

GAZA HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Introduction

Since 7 July, aerial bombardment and fighting has devastated the Gaza strip. As of 13 August, according to the United Nations (UN) more than 1,417 Palestinian civilians have been killed, of whom more than 450 are children. More than 9,900 Palestinians have been injured, of whom almost 3,300 are children and more than 2,000 are women and older people. Israel has faced rocket fire and three civilians have been killed.¹

As hostilities continue, the impact of the crisis is increasing. The level of destruction in Gaza is unprecedented. As of 13 August approximately 425,000 people living in Gaza are displaced, and almost 16,800 homes have been severely damaged or destroyed.² Over 250,000 people have been sheltering in United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools, while almost 100,000 others have found shelter wherever they can in schools, hospitals, and the homes of friends and families, and still others are sleeping on the streets. Nowhere has proved safe and people have no option to leave, as the blockade confines Gaza's population to the 45km long and 6-14km wide strip, 44% of which was designated by the Israeli military as a buffer zone.³

As the occupying power, under the Fourth Geneva Convention Israel has the primary obligation to protect civilians and ensure for the provision of humanitarian assistance as defined by international law.⁴ However, given the failure of Israel to meet these responsibilities, aid is urgently needed to address emergency health, food and shelter needs, as well as critical psychosocial support for children and adults suffering severe stress and trauma. The UN Gaza Crisis Appeal is urgently calling for \$367m to address immediate needs, of which \$293m is for food and shelter.⁵

But aid will not end the crisis. The current humanitarian crisis in Gaza takes place against the backdrop of decades of instability, poverty and vulnerability across the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) resulting from continued Israeli occupation, including the seven-year blockade of the Gaza Strip, and the lack of a viable peace process. Only a just, sustainable and viable political solution will bring an end to the devastating violence and suffering.

Christian Aid outlines here its position on the crisis, the action needed and why it believes that although the scale of destruction and suffering in Gaza is

unprecedented, the current crisis should not be a surprise to anyone. It is the result of decades of political failure and continuous Palestinian displacement. Action is needed now to:

- provide the aid necessary to address the level of crisis, and to ensure the sustained and safe humanitarian access required for it to reach all those in need,
- ensure an end to all violence against civilians,
- implement concrete measures to demonstrate that all those who breach international law will be held to account.

Context for the crisis

Recent conflict

On 7 July 2014, Israel launched a large-scale military operation in the Gaza Strip, codenamed 'Protective Edge'. It claimed the objective of stopping Palestinian rockets firing at southern Israel and destroying the tunnels and military infrastructure of Hamas and other armed groups.⁶

This development marked the collapse of the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire understanding reached between Israel and Hamas in November 2012, which has been gradually undermined since December 2013. The latest round of escalation started in early June, characterised by an intensification of Israeli airstrikes and rockets launched from Gaza at southern Israel. Overall, in the period leading up to the start of the current operation a total of 15 Palestinians, including one civilian, were killed, and another 58, mostly civilians, injured, as a result of Israeli airstrikes in the Gaza Strip. Seven Israelis, five of whom were civilians, were injured due to rocket fire.⁷

Current humanitarian impact

The current military action in Gaza has further devastated a population already experiencing a chronic humanitarian crisis: prior to the recent action 80% of people in Gaza were receiving humanitarian assistance⁸ and the economy had been devastated by seven years of blockade. The lack of permanent ceasefire has limited the humanitarian access, and joint needs assessments are urgently needed to get a detailed picture of the level of need. However, UN figures from the joint government and UN coordinated emergency clusters identify the following significant humanitarian impacts:⁹

Protection – at least 373,000 children are in need of counselling and psychosocial support. Thousands of unexploded remnants of war are left across built-up areas, posing significant risk to children, farmers, humanitarian workers and internally displaced people (IDPs) returning home.

Shelter – the homes of at least 100,000 people have been destroyed or severely damaged (16,800 homes) and they are in urgent need of emergency repair kits or shelter. 223,092 people are being provided with shelter in 87 UNRWA schools and 29,505 are sheltering in 27 government shelters. A further 115,000 are with host families and many others are sleeping on the streets. A total of 92,815 non-food item kits have been distributed to displaced families since the start of hostilities.

Water and sanitation – at least 182,000 people have restricted access to water. Limited electricity and fuel to provide the necessary energy is restricting water provision. Some water distribution is happening through shelters, but recurring displacement and ongoing insecurity including reported attacks against aid workers and utility service employees is hampering predictable distribution systems, and repair to damaged infrastructure. The UN and other agencies are monitoring populations for any risk of disease.

Health and nutrition – severe shortages of drugs and medical supplies are hampering health provision, particularly those related to emergencies, operations and intensive care units. The 29 working hospitals are relying on back-up generators that need fuel. Fifteen damaged hospitals and 16 damaged health facilities require reconstruction. The lack of specialist surgeons is limiting medical support provided to the injured. Public health clinics in areas of IDP displacement are struggling to meet demand.

Food security – food distribution is needed for at least 71,000 people who have lost their homes, as well as hundreds of thousands more displaced due to hostilities. Food prices are rising rapidly¹⁰ and the lack of fuel is affecting people's capacity to cook or bake bread. Blanket food distributions to the whole population are beginning to limit the increasing food crisis. Animal feed is needed for more than 4,000 livestock to prevent further loss of livelihood. A high proportion of agricultural land has sustained damage, with livestock also killed.

Education – the annual start of school year on 24 August will not be possible, and the UN has already announced a delay of one month, which is likely to be extended if hostilities continue. Twenty-five schools have been destroyed or severely damaged, 230 have sustained some damage and there is significant risk from unexploded remnants of war.

Significant constraints include:

- **Resumption of hostilities.** This would severely limit humanitarian access to all areas of Gaza and restrict an organised and coordinated humanitarian response. Safe, secure and continuous unfettered access throughout the Gaza strip is required to enable distribution of aid.
- **Fuel and electricity shortages.** Damage to the Gaza power plant is impacting all areas of life and humanitarian response in Gaza. Hospitals are running on limited power, cooking or baking of food is severely restricted and both small- and large-scale businesses are paralysed.
- **Aid access into Gaza.** The almost exclusive reliance on Kerem Shalom as an entry point into the Gaza Strip remains a key constraint currently limiting access to the region. In addition, swift delivery of aid from the West Bank is restricted due to the unpredictable nature of cargo prioritisation procedure at the Beitunia crossing in the West Bank. Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, as the occupying power over Gaza, Israel has the primary responsibility to ensure unfettered humanitarian access.

Christian Aid partners, like many humanitarian agencies, are working in the incredibly insecure environment to provide:

- **Emergency healthcare.** Christian Aid partner Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS) is working in very dangerous conditions using mobile clinics to serve the urgent needs of approximately 8,000 people every day taking refuge in UN schools, and those injured or ill in harder to reach areas.
- **Safe clean water.** Christian Aid partner PARC has helped to provide 20,000 people with safe clean drinking water.
- **Food and hygiene.** Christian Aid partner Women's Affairs Centre (WAC) supports female-headed households, distributing vouchers to provide food and essential hygiene items.
- **Psychological and practical support.** Christian Aid partner the Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA) is providing mattresses, clothing, cooking materials, hygiene kits and psychosocial support to over 11,000 people who have been left effectively homeless and outside the reach of official shelters and assistance. Khan Younis, where CFTA's centres are located, has been a major target of the ground and air offensive.
- **Accountability to disaster-affected populations.** Christian Aid partner the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) is documenting, monitoring and reporting human rights violations. In addition another, partner Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) will be coordinating a medical fact-finding mission once it is safe to access the Gaza strip.

For more detail on the work of Christian Aid and its partners in the Gaza crisis, please go to christianaid.org.uk/whatwedo/middle-east

Long-term conflict and blockade

The senseless cycle of suffering in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as in Israel, must end. Do we have to continue like this: build, destroy, and build, and destroy? We will build again – but this must be the last time to rebuild. This must stop now. They must go back to the negotiating table.

UN Secretary-General's remarks to the General Assembly on the situation in Gaza, New York, 6 August 2014.

The current crisis in Gaza takes place against the backdrop of decades of instability, poverty, vulnerability and rights violations across the oPt resulting from continued Israeli occupation and the lack of a viable peace process. Billions have been poured into Palestinian 'development' aid, while Israeli actions have fuelled 'de-development' and undermined the Palestinian economy. This de-development has occurred through, for example, confiscation of land for illegal settlements and restricting access and movement of people and goods including the seven-year blockade of the Gaza Strip. This has led to repeated outbreaks of hostilities and civilian casualties. Before the current violence, 80% of people in Gaza relied on international aid.¹¹

From mid-2013, this dire economic situation was compounded and unemployment increased dramatically with the destruction of tunnels into Egypt used to circumvent the Israeli blockade. Additionally, former de facto government employees, including the security forces, had not been paid salaries regularly since August 2013 and no salaries at all since April 2014. Delivery of basic services has also been undermined due to an ongoing energy crisis, involving power outages of 12 hours per day.¹²

While the scale of destruction and suffering in Gaza is unprecedented, the current crisis is the result of decades of political failure and continuous Palestinian displacement. For Israel and the oPt to be truly secure, democratic and peaceful, and to end the poverty that ruins the lives of so many, the occupation must end and all people must be treated equally.

The climate of impunity that has persisted throughout Israel and the oPt must come to an end, and every individual and collective action must be accounted for through a framework guided by international law and justice. This is the essence of a viable peace: building new relationships founded on equity and accountability. If non-violent forms of justice, such as respect for international law, are routinely ignored, then the people of Gaza will continue to face, and the international community will continue to fund, one humanitarian crisis after another.

For Christian Aid's detailed position please go to christianaid.org.uk/Images/This-is-not-about-Gaza-statement-July-2014.pdf

The response required to address humanitarian needs and resolve the crisis – recommendations

Addressing humanitarian needs

1 Ceasefire and humanitarian access.

A sustained ceasefire and end to violence must be agreed and adhered to by all actors to enable people to start rebuilding their lives and the distribution of humanitarian aid to the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians suffering due to the conflict. All actors must facilitate the access of humanitarian aid to affected populations in every way possible. Israel as the occupying power over Gaza has obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention to guarantee access to food, water and medical assistance, as well as employment and education at all times. This includes its responsibility to ensure access for essential supplies including fuel into Gaza through a range of appropriate and diverse entry points. It also requires the movement of aid out of the West Bank to be transported to Gaza.

2 Emergency funding. The Palestinian people living in Gaza are in urgent need of aid that the UN has calculated will cost \$367m. Israel, as the occupying power, has the primary obligation to ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance to the population it controls under international law [Art. 55 Fourth Geneva Convention]; if it is unwilling to do so, it must ensure access to those who are, as the people of Gaza cannot wait, so global efforts must meet this need. However, while aid provision must happen immediately, the crucial issue of who is ultimately responsible for the cost of the crisis and the reconstruction of Gaza must be resolved in order to avert an even deeper and more painful catastrophe. Significant questions remain regarding Israel's responsibility for the impact of the recent hostilities on civilians and on the homes, businesses and infrastructure destroyed in Gaza. Sustainable reconstruction cannot take place without answers to these questions.

Resolving the crisis

3 Address impunity. Support must be given for independent and transparent investigations into allegations of violations of international law in the current crisis. There must be support for their findings and the full implementation of all actions identified. The international community failed to prevent the most recent crisis in Gaza despite clear warnings: for example following the Israeli offensive on Gaza in 2008/9, known as 'Operation Cast Lead', a UN fact-finding mission investigated serious violations of international law perpetrated by both Israelis and Palestinians. The mission warned that if the violations identified in its report were not addressed, the climate of impunity would ensure continued violence and disregard for civilian protection.¹³ This seems to have been born out in the current crisis.¹⁴

4 End the blockade. The seven-year blockade on Gaza has served only as a collective punishment for the people of the Gaza strip; reducing the population to aid dependency, undermining development in every way and severely impacting the vision and future for a generation of Palestinian children. Every effort must be made across the region and the globe to bring an urgent end to the blockade.

5 Accountable and equitable just peace. The international community must work to address the stalemate within the Middle East peace process, and address the impunity undermining international law. This requires a renewed global commitment across a range of levels, including (inter alia) member states and the collective bodies of the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court, backed up by determined action to hold those responsible to account.

Endnotes

1 UN OCHA Gaza Emergency Sitrep 13 August 2014 reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_opt_sitrep_13_08_2014.pdf

2 *ibid.*

3 UN USG/ERC Briefing to the UN Security Council on the situation in the Gaza Strip 31 July 2014, p3 docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/USG%20Amos%20SecCo%20statement%20on%20Gaza%20-%202031%20July%202014%20-%20As%20delivered.pdf

4 Fourth Geneva Convention, Rule 55 icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule55

5 UN Gaza Crisis Appeal August 2014: reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Gaza_Crisis_Appeal_2014.pdf

6 A range of references exist for the objectives of Operation 'Protective Edge' including: BBC News bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28344637, IHS Janes Defence Analysis janes.com/article/41430/analysis-netanyahu-shifts-war-aims-as-well-as-un-ocha-and-the-israeli-ministry-of-foreign-affairs

7 UN OCHA sitrep 10 August 2014 reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_opt_sitrep_10_08_2014.pdf

8 Disasters Emergency Committee, dec.org.uk/facts-and-figures-0

9 UN OCHA sitrep 10 August 2014 and UN OCHA sitrep 13 August 2014, see notes 1 and 7

10 Christian Aid partner report 10 August 2014

11 Disasters Emergency Committee, dec.org.uk/facts-and-figures-0

12 UN OCHA sitrep 10 August 2014

13 Statement by Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights unispal.un.org/unispal.nsf/47d4e277b48d9d3685256ddc00612265/7fdadc45b426215685257d2c004657c3?OpenDocument

14 Report of UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza conflict jacpac.org/index.php/issues/44-issues/issues/117-goldstone-analysis