Palestine – Conflict

ETC Situation Report #8
Reporting period: 13/12/2023 to 19/12/2023

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

Highlights

- The shutdown of telecommunications and internet services in Gaza from 14 to 17 December severely disrupted communications and humanitarian response work in the whole Gaza Strip.

- As of 19 December, the 20 fully activated satellite phones purchased from Gilat Telecom in Israel for use by international UN staff in Gaza are the only equipment which the ETC has been authorized to import. The United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) is coordinating with the Area Security Management Team (ASMT) to distribute the devices to humanitarian responders in critical need.

- The ETC met for a technical engagement with UNDSS in Jerusalem on 17 December and discussed the status of the Very High Frequency (VHF) radio network security communications system (SCS) in Gaza.

Buildings, telecommunications, and power infrastructure have been destroyed in Gaza due to the ongoing conflict. Photo: WFP/Ali Jadallah.

Situation overview

The shutdown of telecommunications and internet services in Gaza which started on 14 December and continued into 17 December, severely disrupted communications and humanitarian response work in the whole of the Gaza Strip. This is the fifth blackout since the outbreak of conflict on 07 October. Partial restoration of telecommunications started on 18 December in some locations.

On 15 December, an airstrike hit a school sheltering Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Khan Yunis, reportedly killing 12 people and injuring dozens of others. According to the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA), since 07 October, at least 288 IDPs have been killed and 998 injured in shelters.

Heavy fighting across Gaza continued on 18 December, with more intense airstrikes reported in Khan Yunis and Gaza city. Most of the population (85%) are displaced and the conditions for meaningful humanitarian operations do not exist.

Telecommunications overview

The shutdown of telecommunications and internet services in Gaza which started on 14 December and continued into 17 December, severely disrupted communications and humanitarian response work in the whole of the Gaza Strip. This is the fifth blackout since the outbreak of conflict on 07 October. Partial restoration of telecommunications started on 18 December in some locations.

Limited fuel allocation for MNOs continues to limit access to reliable telecommunications platforms. Only the prioritized 217 telecommunications towers are intermittently operational.

Some humanitarian agencies are relying on their independent connectivity platforms or the local infrastructure for access to telecommunications services. It remains a priority for humanitarian responders to obtain authorization from the authorities to set up independent and reliable shared services for telecommunications to ensure coordinated humanitarian service delivery to the population of Gaza.

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 dedicated ETC Coordinator, based in Cairo, continues coordinating ETC activities while waiting for issuance of entry documents to deploy and be based in Jerusalem.

A WFP FITTEST[1] ICT Specialist deployed to Jerusalem on 13 December for ETC technical engagements, while requesting for visa extension and plan to proceed to Gaza on 01 January 2024. Deployment to Gaza is part of the ETC response for ICT information gathering, rapid situation assessment, and to quantify the state of available telecommunications equipment on the ground, if possible.

The ETC and its partners continues to actively engage with the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) for authorization to import telecommunications equipment and set up an independent, efficient, and reliable communications platform for humanitarian responders. On 10 December, COGAT contacted the agencies to enquire whether all telecommunications systems intended for use in Gaza can be hand carried, used on local service provider platforms, and disabled remotely. The ETC and partners submitted all the requested information to COGAT on 13 December and are now awaiting feedback.

Telephony

As of 19 December, the 20 fully activated satellite phones purchased from Gilat Telecom in Israel for use by international UN staff in Gaza are the only equipment which the ETC has been authorized to import. No other telecommunications equipment has been approved or authorized for importation into Gaza.

COGAT has authorized and proposed to the cluster to procure Cellcom SIM cards for use by humanitarian staff in Gaza. Cellcom is an Israeli MNO which offers voice and possibly data connectivity services that can be used in Gaza. The use of Cellcom SIM cards is technically cleared by Shabak—the Israeli national security agency—and the service authorized for use by all humanitarian staff. The

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[1] WFP Fast Information Technology & Telecommunications Emergency Support Team

mobile phone serial numbers, SIM card information, and assignee for each phone would have to be shared with COGAT and Shabak if agencies choose to use this option. The offer was circulated on 10 December by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) office to all heads of agencies highlighting the risk of compromising UN operational independence. The ETC, UNDSS, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) are collecting feedback from organizations and will then propose a way forward. To date, three UN agencies confirmed their interest in procuring the SIM cards. The ETC will follow up to send a reminder to UN agencies to engage with their heads of country operations if interested in the service. The service is only suggested to UN agencies for now but could potentially be extended to accredited NGOs.

Security communications services

The ETC met for a technical engagement with UNDSS in Jerusalem on 17 December and discussed the status of the VHF radio network security communications system (SCS) in Gaza—which has four repeaters—one in each location of Jabalia, Gaza City, Khan Yunis, and Rafah.

UNDSS engaged the Israeli authorities in November to get authorization to re-launch the SCS. Two repeaters—one in Khan Yunis and the other in Rafah—were functional when the system was reactivated on 03 December. Each repeater is equipped with a battery backup to operate for a maximum of two hours. On 13 December the Khan Yunis repeater site broke down due to a suspected power outage and is currently inaccessible for maintenance work because of the prevailing insecurity. The Rafah repeater is partially operational and connected to a local clinic power system, which relies on a generator running only from 09:00 to 13:00 from Sunday to Thursday. UNDSS colleagues have identified power as the primary challenge at the Rafah repeater site. An independent power solution such as a solar system is needed for this site.

The ETC is considering the possibility to enhance the Egyptian Red Crescent (ERC) radio security communications system (SCS) in Egypt. ERC are licensed to operate VHF radio SCS in Egypt and are the sole consignee for goods and equipment importation into Gaza, through the Rafah Border crossing. ERC expressed a desire to receive the radio SCS equipment as an in-kind donation from the ETC to use in Egypt and eventually facilitate an enhanced cross border communications system for humanitarian responders in Gaza. The ETC has requested ERC to provide a detailed account of their needs to be able to support all humanitarian responders in Gaza.

Access to information

ETC partner—REACH—has agreed to develop a communications and information needs assessment report by 21 December using available collected secondary data from sources on the ground. UNOCHA is jointly involved in the exercise as the chair of the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) group. The ETC will engage with the CDAC Network, UNRWA, and the Office of the Quartet to source any other available data to inform the assessment.

Staffing

The Global ETC Deputy Coordinator—Caroline Teyssier—departed Cairo on 19 December after supporting with coordination of ETC activities since 03 December. The dedicated ETC Coordinator—Hossam Metwally—based in Cairo, returned from compassionate leave on 10 December and will continue coordinating ETC activities while waiting for issuance of entry documents to deploy and be based in Jerusalem.

ETC Operations Specialist—Komi Amedjonekou—will support ETC Palestine coordination activities remotely while waiting for entry visa issuance to deploy to Jerusalem.

Mufaro Masuka—ETC Information Management Officer—departed Cairo on 19 December after supporting with the Information Management (IM) and reporting activities in the Gaza emergency

response since 21 November. On 10 December, the ETC initiated a StandBy Partner (SBP) replacement for the IM role. Partners with potential candidates were informed on 11 December and three nominees have so far been recommended. Mufaro will continue to remotely support the response until a replacement is recruited.

FITTEST ICT Specialist—Burak Sezgin—deployed to Jerusalem on 13 December to fill ETC gaps while requesting extension of his visa prior to enter Gaza. Deployment to Gaza is tentatively now scheduled for 01 January 2024 for an initial technical engagement with local actors, to plan an initial needs assessment, and to set up technical coordination processes for the response.

Dashboard

See the **ETC Dashboard** for an overview of planned service locations.

Funding

On 10 December, the Government of Luxembourg confirmed a funding allocation of EUR250,000 for the ETC Palestine response in Gaza. On 05 December, the Government of France allocated EUR250,000 to the ETC Palestine operation in Gaza, bringing the total funding status to 64% of the US$800,000 requested in the Flash Appeal to undertake its activities and address the immediate needs in Gaza. The funding will enable the ETC to carry out essential coordination and information management, as well as be ready to deploy shared communications services in up to two locations for the next 1 to 2 months, pending the evolution of the situation.

The **updated Flash Appeal** released on 06 November is requesting US$1.2 billion to meet the needs of the entire population of Gaza and 500,000 people in the West Bank.

Challenges

The intensity of hostilities has spread further south to include locations such as Khan Younis and Rafah, thereby limiting the safe movements of humanitarian responders.

Limited access to electricity, fuel, and telecommunications services continues to hamper the humanitarian response in Gaza.

The Rafah Border crossing between Egypt and Gaza is the only point open to deliver humanitarian relief items. The cross-border operations are now extremely restricted due to 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 pre-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 risk of cybersecurity issues in this emergency is considered extremely high.

Meetings

The next Global ETC Teleconference with partners on the response in Gaza will be held on **27 December at 13:00 UTC**.

The previous Global ETC Teleconference was held on **13 December**. All minutes are uploaded **here**.

Contacts

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

www.etcluster.org/emergency/palestine-conflict

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