

Not enough water to survive

Urgent appeal from WASH actors in the occupied Palestinian territory

2 November 2023

Since 7 October, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has significantly deteriorated due to escalated hostilities. Compounded by 16 years of blockade and multiple previous rounds of devastating escalations in violence, the Gaza Strip now grapples with **catastrophic water, sanitation, and hygiene needs essential to the survival of its 2.3 million inhabitants, of whom half are children.**

Safe and sustained access to water in Gaza remains extremely limited. From 16 to 24 October, the WASH Cluster estimated that people had access to just 1 to 3 litres of water daily. This scarcity raises fears of dehydration, kidney failure and other critical health consequences, particularly for already vulnerable people. Since 25 October, the WASH Cluster has reported a slight increase in the daily amount of available water. This fluctuation in daily water availability is based on a number of factors including the ability to safely transport existing water supplies, the functionality of the Israeli-sourced water pipelines, and the emergency fuel reserves available for the two remaining operational seawater desalination plants, currently operating at between 5 and 40 percent of their capacity, according to OCHA.

Women, notably those pregnant or lactating, alongside children, face heightened risks due to the lack of adequate water and sanitation. Children under 5 are more susceptible to waterborne diseases due to contaminated water and inadequate hygiene. Women and girls face challenges managing menstruation hygienically and with dignity, prompting many to use menstrual products for longer than intended, escalating infection dangers. Female-led households, the elderly, and people with disabilities face much greater challenges in accessing scarce water supplies which might be found far from their place of displacement.

Between 21 October and 1 November, only 26 trucks carrying vital water and sanitation supplies entered Gaza, according to OCHA, which is nowhere near enough to meet the essential needs for the survival of the population.

No fuel has entered Gaza in the past four weeks. A daily minimum of 30,000 litres of fuel is essential for basic water services in Gaza. The lack of fuel has seen the total shutdown of wastewater treatment plants, leading to the daily release of over 130,000 cubic metres of untreated sewage into the Mediterranean Sea, posing a grave environmental hazard. Some 80 percent of Gaza's water supply is located in wells and groundwater aquifers, which require fuel for extraction and desalination. Most water trucks stand empty of fuel, with residents resorting to donkeys to transport the limited available water supply.

On 29 October, the Israeli authorities confirmed their intention to restart water supplies to Middle Area of Gaza and gave the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) the go-ahead to fix a critical water pipeline. However, even with this authorisation, it remains uncertain if the PWA has the necessary resources, safety conditions, supplies, and skilled personnel to effectively carry out these repairs. Once functional, this pipeline can significantly enhance the area's drinking water availability. By contrast, the water supply from Israel to western Khan Younis, which was re-connected on 15 October, stopped on 30 October, for unclear reasons. The third pipeline from Israel to northern Gaza remains closed since 8 October.

Meanwhile, water access in the West Bank, especially for remote communities in Area C, is increasingly in peril. The West Bank Protection Consortium reports that some communities are facing water shortages due to the Israeli checkpoints and road closures. Moreover, there is a surge in violence from settlers against water and sanitation systems. This includes damages to the primary water pipeline for Masafer Yatta residents in the south Hebron hills, destruction of water storage tanks, and movement and access restrictions preventing locals from reaching their primary water sources.

The undersigned WASH actors issue an urgent appeal for:

- All parties to the conflict, world leaders and the global humanitarian community to call for an **immediate ceasefire** to ensure the protection of civilians and the unimpeded delivery of essential goods, including water, to and within the Gaza Strip.
- All parties to abide by **international humanitarian law**, which requires the protection of civilians and the protection of infrastructure critical for the survival of the civilian population, including water and sanitation infrastructure, from damage.
- A significant **increase in the daily number of trucks** filled with humanitarian aid entering Gaza. This must include an upscaled provision of water and sanitation resources to address the dire needs of the local population. Humanitarian aid must include personal, domestic, and institutional hygiene items; cleaning products; and the vital entry of spare parts and materials necessary for the urgent repairs of war-damaged water infrastructure.
- All parties to agree to the **immediate provision of fuel** into Gaza. This is paramount to reactivate and strengthen the indispensable water and sanitation infrastructure necessary for the survival of Gaza's civilian population.
- The unconditional, unfettered and continuous **re-establishment of all Israeli-sourced water** into Gaza through the three Mekorot water supply lines.
- The **protection of Area C communities** in the West Bank from the risk of forcible transfer, and for the perpetrators of violence against these communities to be held accountable. We call for the end of movement restrictions on Palestinian communities in the West Bank to allow the access of goods and services for these vulnerable communities.

Signatories:

