

Political

update: Humanitarian situation in Gaza – 5 January

Latest developments

- Prime Minister Gordon Brown warned on 31 December of a “humanitarian crisis” in Gaza saying that it is “vital that moderation must now prevail.”
- Foreign Secretary David Miliband said on 29 December that: “The deteriorating humanitarian situation is deeply disturbing... Israel must abide by its humanitarian obligations.”
- The Kerem Shalom crossing between Israel and Gaza is open for the transfer of humanitarian aid.
- 80 trucks of medical supplies and medication including donations from Greece, Jordan and Egypt entered the Kerem Shalom crossing on Monday (5 January).
- The Nahal Oz fuel terminal was opened on Monday (5 January) to receive 200,000 litres of fuel for Gaza’s power station and essential services. This is the first time it has been opened since the conflict began on 27 December.
- 64 trucks carrying 1,530 tons of humanitarian aid (including basic food stuffs, medicines, medical supplies, tents and generators) were delivered to Gaza on 2 January. Among the trucks were 25 United Nations Relief and Works Agency trucks, 8 truckloads of food from Turkey and 3 truckloads of medical equipment from the World Health Organisation (WHO).
- 60 trucks, with approximately 1,360 tons of humanitarian aid, medical supplies were delivered on 1 January.
- The World Food Programme (WFP) has 3,300 tons of food in its Gaza warehouses. International aid groups have asked that Israel briefly suspend shipments since there is no more room in their Gaza warehouses.
- More food convoys to Gaza are planned for later this week.
- Gaza’s hospitals are reporting 18 hour electricity cuts, during which time they have to use fuel-power back-up generators, which are running low on fuel.
- During the coming days International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) surgical teams are due to enter Gaza to help in the territory’s Shifa Hospital.

Current levels of humanitarian aid in Gaza

- During the first week of Israel’s military operation (which began on 27 December), 401 trucks of humanitarian supplies and medical equipment were transferred into Gaza through the Kerem Shalom crossing. These shipments included food, WHO medical equipment, Red Cross relief equipment, UNRWA donations, Palestinian private sector trucks, as well as donations from European and Arab countries. This amounted to 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid.
- During this period 226 Palestinians with dual nationality were evacuated from Gaza; 2000 units of blood were donated by Jordan; five ambulances were donated by Turkey; five ambulances were transferred from the West Bank on behalf of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society; and 20 people were evacuated to Israel for medical treatment.

- Hamas have been reportedly blocking Palestinians in need of medical attention from crossing into Egypt. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said on 28 December that “the wounded are barred from crossing... those who control Gaza. We are waiting for the wounded to cross.”
- Speaking on the Radio 4 Today programme about Hamas’ hampering of the aid effort, the Foreign Secretary David Miliband said:

“Remember Hamas are the people who are blocking the transfer of some people from Gaza hospitals into Egypt and Hamas are the people who bombed some of the fuel convoys that were bringing fuel into Gaza some months ago.” (29/12/08)

- Patients began to be transferred from Egypt to Gaza on 1 January, although Hamas continue to disrupt the process.

The Rafah border crossing

- Egypt opened its Rafah border crossing to Gaza on 28 December for the transit of aid to Gaza and the transfer of Palestinian patients to Egyptian hospitals. The crossing has since remained open for emergency use.
- Egypt and the EU control routine access at the Rafah border crossing. The crossing between Gaza and Egypt was closed in June 2007 to all but emergency use when Hamas took over the territory. According to a deal brokered in 2005, the Rafah crossing cannot be re-opened without the presence of pro-Abbas forces and European Union (EU) monitors.
- The Rafah border crossing saw clashes between Palestinians and Egyptian border guards on 29 December. Hundreds of Palestinians reportedly breached the border fence in several places, fleeing Israeli airstrikes. One Egyptian border guard was killed and two were wounded in the confrontation.
- A European Union statement on the situation in the Middle East on 31 December said that the EU is ready to send its monitors back to Gaza’s border with Egypt, provided there are assurances they will not be at risk in the Hamas-run territory.
- The Haaretz newspaper has reported that as part of a ceasefire deal Israel wants the reinstatement of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), which would see the PA, Egypt and the EU operating the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and Gaza.

Background: previous aid levels

- Prior to Hamas’ escalation of rocket fire from 4 November onwards, Israel was providing close to 4000 trucks of aid a month to Gaza. This included food aid, medical supplies and construction materials as well as fuel for transportation, cooking and electricity production.
- Israel continues to supply Gaza with around 120 megawatts of its electricity needs, with Egypt supplying 17 megawatts. The remaining 55 megawatts are produced by the EU-run power plant in Gaza, which is reliant upon fuel imports.
- Thousands of Gazans are granted passage into Israel for emergency and routine medical treatment. In 2007, 7,226 exit permits were issued for patients and another 7,922 for their family member escorts from Gaza. According to the World Health Organisation and the Israeli Coordination and Liaison Administration 4,900 patients received permits to enter Israel for care in 2006. This upward trend has continued in 2008. Between 1 January and 17 July 2008, 10,428 permits were issued.

Background: Hamas hampers Israel's aid efforts

- Hamas deliberately causes border crossings to be closed and has prevented the distribution of aid coming into Gaza. In addition Hamas have misappropriated the contents of humanitarian trucks headed to Gaza, causing security delays at Gaza's crossing points. For example:
 - The Kerem Shalom crossing was damaged by a suicide attack on 19 April 2008 which injured 13 IDF soldiers. Hamas claimed responsibility for this attack. The Sufa crossing was opened for truck deliveries whilst Kerem Shalom was repaired.
 - Two Israeli civilians employed at the Nahal Oz fuel terminal (which delivers nearly 800,000 gallons of gasoline and industrial fuel to Gaza hospitals and to the Gaza City power station) were killed by mortar fire on 9 April 2008. Three terror groups, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees and the Mujahideen Brigades, claimed responsibility for the attack.
 - The IDF closed the Nahal Oz fuel terminal on 4 May 2008 following a number of rocket and mortar attacks on it by Palestinian militants. Hamas gunmen also raided the Palestinian side of the Nahal Oz fuel crossing, stealing at least 60,000 litres of fuel meant for the Gaza power station in order to fill their own vehicles on 29 April 2008. Hamas has repeatedly blocked the distribution of more than 250,000 gallons of fuel that Israel has pumped into Gaza.
 - The IDF seized 6.5 tonnes of potassium nitrate, marked as EU sugar for the Gazan population, at a West Bank checkpoint in December 2007. Security forces discovered the chemicals, which can be used to make explosives and homemade rockets, in the cargo of a Palestinian truck.
 - The Karni Crossing Point is the primary crossing point for commercial goods in and out of Gaza. During fighting between Fatah and Hamas militants in June 2007 much of the equipment at the crossing was destroyed, including substantial damage to the container loading platforms. The terminal's operators, who were affiliated with Fatah, are no longer willing to run the crossing. In response, the Israeli Defence Force moved the transit of humanitarian shipments from the Karni crossing to the significantly smaller Kerem Shalom and Sufa crossings. On 25 June 2007, John Ging, UNWRA Director of Operations, commended the IDF for this measure.
- Speaking on behalf of the government in the House of Lords, Baroness Crawly said:

“Palestinian militants’ actions are aggravating the humanitarian situation - we condemn these actions. This leads to more misery for the people of Gaza. The violence needs to stop and basic humanitarian supplies, including fuel, should be allowed in and properly distributed to those in need.” (20/05/08)
- A statement from the EU President released on 25 April 2008 openly condemned Hamas for the role they have played in intensifying the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip:

“Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza have their share in aggravating the humanitarian situation, including through carrying out the attacks on the Nahal Oz and Kerem Shalom crossings... The [EU] president condemns such actions, which only lead to further suffering of the population.” (27/4/08)