

AI Index: PRE 01/635/2013
02 December 2013

Israel/OPT: Gaza power crisis has compounded blockade's assault on human dignity

Israel must immediately lift its blockade on the Gaza Strip, including by allowing the delivery of fuel and other essential supplies into the territory without restrictions, said Amnesty International today.

For the last month, all of Gaza's 1.7 million residents have been living without power for most of the time and in the shadow of a public health catastrophe, after their sole power plant was forced to shut down, causing the failure of several sewerage and water plants.

"This latest harsh setback has exacerbated the assault on the dignity of Palestinians in Gaza and the massive denial of rights they have experienced for more than six years because of Israel's blockade, together with restrictions imposed by Egypt," said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"The blockade has collectively punished Gaza's population in violation of international law. The power plant shutdown has further affected all aspects of daily life, and the Israeli authorities must lift the blockade immediately, starting by allowing urgently needed fuel supplies into the Strip and working with all relevant parties to avert a prolonged humanitarian crisis this winter."

The power plant, which until recently supplied 30 per cent of the Gaza Strip's electricity, ran out of diesel fuel on 1 November. The resulting shutdown has exacerbated an ongoing water and sanitation crisis and has left Gaza residents without power for 16 hours a day.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, all 291 water and wastewater facilities in the Gaza Strip are now relying on standby generators, which are also affected by the fuel shortages. On 13 November a large sewage pumping station failed in al-Zaytoun, south of Gaza City, allowing more than 35,000 cubic metres of raw sewage to spew into the streets.

Local authorities have struggled to clean up the spill, leaving some 3,000 residents wading through sewage. The clean-up finally began on 29 November, according to local residents, following efforts by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other agencies, and an emergency donation from Turkey to pay for fuel for critical sewage stations.

"The reason for the flood of sewage was the blockade," a resident of al-Zaytoun told Amnesty International. "The question is, why is the blockade being allowed to continue? What is our crime? There is no justification for this situation. We just want to live like any other people in the world."

Ten other sewage pumping stations in the Gaza Strip have been forced to divert sewage to open channels, lagoons, or the sea during the last month, and other stations are close to overflowing.

Before the current crisis, some 90 million litres of raw or partially treated sewage were being dumped into the sea off Gaza every day. Since the power plant shutdown, more raw sewage is being dumped into the sea. For years, more than 90 per cent of the water extracted from the Gaza aquifer has been polluted and unfit for human consumption due to the infiltration of sewage and seawater and prolonged over-extraction because of Israel's disproportionate use of water resources.

Water supply to households across the Strip, which was already rationed, has also been reduced since the power plant shutdown. Some 65 per cent of Gaza's population only receive water once every three or four days.

“For each day that the Gaza power plant does not receive fuel, the risk of a massive public health crisis increases. Access to adequate sanitation and drinking water are fundamental human rights. The power plant shutdown should never have been allowed to happen,” said Philip Luther.

Hospitals and other health facilities throughout the Gaza Strip have been relying on their own generators during the lengthy power outages. But the generators are also affected by fuel shortages, jeopardizing essential services like kidney dialysis, operating theatres, blood banks, intensive care units, neo-natal care, and laboratories, putting patients' lives at risk.

Businesses, construction, and much agricultural work have also ground to a halt amid the power cuts and shortages of fuel and building materials. This has further reduced the incomes of many households who already had trouble meeting their basic needs.

Bakeries have reduced production and people are forced to queue to buy bread. Transportation throughout the Strip has been curtailed; carts pulled by donkeys are now being used to collect solid waste. The Strip's schools and universities have also been affected.

Since June 2007, when the Israeli blockade was tightened, Gaza's energy, water, and sanitation infrastructure has been inadequate to fulfil the basic rights of its inhabitants. They were already poor due to prior Israeli restrictions and decades of neglect.

Before the power plant shut down, Gaza already suffered from a chronic electricity shortage and routine power outages. Since 1 November, the electricity currently supplied to the Strip – which is purchased from Israel and Egypt – covers less than 40 per cent of the population's needs.

A main factor triggering the shutdown was the Egyptian military's campaign to destroy tunnels between Gaza and Sinai – more than 90 per cent have been removed since June 2013. Since early 2011, the power plant was run on Egyptian diesel brought in through some of those tunnels – the amount dropped from about 1 million litres per day in June 2013 to around 20,000 litres per week in November.

Amnesty International is calling on the Egyptian authorities to facilitate construction of new power lines to increase the electricity supply to the southern Gaza Strip and work with Palestinian and Israeli authorities to find a sustainable solution to the fuel crisis.

Background

On 28 June 2006, Israeli aircraft fired eight missiles into the Gaza power plant, destroying all its

transformers. Israeli restrictions on imports of construction materials, spare parts, and fuel impeded reconstruction. These restrictions were tightened after Israel imposed a complete air, land and sea blockade on Gaza in June 2007, when Hamas established a de facto administration in the Strip.

As the occupying power, Israel has the primary responsibility for addressing the current crisis by immediately increasing fuel supplies to Gaza. It must also address the long-term crisis by completely lifting the blockade, including by allowing fuel into Gaza without restrictions, allowing construction materials and equipment necessary for repairing and maintaining vital infrastructure, and increasing electricity supplies to Gaza by facilitating the construction of new power lines.

Continuing disputes between the Hamas de facto administration in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority over payment and taxes are also a factor in the current crisis. Both authorities must co-operate so that the power plant again receives a steady supply of fuel and can resume operations.

According to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, only about a quarter of the water and sanitation projects in Gaza included in the 2013 Consolidated Appeals Process have been funded.