Palestine – Conflict

ETC Situation Report #16
Reporting period: 08/02/2024 to 14/02/2024

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

Highlights

- In support of the ETC, the United Nations (UN) Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) engaged with the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and on 12 February, successfully secured approval for the importation of the digital Very High Frequency (VHF) radio equipment and solar power solutions for the ETC, United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

- The ETC continues to engage, coordinate and support to all humanitarian local actors, UN agencies and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) with telecommunications technical needs, advise to ensure realistic communication expectations in the response.

The ETC tests satellite phone coverage across different locations in Rafah, Gaza. Photo WFP/ETC

- Since 09 January the ETC has conducted eight ICT assessments in four locations in Rafah, supported 14 humanitarian agencies with ICT repairs, technical advice, and guidance on the use of ICT equipment.

Situation overview

Ground fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas groups continues with hostilities particularly intense in Khan Younis and intensified in Rafah in the early hours of 12 February. Recent airstrikes on Rafah have heightened concerns of an escalation in the most southerly area of Gaza, which is already hosting over half of Gaza's population.

Increased airstrikes on Rafah have led to population movements towards Deir al Balah and An Nuseirat Refugee Camp. The capacity of humanitarian agencies to operate safely and effectively anywhere in Gaza remains heavily compromised by recurrent restrictions to access to the north, the import of critical equipment, and recurrent intense hostilities.

Telecommunications overview

Voice services from Mobile Network Operators (MNOs)—Jawwal and Ooredoo are operational, although the network is congested due to increased subscribers in Rafah following multiple

displacements and few operational telecommunications towers, due to fuel allocation limitations. Paltel Internet Service Provider (ISP) has restored internet services in parts of Rafah, though with intermittent connectivity. Internet services from both MNOs Jawwal and Ooredoo 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 2023. The electrical power issues remain critical with the ongoing conflict. 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 on 11 October.

ETC Activities

Coordination

The ETC continues to engage, coordinate and support UN agencies and International NGOs with telecommunications technical needs, advice, and information sharing about the challenges and available capacity in the current Gaza response.

Since 09 January the ETC has conducted eight ICT assessments in four locations in Rafah, supported 14 humanitarian agencies with ICT repairs, technical advice, and guidance on the use of ICT equipment.

The WFP Palestine Country Director (CD) was in Gaza on 13 February, on a mission to assess the humanitarian situation and observe current response. The ETC met the WFP Palestine CD and discussed potential access of Khan Younis city to North to support agencies and partners with telecommunications technical service and assess the availability of power supply and communication services.

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 humanitarian communications in Gaza.

In support of the ETC, the UN HC engaged with the COGAT and on 12 February, successfully secured approval for the importation of the digital VHF radio equipment and solar power solutions for the ETC, UNDSS and the UNOCHA. The ETC is engaging WFP FITTEST[1] unit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) to expedite the shipping of equipment into Israeli first—which has no import restrictions and onwards importation into Gaza once authorization is issued. These items are part of the already prepositioned ETC equipment at WFP Dubai, UAE.

Data connectivity

Voice services from MNOs Jawwal and Ooredoo are operational, although the network is congested due to increased subscribers in Rafah following multiple displacements and few operational telecommunications towers, due to fuel allocation limitations. Paltel Internet Service Provider (ISP) has restored internet services in parts of Rafah, though with intermittent connectivity. Internet services from both MNOs Jawwal and Ooredoo remains down across the whole of Gaza.

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[1] WFP Fast Information Technology and Telecommunications Emergency Support Team

The ETC is assessing network connectivity solutions for the Joint Humanitarian Operations Centre (JHOC), WFP Warehouse, Rafah Crossing shunting yard and guesthouse premises to improve service signal and ensure stable internet access for all humanitarian agencies in carrying out their mandate.

As of 13 February, the JHOC in Rafah—which is accommodating approximately 300 humanitarians—has over 500 internet connections on the fibre optic and microwave link data connectivity provided by local service provider, Ajyal. The network has been down since 11 February and is also heavily congested when operational resulting in slow download and upload speeds.

Telephony

Iridium and Thuraya satellite phone voice services are operational across the Gaza Strip, though connections are slow.

Security communications systems (SCS)

The internet connectivity for the UNDSS-managed SCS VHF Rafah repeater at Al Shaboura Clinic is down since 08 February. The ETC has tentatively scheduled to conduct a visit to the repeater site on 16 February to fully ascertain the status. The repeater is still currently powered by a generator connected to Al Shaboura Clinic that currently operates five days a week from 0730 until 1600. A solar power solution was identified locally and once procured, is planned to be installed by the ETC to ensure the VHF digital radio repeater is operational for 24 hours daily. The SCS will be connected to the Jerusalem server once the power issue is resolved.

The ETC has informed all humanitarian agencies to get their VHF radios programmed first at the UNDSS server in Jerusalem, in compliance with authorities before bringing them into Gaza. This will ensure seamless compatibility and authorized connectivity to the SCS.

Community Information Services

Alternative communications channels are needed to disseminate humanitarian messages to the population in Gaza. The ETC is collaborating with the inter-agency Accountability for Affected Population (AAP) working group and a local community FM radio station to package key humanitarian messages for broadcast to the Gaza population. A rapid assessment on 09 February, revealed that 19 Arabic and Hebrew radio stations are still operational. Reports from an NGO community radio specialist, state that there is no operational Rafah-based FM transmitter service as all the current transmissions emanate from across the border. An FM transmitter was recovered from Khan Younis with possibility to install in Dier Al Balah or Rafah. There are ongoing assessments to ascertain if BBC Arabic service from Cyprus is receivable on ordinary AM radios in Gaza.

Staffing

The ETC Coordinator—David Pickering—is in Rafah, Gaza, since 31 January, where he is supporting the response with coordination activities, conduct technical engagements with local actors and assist other humanitarian responders with information, repairs, and guidance on the use of ICT equipment. The Deputy ETC Coordinator—Hossam Metwally—continues to remotely support all Gaza response activities while based in Cairo.

The Standby Partner (SBP) Information Management Officer (IMO) for the ETC Palestine–Gaza response RedR's Bipin Jha deployed to Cairo, Egypt on 12 February.

The WFP FITTEST ITC Specialist - Burak Sezgin - is due to return to the operation tentatively on 01 March, after completing a break.

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

The previous Global ETC Teleconference was held on **07 February**. 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

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