Palestine – Conflict

ETC Situation Report #12
Reporting period: 11/01/2024 to 17/01/2024

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was activated for the conflict crisis in Gaza on 31 October 2023. Situation Reports are published weekly.

Highlights

- As of 17 January, telecommunications services in Gaza have remained shut down for the fifth consecutive day, since 12 January. This is the seventh time that communications have stopped working since the onset of conflict on 07 October.

- On 15 January, the ETC conducted a technical assessment of the Rafah Very High Frequency (VHF) digital radio repeater installed at Al Shaboura Clinic. The ETC continues to provide technical assistance to multiple humanitarian responders in Rafah.

- On 15 January, the World Food Programme (WFP) Executive Director stated that, "People in Gaza risk dying of hunger just miles from trucks filled with food. Every hour lost puts countless lives at risk. We can keep famine at bay but only if we can deliver sufficient supplies and have safe access to everyone in need, wherever they are."

The ETC tests the VHF radio repeater at Al Shaboura Clinic in Rafah, Gaza. Photo: WFP/ETC

Situation overview

On 17 January, intense Israeli air, land and sea bombardments, ground operations and fighting with Hamas armed groups continued across much of the Gaza Strip. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 1.9 million people—approximately 90% of the Gaza population—are internally displaced and 60% of the infrastructure has been destroyed or damaged.

On 15 January, the WFP Executive Director stated that, "People in Gaza risk dying of hunger just miles from trucks filled with food. Every hour lost puts countless lives at risk. We can keep famine at bay but only if we can deliver sufficient supplies and have safe access to everyone in need, wherever they are."

As stated by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General—António Guterres—on 15 January, "The long shadow of starvation is stalking the people of Gaza—along with disease, malnutrition, and other health threats. I am deeply troubled by the clear violation of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing...An effective aid operation in Gaza—or anywhere else—requires certain basics. It requires security. It requires an environment where staff can work in safety. It requires the necessary logistics and the resumption of commercial activity."

Humanitarian agencies continue to report the rejection of authorization for coordinated movement requests, thereby critically inhibiting time-sensitive response for live saving items. In the first two weeks of January, only 24% (7 out of 29) of planned missions to deliver food, medicine, water, fuel, and other lifesaving supplies successfully reached the intended destinations north of Wadi Gaza.

Telecommunications overview

As of 17 January, telecommunications services in Gaza have remained shut down for the fifth consecutive day, since 12 January. This is the seventh time that telecommunications have stopped working since the onset of conflict on 07 October. The absence of telecommunications deprives people from accessing life-saving information, while also impeding the operations of first responders and other humanitarian actors.

On 13 January, a telecommunications company vehicle was reportedly struck in central Khan Younis, even though the crew were on a repair mission and had coordinated their security escort in advance. Two staff were reportedly killed.

Some humanitarian agencies are relying on their independent connectivity platforms or the local infrastructure—when available—for access to telecommunications services. It remains a priority for humanitarian responders to obtain authorization to set up independent and reliable shared services for telecommunications to ensure coordinated humanitarian service delivery to the population of Gaza.

Electricity to charge devices is limited in certain areas that have generators and solar power solutions. Other locations are completely without power since the shutdown of Gaza's sole power plant by Israeli authorities on 11 October.

ETC Activities

Coordination

On 14 January, the ETC attended the national Interagency Coordination Cell Group (ICCG) meeting for the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) to discuss the ongoing emergency response cluster operations in Gaza.

On 14 January, the ETC took part of the interagency forum led by Importation And Customs Clearance Together (IMPAACT) to discuss the importation and customs clearance process for telecommunications and ICT equipment in Cairo along other goods. IMPAACT fosters a dialogue between aid donors and national customs administrations to help crisis-affected people rapidly get the humanitarian assistance they need, in line with the UN's vision. This is a planning process to aid the prepositioning of equipment in El-Arish at the Egyptian Red Crescent (ERC) warehouse, for eventual importation into Gaza once approval from the authorities is issued.

The ETC and WFP Regional Bureau for the Middle East and Northern Africa (RBC) are on an ICT and Emergency Preparedness Response (EPR) needs assessment mission in El-Arish since 15 January. This is to plan for possible future WFP operations at the location to support the emergency response in Gaza with telecommunications services for transiting humanitarian staff as well as warehouses to store prepositioned ICT equipment for importation into Gaza.

The ETC also met with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in El-Arish on 16 January, who requested technical support for the VHF/HF handheld radio spare parts specifications to purchase as prepositioned stock for future maintenance.

The ETC met with the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Office of the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, who landed in El-Arish city to visit the ERC warehouses prior to going into Gaza. The ETC's main activities, challenges, and action plan were shared with her.

The cluster also met with the ERC to discuss the need to support humanitarian responders movements from El-Arish to Gaza. The ERC expressed their need to expand their radio communications capacity to strengthen the transportation of commodities and food between El-Arish and Gaza.

Equipment importation

On 09 January, the interagency group including the ETC met with the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) for an update meeting regarding the revised list of the consolidated ICT equipment submitted on 07 January. COGAT requested the ETC to resubmit the consolidated ICT equipment list in an official letter format. The ETC resubmitted the request in the new format on 13 January. The list contains the detailed description of all equipment, quantities, and solutions required for humanitarians to effectively operate in Gaza. The ETC, OCHA, and UNDSS were scheduled to meet COGAT on 15 January to follow up on the resubmitted request, but the meeting was cancelled. The ETC will continue advocating for the importation of all essential telecommunications equipment into Gaza and seek the possibility to schedule another meeting.

Data Connectivity

As of 17 January, telecommunications services in Gaza have remained shut down for the fifth consecutive day, since 12 January. Services of the two Mobile Network Operators (MNOs)—Jawwal and Ooredoo—as well as the Paltel Internet Service Provider (ISP) are all down.

As of 16 January, the Joint Humanitarian Operations Centre (JHOC) in Rafah—which is accommodating approximately 300 humanitarians—has fibre optic and microwave link data connectivity from local service provider, Ajyal, who in turn are connected to the Israeli service provider, Bezeq. Other humanitarian agencies that include UNICEF, UNRWA, WFP, and WHO are also using the same connectivity in their residential guesthouses.

Israeli ISPs—Partner and Cellcom—are reportedly operational in areas within a 4-kilometre radius from the Israel–Gaza border. The ETC is planning to visit the location to ascertain the connectivity status.

Telephony

Iridium and Thuraya satellite phone voice services are operational across the Gaza Strip.

Security communications systems (SCS)

On 15 January, the ETC conducted a technical assessment of the Rafah VHF digital radio repeater installed at Al Shaboura Clinic. The repeater is currently powered by a generator at Al Shaboura Clinic that operates from 0730 until 1600. The ETC assisted UNDSS with the programming of two VHF/HF handheld radios for use on the security communications system (SCS). While the repeater is functional, the SCS remains non-operational due to the incompatibility between the VHF handheld radio antennae and the digital repeater system. The ETC is assisting UNDSS to import compatible antennae from Jerusalem, with approval from COGAT.

Access to information

The ETC met with First Response Radio and UNRWA on 10 January to discuss the setting up of an FM radio station broadcasting solution for access of vital information for the Gaza population. The ETC is currently seeking information about licenses and authorization to operate FM radio broadcasting services in Gaza.

Staffing

The Israel Embassy in both Rome and Geneva are closed until 22 January; hence no Palestine-Gaza entry visa can be issued for now. Two ETC members of staff need visa issuance in preparation for possible deployment as ETC Coordinators to Gaza and Jerusalem, respectively.

The ETC Coordinator—Komi Amedjonekou—and Deputy ETC Coordinator—Hossam Metwally—are based in Cairo, Egypt, to remotely support all Gaza response activities. Both members of staff await the issuance of entry documents to deploy and be based in Jerusalem. The Deputy ETC Coordinator is currently on an ICT needs assessment in El-Arish from 15 to 19 January.

The ETC Senior ICT Specialist—Burak Sezgin—is in Rafah, Gaza, since 08 January, conducting technical engagements with local actors, ICT needs assessment, and offer technical ICT support to other humanitarian responders.

Mufaro Masuka—ETC Information Management Officer—continues to remotely support the response, while in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), until entry visa, travel documents, and contract are finalized for the identified replacement candidate. The WFP Standby Partnership (SBP) unit has identified the replacement candidate from WFP SBP—RedR Australia—who is currently being onboarded to fully take over the role, starting 01 February, based in Cairo, Egypt.

Dashboard

See the **ETC Dashboard** for an overview of planned service locations.

Funding

Currently, the ETC is 64% funded out of the US$800,000 requested in the Flash Appeal to undertake its activities and address the immediate needs in Gaza. The Government of France allocated EUR250,000 to the ETC out of a EUR 3 million contribution to the WFP Palestine operation in December 2023 and the Government of Luxembourg allocated a further EUR250,000 to the ETC response in Gaza in the same month. The funds are currently enabling the ETC to carry out essential coordination and information management activities, as well as be ready to deploy shared communications services in up to two locations for two months, pending the evolution of the situation.

The **updated Flash Appeal** released on 06 November is requesting US$1.2 billion to meet the needs of the entire population of Gaza and 500,000 people in the West Bank. It was extended until the end of March 2024.

Challenges

The intensity of hostilities has spread further south to include locations such as Khan Younis, limiting the movements of humanitarian responders.

Limited access to electricity, fuel, and telecommunications services continues to hamper the humanitarian response in Gaza.

The Egypt—Gaza Rafah Border crossing and recently the Israel—Gaza Kerem Shalom border crossing are the only two points open to deliver humanitarian relief items. The cross-border operations are extremely restricted due to ongoing shelling, security checks, and the lack of fuel.

Importation of telecommunications equipment into Gaza is lengthy and extremely challenging.

All items going into Gaza need to be approved by the Israeli authorities. Any items brought in via Egypt also needs to have importation permits from the Egyptian authorities and agreement with the Egyptian Red Crescent, who are the sole consignee of goods for the Rafah Border Crossing.

The reach of operations will remain limited without a prolonged ceasefire, safe access, and significant funding for the humanitarian response.

The risk of cybersecurity issues in this emergency is considered extremely high.

Meetings

The next Global ETC Teleconference with partners on the response in Gaza will be held on **24 January at 13:00 UTC**.

The previous Global ETC Teleconference was held on **17January**. All minutes are uploaded **here**.

Contacts

NAME	POSITION	LOCATION	CONTACT
Komi Amedjonekou	ETC Coordinator	Cairo, Egypt	komi.amedjonekou@wfp.org
Hossam Metwally	ETC Deputy Coordinator	Cairo, Egypt	Hossam.Metwally@wfp.org
Mufaro Masuka	Information Management Officer	Dubai, UAE	mufaro.masuka@wfp.org

Further information related to the ETC operation can be found on the website:

www.etcluster.org/emergency/palestine-conflict

For more information or to be added or deleted from the mailing list please contact:

Palestine.ETC@wfp.org