Palestine – Conflict

ETC Situation Report #14
Reporting period: 25/01/2024 to 31/01/2024

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

Highlights

- Although the voice services of Mobile Network Operators (MNOs)—Jawwal and Ooredoo—are operational, the networks are congested due to elevated subscribers and internal displacement and few operational telecommunications towers. However, internet connectivity remains down across the whole of Gaza Strip.

- On 25 January, the ETC assessed the network signal coverage of the Very High Frequency (VHF) digital radio security communications system (SCS) which operates using the VHF Rafah repeater installed at Al Shaboura Clinic. Although the signal coverage is good, the SCS remains non-operational due to the incompatibility between the VHF/HF handheld radio antennae and the digital repeater system.

The ETC conducts an ICT assessment in El–Arish, Egypt, for possible use of the location in the scale-up of humanitarian assistance in Gaza. Photo: WFP/ETC

- From 09 to 31 January, the ETC supported 10 humanitarian agencies with ICT assessments, technical advice and information, quick repairs, and guidance on the use of ICT equipment in Gaza.

Situation overview

Intense Israeli bombardments from air, land and sea continued across much of the Gaza Strip on 30 and 31 January. Ground fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas groups continues with intense hostilities reported in Khan Younis. According to the Ministry of Health (MoH) in Gaza, at least 26,900 have been killed and 65,949 injured between 07 October 2023 and 31 January 2024. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reports that 1.7 million people—approximately 90% of the Gaza population—are internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 60% of the infrastructure has been destroyed or damaged. Many families have been displaced multiple times as they seek safety.

The capacity of humanitarian agencies to operate safely and effectively anywhere in Gaza remains heavily compromised by recurrent denials of access to the north, restrictions on the import of critical equipment, and recurrent and the intensity of hostilities.

On 29 January, the transfer of humanitarian supplies into Gaza through the Kerem Shalom crossing with Israel was resumed after four days of disruption by Israeli protests.

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Telecommunications overview

Although the voice services of MNOs—Jawwal and Ooredoo—are operational, the networks are congested due to elevated subscribers because of internal displacement and few operational telecommunications towers. However, the internet services of Jawwal and Ooredoo, as well as the Paltel Internet Service Provider (ISP), remains down across the whole of Gaza.

Recurrent telecommunications shutdown in the Gaza Strip restricts people from accessing life-saving information and impedes other forms of humanitarian response. Telecommunications blackouts have occurred 10 times since the onset of hostilities on 07 October.

ETC efforts have been underway since 03 November 2023 to obtain the authorization to import telecommunications equipment to set up and provide an independent platform for communications in Gaza to support the delivery of critical humanitarian response. 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

The ETC Coordinator—David Pickering—departed Cairo on 31 January and travelled to Rafah, Gaza, where he will support the response with coordination activities, conduct technical engagements with local actors, and offer technical support to other humanitarian responders. The ETC Deputy Coordinator—Hossam Metwally—will continue to remotely support all Gaza response activities from Cairo in Egypt.

The ETC met with the USA-based human rights organization—Access Now—on 29 January to discuss the challenges with authorization to import telecommunications equipment for setting up common services for humanitarian responders in Gaza. Access Now defends and extends the digital rights of people and communities at risk.

Equipment importation

ETC efforts have been underway since 03 November 2023 to obtain the authorization to import telecommunications equipment to set up and provide an independent platform for communications in Gaza for the delivery of critical humanitarian assistance. The ETC will continue engaging the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) for the importation of all essential telecommunications equipment into Gaza.

The ETC is supporting global partner—International Telecommunication Union (ITU)—to allocate 100 fully activated Thuraya satellite phones to UN agencies operating in the Gaza emergency response for enhanced communication services. The satellite phones were donated by the Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to ITU for the inter-agency use and are fully paid for. The ETC conducted an online survey for UN heads of agencies to express their interest in being allocated part of the 100 Thuraya satellite phones. The survey was conducted from 26 December to 04 January and eight UN agencies expressed their interest to be allocated a cumulative total of 32 satellite phone devices. ITU and ETC collaborated to get consent from all interested agencies to share focal point contact

information with the authorities in seeking to import the satellite phones into Egypt and eventually into Gaza. ITU is consulting ALKAN—the registered sole satellite phone service provider in Egypt—on the procedures to follow for the importation of satellite phones into Egypt. The Egyptian National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA) has indicated that the satellite phones can be imported and released from customs into Egypt on the condition that they will be activated using services from ALKAN.

The ETC and ITU are also exploring the possibility of providing extra satellite phone devices to other humanitarian agencies working in the Gaza response.

Data connectivity

The voice call services of Jawwal and Ooredoo were gradually restored across most of Gaza starting on the evening of 19 January, having been shut down for one week since 12 January. However, the internet services of both Jawwal and Ooredoo, as well as Paltel remains down across the whole of Gaza.

From 09 to 31 January, the ETC supported 10 humanitarian agencies with ICT assessments, technical advice and information, repairs, and guidance on the use of ICT equipment. The organizations include Action Against Hunger (ACF), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Logistics Cluster United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Four organizations—the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF), and UK-Med—are scheduled to be assisted.

Telephony

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

Security communications systems (SCS)

On 25 January, the ETC assessed the network signal coverage of the VHF digital radio SCS which operates using the VHF Rafah repeater installed at Al Shaboura Clinic. The repeater is currently powered by a generator at Al Shaboura Clinic that operates daily from 0730 until 1600. To assess the VHF signal coverage, the ETC used two UNDSS VHF handheld radios which were fully programmed for use on the SCS. The VHF SCS network is only locally functioning on the Rafah VHF repeater and is not yet connected to the control server in Jerusalem. VHF digital radio SCS network coverage is good and stable in Rafah city, Joint Humanitarian Operations Centre (JHOC), WFP Warehouse, and the Rafah border crossing. Coverage in other surrounding areas is yet to be assessed when the areas become safe and accessible. The SCS remains non-operational due to the incompatibility between the VHF/HF handheld radio antennae and the digital repeater system. The ETC is assisting UNDSS to identify compatible VHF radio antennae from Cairo, Jerusalem, or other international suppliers for importation into Gaza and installation on the SCS. The ETC is assisting UNDSS and UNRWA to identify, procure, and install a solar power solution for the VHF digital radio repeater installed at Al Shaboura Clinic, Rafah, to continually operate for 24 hours a day.

The ETC Senior ICT Specialist travelled back to Jerusalem on 31 January and will engage the service provider who installed the SCS in Gaza, to obtain the settings, configuration, and a better understanding of the system.

Staffing

The ETC Coordinator—David Pickering— departed Cairo on 31 January to go to Rafah in Gaza, where he will support the response with coordination activities, conduct technical engagements with local actors, and offer technical support to other humanitarian responders. The ETC Deputy

Coordinator—Hossam Metwally—will continue to remotely support all Gaza response activities while based in Cairo.

The ETC Senior ICT Specialist—Burak Sezgin—departed Rafah, Gaza, on 29 January to Cairo, enroute to Jerusalem on 31 January to seek an extension of his Israeli visa. Burak has been in Rafah since 08 January, conducting technical engagements with local actors, ICT needs assessments, and offering technical telecommunications support to other humanitarian responders. Burak is tentatively scheduled to depart Jerusalem on 09 February and embark on annual leave.

Mufaro Masuka—ETC Information Management Officer—continues to remotely support the response from Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), until entry visa, travel documents, and contract are finalized for the identified replacement candidate. The WFP Standby Partnership unit has identified the replacement candidate from WFP Standby partner—RedR Australia—who is currently being onboarded for handover starting 01 February and fully take over role by 12 February. The candidate is starting the role remotely, while waiting for all travel and visa entry documents for Cairo, Egypt, to be issued.

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 **updated 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 issuance of Gaza entry visa for staff intending to deploy to Gaza remains lengthy.

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 **07 February at 13:00 UTC**.

The previous Global ETC Teleconference was held on **24 January**. All minutes are uploaded **here**.

Contacts

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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:

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