up of aid into and across Gaza, according to the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator.

Intense Israeli bombardment and ground operations as well as heavy fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas armed groups continue to be reported across much of the Gaza Strip, particularly in Deir al Balah and areas surrounding Al Shifa Hospital in Gaza city. This has resulted in further civilian casualties, mass displacement (over 75% of the population have been internally displaced across the Gaza Strip – some multiple times), and destruction of houses and other civilian infrastructure.

Telecommunications overview

Internet connectivity remains a primary communications challenge across the Gaza Strip, and it is expected to worsen as refugees relocate to their original locations in the North to flee the now volatile security situation in southern Rafah.

Voice and SMS services provided by Mobile Network Operators (MNOs)—Jawwal and Ooredoo—are operational, although limited to Rafah and some locations in the north of Gaza. The network is congested due to the increased subscribers in Rafah and few operational telecommunications towers. Connectivity to available Israeli mobile networks (authorized for use in Gaza) continue to be repeatedly deactivated upon reactivation. WFP in Palestine is following up with COGAT to identify the issue and possible solutions.

The internet services from both MNOs—Jawwal and Ooredoo—are non-operational in Gaza. This situation pre-existed before the onset of conflict on 07 October 2023.

Paltel and Ajyal Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have restored internet services in parts of Rafah, though with intermittent connectivity, significantly affecting humanitarian responders to access critical information for delivering lifesaving aid.

Iridium and Thuraya satellite phone voice services are operational across the Gaza Strip.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The ETC continues to engage, coordinate, and support all humanitarian local actors, UN agencies, and partners in Gaza with technical needs, providing guidance on a regular basis and ensuring that the limited communications resources on the ground are utilized effectively.

Since 09 January, when ETC personnel arrived in Gaza, the ETC has conducted 20 Information and Communications Technology (ICT) assessments in 15 locations and supported 18 humanitarian agencies with repairs, technical advice, and guidance on the use of ICT equipment.

Due to the staff ceiling and rotations in Gaza, the ETC did not have any presence in Gaza for three weeks. The ETC is remotely coordinating its activities from Cairo, and the ETC Telecommunications Specialist redeployed to Gaza on 18 March to assist partners with technical support and guidance.

The ongoing limited access to internet connectivity in Gaza restricts coordination to face-to-face meetings at the Joint Humanitarian Operations Centre (JHOC) with limited online collaboration and engagement among partners and agencies operating remotely.

COGAT has streamlined the importation approvals process for technical equipment into Gaza through the availability of an online form to be completed by organizations intending to import equipment.

Internet connectivity

The ETC is collaborating with OCHA to seek COGAT approval for solutions to strengthen the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) signal of telecommunications service providers in Gaza, particularly in anticipation of the humanitarian response expanding further to the north with the population movement.

The ETC is engaging with OCHA and WFP Palestine to secure approval from COGAT to import Starlink terminals for internet connectivity in Gaza. An ETC letter requesting approval for Starlink terminals will be shared with COGAT through OCHA for advocacy and approval from COGAT. Previously, a UAE field hospital in Gaza received Starlink approval, indicating a successful precedence.

Security Communications Systems (SCS)

On 24 March, the ETC conducted a follow-up assessment at the VHF repeater site at Al Shaboura Clinic in Rafah and identified the issue with the ISP configuration hindering connection to the UNDSS server in Jerusalem. The ETC is closely engaging with the ISP, Paltel, to resolve the issue and establish

connectivity. On 25 February, the ETC successfully implemented a solar power solution at this site, which was confirmed during the assessment to be operational, ensuring uninterrupted 24/7 operations.

There is an urgent requirement for the expansion of VHF radio coverage in Deir al Balah and Khan Yunis, particularly in anticipation of the humanitarian response expanding further to the north. The ETC has been requested to conduct a VHF coverage assessment at Deir al Balah by UNDSS and WFP Palestine, which is planned to take place as soon as possible.

As of 21 February, the latest damage mapping shared by partners has revealed that the VHF repeater sites in Gaza City and Jabalia are still standing, while the repeater site in Khan Yunis has been damaged. The ETC is planning to conduct physical assessments at these sites to make informed recommendations, depending on when safe access can be secured. The dates for the assessments are yet to be scheduled.

The 30 digital VHF handheld radios approved for importation by COGAT have received export approval from the authorities in the UAE for WFP FITTEST to ship them from their warehouse in the UAE. They are now ready for dispatch to Jerusalem. The ETC is collaborating with COGAT through OCHA to secure a certificate of approval to ensure the swift release of the 30 pre-approved radios upon their arrival at Tel Aviv Airport. The ETC continues to engage with UNDSS in Jerusalem to coordinate the arrival, configuration, assignment of call signs, and the distribution process of the 30 VHF radios upon their arrival in Gaza.

The results of the SCS needs survey carried out from 06 to 14 March have been analysed and the findings will be shared with UNDSS to prioritize how the 30 VHF handheld radio will be distributed to UN agencies in Gaza.

Access to information for communities

The ETC continues to coordinate with the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Working Group (WG) and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), providing advice and guidance to establish effective communication mechanisms to disseminate life-saving information to the affected population.

On 22 March, the ETC conducted a technical assessment and provided recommendations to the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) for the provision of solar-powered charging stations intended for the use of vulnerable women traveling from Rafah to the welcome centre of the World Central Kitchen located northwest of Deir al Balah.

Staffing

There are currently four dedicated ETC staff deployed in the response. Due to a reduction in the UN staff footprint in Gaza, the ETC Coordinator has resumed his role remotely based in Cairo since 08 March, with a scheduled plan to deploy to Gaza on 25 March. The Deputy ETC Coordinator continues to support the response while based in Cairo. The ETC Telecommunications Specialist rejoined the operation following a short break on 13 March in Cairo and re-deployed to Gaza on 18 March to assist partners with technical support and guidance. The Information Management Officer (IMO) continues to support the response while based in Cairo.

Dashboard

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

Funding

The ETC remains 64% funded out of the US\$800,000 requested in the Flash Appeal to undertake its coordination and information management activities to address the immediate needs in Gaza.

The current Palestine [Flash Appeal](#) expires on 31 March. The revised Flash Appeal, incorporating ETC's budget requirement of US\$1.8 million until 31 December 2024, has been finalized and submitted to OCHA on 16 March.

Challenges

The reduction of staff presence in Gaza has posed challenges for face-to-face meetings and coordination activities, exacerbated by the existing internet connectivity issues across Gaza.

Limited access to electricity, fuel, and telecommunications services continues to impede the humanitarian response in Gaza. Importation of telecommunications equipment into Gaza is prolonged and extremely challenging.

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 requiring approval from respective authorities. The cross-border operations are extremely restricted due to ongoing shelling, security checks, and the lack of fuel.

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

The issuance of entry visa for staff intending to deploy to Gaza remains prolonged and challenging.

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 **03 April 2024 at 13:00 UTC**.

The previous Global ETC Teleconference was held on 20 March 2024. All minutes are uploaded [here](#).

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www.etcluster.org/emergency/palestine-conflict

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