Factsheet

Over 2 million Palestinians at risk of dying of thirst in the Gaza Stirp

November 2023
Introduction

On the 43rd day of the ongoing war crime against the Gaza Strip, the Israeli occupying authorities have waged a war on hospitals to shut them down, carry on forcible displacement, and completely destroy the Gaza city and Northern Gaza. So far, the Israeli occupying forces (IOF) have dropped more than 32 tonnes of explosives on Gaza, which is two times greater than the Hiroshima bomb.

The Gaza Strip has been subjected to starvation and dehydration as a result of the stifling siege imposed by the IOF since the start of the military aggression on 7 October. The world has been incapable of entering humanitarian aid, which is prevented from reaching Northern Gaza. With the continued bombing, killing and destruction around the clock, citizens of the Gaza Strip face particular hardships in accessing water.

Over 2 million Palestinians in the small, most densely populated coastal strip in the world are at risk of dehydration due to the lack of potable water. At the beginning of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, the Israeli occupying authorities decided to cut off electricity, water, and fuel supplies to the Gaza Strip. Three days into the aggression against Gaza, on 9 October, Yoav Ghallant, the Israeli Defence Minister, declared a complete siege on Gaza, stating: “no electricity, no food, no water, and no fuel.” He also announced that “we are fighting human animals.”

Accordingly, the Israeli water company interrupted potable water supplies to some areas in the Gaza Strip, particularly to Central Gaza as well as to the cities of Rafah and Khan Yunis in the south. These are the areas to which citizens are displaced from Northern Gaza and Gaza city.

Water sources in the Gaza Strip

There are multiple water sources in the Gaza Strip. The largest of all is the coastal aquifer. Serving as the main water source, the Gaza population completely rely on the coastal aquifer, which is recharged by an average of 30-40 million cubic metres (MCM) of rainwater a year. Water shortage is estimated at some 120 MCM as Gaza consumes about 240 MCM of water.

According to an agreement with the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli Mekorot Company provides water supplies to the Gaza Strip. The Israeli occupying authorities control the quantity and mechanism of water supply from this source. Water is pumped through three networks: (1) in the Gaza Municipality area, (2) in the Abasan as-Saghira Municipality, and (3) in the Al-Maghazi area. Water supply is under full control of the Israeli occupying authorities, effectively risking cut off during any crisis, escalation of hostilities, and recurrent aggressions against the Gaza Strip.

Water desalination is the third water source in the Gaza Strip. Three water desalination plants are in operation in Gaza, namely the Al-Qarara and South, Deir al-Balah, and North plants.

2 Palestinian Water Authority, https://www.pwa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=5OmXWDa2720110074a50mXWD.
2021, all three desalination plants produced a total of 3.5 MCM of water. Rainwater collection is Gaza’s fourth and last water source. Annual rainfall ranges from 100 to 120 MCM a year across the Gaza Strip. This amount needs to be maintained and exploited. However, due to the lack of necessary equipment and capacities, a large amount of rainwater is wasted and discharged into the sea.⁴

**Dehydration policy**

The occupying Power has put in place many policies, which aim at killing Gazans by dehydration, particularly in Northern Gaza. Of these:

- a. Limited quantities of water are entered to the southern areas only. In the context of humanitarian assistance programmes, the Israeli occupying authorities have only allowed the entry of 4 percent of the water needs of the Gaza population. Water is primarily distributed in southern Gaza. Relief agencies have not been able to distribute bottled water to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the north.
- b. All municipal water wells have been closed down due to the lack of fuel. Overall, the Gaza population face an acute shortage of usable water supply after all municipal water wells were shut down because of fuel shortages.
- c. Water trucking has come to a halt as a result of the relentless bombardment of all areas and facilities. Most water tanks, remaining water wells, and sewage lines have been targeted.
- d. Fuel supplies have been cut off to the Gaza Strip. Infrastructure and sanitation networks have also been destroyed.
- e. Electricity blackout and depletion of fuel have disrupted the distribution of water from artesian wells to households. This is compounded by a complete cessation of water trucking from desalination plants due to fuel depletion.
- f. The ongoing war of aggression exacerbates the risk of targeting citizens on the streets, diminishing the chances of filling domestic tanks on house roofs in view of poor or destroyed main water pipelines.

**War of aggression… death by dehydration**

Younes Zuhdi al-Ghureiz, Assistant to the Chair of the Government Emergency Committee in Gaza, stated that the Gaza city has been hit by a real dehydration crisis. Over 2 million Palestinians are at risk of dying either by missiles or of thirst. Al-Ghureiz stressed that water of whatever kind was not available for either humans or plants. All the more so, saline water used for hygiene and other purposes has been lacking. Describing the severe humanitarian crisis that has befallen the Gaza Strip, Al-Ghureiz said that everything was dying bit by bit. All

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aspects of life and infrastructure have been in a state of total paralysis. Also, ambulances and civil defence vehicles have run out of emergency fuel.

According to Al-Ghureiz, the remaining water desalination plants are solar powered and operating at minimum capacity, producing 10,000-15,000 cubic meters (CM) per day. The Gaza population need some 300,000 CM, or 3 million litres of water a day.5

Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) warned against of the serious consequences of depleting potable water on the lives of Gaza’s 2.3 million people in the midst of the Israeli war, which has resulted in a mounting humanitarian crisis.6

To mitigate the disaster, the Khan Yunis and other municipalities across the Gaza Strip had to deploy vehicles with generators to refill domestic tanks in densely populated neighbourhoods from brackish and unsterile private wells. Though unfit for human consumption, access to this water has still been an “impossible mission” for the majority of people in the time of aggression.7

Consequences of dehydration

- According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 100 and 150 litres of water per person per day are needed to ensure that most basic needs are met. As a result of the dehydration of the Gaza population, the daily intake of water per person is now 1 to 3 litres of water, depending on their location.

- Because the Israeli occupying authorities have banned the entry of fuel into the Gaza Strip, local government units have stopped pumping (brackish) water from wells to households. Having used to produce 21 MCM of drinking water per day, all three water desalination plants are now out of operation. In most areas across the Gaza Strip, households no longer have access to any water sources, including for both drinking and domestic purposes. As a result, the majority of citizens are forced to drink non-potable water, risking serious and life-threatening health conditions.

- Electricity blackout has forced citizens to crowd for as long as six hours at brackish water wells and a few desalination plants, which continue to operate at minimum capacity, in order to fill plastic jerrycans that can barely meet minimum daily needs. Some citizens have had to drink untreated brackish water.

- Suffering of the population has aggravated due to the severe shortage of potable water and adverse sanitation conditions, putting the Gaza Strip at an immense health risk. Diseases, including hepatitis, smallpox, scabies, severe diarrhoea and lice infestation, have started to emerge. Kazem Abu Khalaf, UNRWA spokesman, stated that more than

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5 https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2023/10/17.
13,000 cases of skin diseases have been reported among IDPs in UNRWA shelters due to the lack of water for cleaning purposes. Some 33,000 children have had diarrhoea.\(^8\)

- According to Zuhdi al-Ghureiz, Khan Yunis Mayor, citizens crowd at brackish water wells and a few desalination plants, which continue to operate at minimum capacity, to fill plastic jerrycans that can barely meet minimal daily needs. Some citizens have had to drink untreated brackish water.

- The majority of the Gaza population no longer have the luxury of asking about the quality of water as all water sources have been cut off to 90 percent of households. Many have been forced to consume untreated brackish water, triggering a serious health crisis.

- In addition to the consumption of brackish water and deteriorating sanitation conditions, children under six months of age, pregnant women and people with kidney diseases face a life-threatening danger, threatening that lice infestation, smallpox, scabies, and severe diarrhoea become widespread. The incidence of these diseases is expected to rise unless electricity or fuel is supplied to resume operations of water and sanitation facilities. WHO warned of the risk of the rapid spread of infectious diseases and bacterial infections due to the water shortage and related consumption of contaminated water. Over 33,500 cases of diarrhoea have been reported, of whom more than half were among children under five.\(^9\)

**Recommendations**

In the light of the foregoing, Palestinians, all international organisations and agencies, and free peoples are racing against time to press for putting an end to the war of aggression and ongoing crimes of genocide against the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip, entering humanitarian aid, and opening commercial crossings to enable the private sector to bring in needed commodities. Necessary quantities of fuel should be entered to operate water desalination plants. Israel’s inhuman policy of continued deprivation of safe access to water must be brought to an end. Needed water, health and sanitation facilities should be operated.

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\(^8\) [https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-33](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-33).

\(^9\) [https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-33](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-33).