

Crisis in Gaza deepens

In recent months in Gaza, air raids, physical barriers, and economic sanctions have resulted in disastrous consequences for residents.

Although there has been a decrease in Israeli attacks the last couple weeks, much of the infrastructure has already been destroyed. Poverty has increased dramatically, and the need for humanitarian assistance is enormous.

"When buying vegetables yesterday, I found the price for two potatoes was US\$0.52. One kilo usually costs US\$0.84. Many families cannot afford to buy even the most basic necessities, and more and more children can be found on the streets selling small items in an attempt to earn more money for their families," said Constantine Dabbagh, head of the Middle East Council of Churches Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees (MECC/DSPR) office in Gaza, in an interview by phone. MECC is a member of the global alliance Action by Churches Together (ACT) International.

Lack of electricity a large problem

According to Dabbagh, residents have been suffering from a lack of electricity since Israel bombed Gaza's only power station on June 28. Residents have access to electricity an average of six to eight hours per day. Daytime temperatures are also high - 30 to 35 degrees Celcius.

"This is especially problematic for hospitals, which, although they are working, still use generators. There is gas (though much more expensive), but there is a shortage of generators, and poor families can not afford them," he said.

It costs 12 euros (US\$15.46) an hour to run a generator. It is difficult for most families and shops to keep food cold, and most avoid buying milk, meat and other products which need to be refrigerated. Food that was frozen during the winter has spoiled in the heat when freezers stopped working.

Cannot afford to buy food

Even residents' accessibility to water is sporadic. Water is available only two to three hours per day. In addition, the quality is poor, and, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), a side effect of bad water is an increase in diarrhea.

Fishermen have not been out to sea since June 28 as a result of a ban from the Israeli navy. This has resulted in large losses, both for those in the fishing industry as well as the overall economy.

Apart from fish, there is no lack of food, but customers are scarce. Prices of several types of food have increased, while only 30 percent of the population in Gaza has a consistent income as a result of the disrupted assistance from the European Union and other aid givers.

Help with free healthcare

With the support of ACT members around the world through ACT Appeal MEPL61 - Emergency Assistance to the Palestinian population, MECC/DSPR-ACT is providing 50 families with about 40 euros (US\$51.53) to be used for necessities.

"We have calculated that from the ACT disaster grant, we can help 2,500 families. But there are so many in need that we are going to apply for more money so we can help 6,000 to 7,000 families," Dabbagh said.

Assistance is provided in the form of cash to families rather than with material items mainly because of the difficulties in transporting goods from the outside through various checkpoints. The cash also gives families the flexibility of purchasing the food that is available at the time and exactly what they need. This has been the practice of MECC/DSPR for some time and is common among other humanitarian-aid agencies working in the region.

Through the appeal, MECC/DSPR-ACT is also offering free treatment at its health clinics in Gaza. Due to a lack of medical supplies at state-supported clinics, there have been many more patients than normal at these clinics. Patients usually have to pay a small fee of 1.50 euro (less than US\$2) for treatment.

"We are now offering free health care because no one can afford to pay either the fee or for medicine," said Bernard Sabella, MECC/DSPR executive secretary.

Support for vocational training

Another challenge in this crisis is that those who are participating in various vocational training programs MECC/DSPR supports cannot pay the program fee. The current MECC/DSPR-ACT response is covering these expenses.

"Since 80 percent of Gaza's one and a half million inhabitants are under 30, we consider it important that we continue to prioritize education and health with disaster assistance," Sabella said.

According to Palestinian authorities, Egypt will, with two months, provide southern Gaza with electricity and help with the planning of infrastructure reconstruction.
70,000 employed without pay

Sabella expressed hope that the boycott that foreign governments have placed on the Palestinian authorities will be lifted soon and that salaries of employees who have been working without pay since February (about 75,000 people in Gaza alone) will be paid. This would lead to a return to economic stability, he said.

On September 1, Sweden, Spain and Norway will co-host a conference in Stockholm on the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian Territories areas with a focus on Gaza. The conference will focus on humanitarian efforts, the humanitarian right of return and quick reconstruction.

Israel's destruction of civilian targets infringes on the principle of distinguishing between conflict and civilian life, according to international human rights.

During July, the bloodiest since April 2002, 163 civilian Palestinians, 38 of which were children, were killed by the Israeli army's intensive bombing. Since the start of Israel's offensive in Gaza on June 25, 180 Palestinians have been killed.