



For immediate release

Gaza siege puts public health at risk as water and sanitation services deteriorate warns Oxfam

Jerusalem, 20 November 2007 – Humanitarian agency Oxfam International today said there is an increasing risk to public health in Gaza as water and sanitation services begin to buckle under the strain of Israel's restrictions on fuel, vital maintenance goods and spare parts into Gaza.

According to Oxfam International's partner the Coastal Municipalities Water Utilities (CMWU) 15% of Gaza's population - 225,000 people - is not receiving an adequate amount of drinking water due to the lack of diesel.

Oxfam International is also worried at the latest reports of Israel's Attorney General's Office giving approval to its new Defense Ministry's plan to reduce the quantity of electricity delivered to the Gaza Strip. This decision comes on top of Israel's fuel reductions since 28 October 2007, which are having an immediate impact on the water and wastewater systems in the Gaza Strip.

According to Oxfam International Executive Director Jeremy Hobbs:

"There has to be an immediate resumption of fuel supplies to Gaza if we are to avoid a public health crisis. Access to clean water is a fundamental human right and must not be used as a tool to collectively punish the population of Gaza. As international efforts increase to breathe new life into progress towards peace, the international community is ignoring Gaza's plight, allowing it to slip further into a crisis. Ordinary civilians in Gaza are being punished for crimes they have not committed, in clear violation of international humanitarian law. This illegal policy of collective punishment must stop at once."

For the first two weeks of November CMWU had on average 7 water wells in Gaza City that worked either partially or not at all due to the lack of diesel. As a result 50,000 people were directly affected and received 75% less water. According to partners and staff the situation throughout the Gaza Strip is deteriorating as the availability of water is dropping further. Electricity reductions would only exacerbate Gaza's sufferings.

CMWU warns that more people are now buying water from various sources many of which do not implement proper quality control. Drinking non-treated water can lead to severe health problems.

The water and sewage system is already very vulnerable because of severe restrictions on the entry of goods into the Gaza Strip. CMWU is experiencing severe shortages of spare parts, and other materials necessary for repairs and preventive maintenance, which have been repeatedly denied access by the Israel Defense Forces since June 2007. When the rainy season begins more diesel and electricity will be needed to operate the sewage system.

Since the diesel fuel cuts started on late October 2007 CMWU has faced growing problems in operating the water and wastewater system throughout the Gaza Strip. As the sole water supplier for Gaza's 1.5 million people, CMWU is highly dependant on diesel to run generators for its 135 water wells, 33 pumping stations and 3 treatment plants because throughout the Gaza Strip there is already an electricity deficit.

Oxfam International calls for the immediate resumption of unimpeded fuel deliveries to the territory. Oxfam also urges the government of Israel to immediately cease acts of collective

punishment on the impoverished civilians of the Gaza Strip. It calls on the international community to speak out against the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza and to hold responsible actors accountable for protection of civilians.

For more information, or to set up interviews, please contact us:

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Notes to Editors:

Facts on the water and wastewater system:

The Coastal Municipalities Water Utility (CMWU) in Gaza needs a monthly supply of 150.000-250.000 litres of diesel per month to power the generators for the water and wastewater systems (135 water wells, 33 pumping stations and 3 wastewater treatment plants).

For the month of October, CMWU recorded a deficit of 40.000 litres of diesel.

CMWU re-directed fuel used for the water system into the sewage system as diesel is needed to operate the sewage pumping stations 24h hours/day to prevent sewage floods.

CMWU and electricity in Gaza

The Gaza Strip needs 210 megawatts of electricity on a daily basis. It currently receives around 187 megawatts. This results in frequent power outages and a situation of low voltage in which generators, play a vital role to run Gaza's water and wastewater system. CMWU consumes 20-25 MW on a daily basis, making it the biggest electricity consumer.

The lower the electricity supply, the more CMWU relies on fuel for back up and to supplement under-voltage.

About Oxfam International

- Oxfam International has been working in Gaza and the West Bank since the 1980s. Along with 12 Palestinian partner organizations in Gaza, Oxfam works in the areas of emergency and primary healthcare, water and sewerage projects, human rights monitoring, workers' rights, refugee rights, women's rights, microfinance, agriculture/food security and others.
- Based on Oxfam's first hand experience, we are concerned about the increase in poverty and suffering for Palestinians. Oxfam believes that all people in the Middle East region should be free from violence, coercion and deprivation. Ensuring these basic rights for ordinary women, men and children is fundamental to the success of any peace process. Oxfam believes that Palestinians and Israelis alike have the right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders. Oxfam is against the use of violence against civilians in any form and calls on all parties to protect civilians from harm.
- Oxfam International has a rights based approach and its analysis of the Israeli Palestinian conflict and its eventual resolution is rooted in international humanitarian law and human rights principles. Based on these principles, OI seeks a just and lasting solution based on international law, in which both Palestinians and Israelis will enjoy human security and peace. OI believes that the international community has a political, legal and moral responsibility to engage effectively in resolving this conflict. OI also believes in a two state solution.