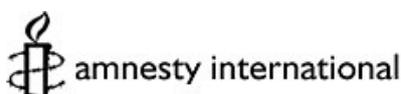


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Israeli army blocks deliveries to Gaza

The Israeli army has completely blocked the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian aid and medical supplies to the Gaza Strip for more than a week. Very little fuel has been allowed in. Amnesty International urged the Israeli authorities on Friday to allow their immediate passage.

"This latest tightening of the Israeli blockade has made an already dire humanitarian situation markedly worse. It is nothing short of collective punishment on Gaza's civilian population and it must stop immediately," said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

Eighty per cent of the population of Gaza has been dependent on the trickle of humanitarian aid previously allowed into Gaza until Wednesday, 5 November. Industrial fuel, which is donated by the European Union and needed to power Gaza's power plant, has also been blocked, causing a blackout in large parts of Gaza.

"Today I went to look for bread in several bakeries but couldn't find any," Abu Khalil, a resident of Gaza City, told Amnesty International on Thursday evening. "There is no electricity, it's pitch dark.

"A few months ago, we bought an electric cooker because cooking gas is difficult to find and very expensive, but now without electricity we can't even cook. We are sitting at home in the dark; the children don't know what to do with themselves. We can't do anything. Until when can we live like this?"

Other residents of Gaza told Amnesty International that they could not even find candles in the market any more. They said that the few people who have back generators in their homes and who still have fuel do not dare to use them because nobody knows when the blackout will end.

The United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), the main UN aid agency, which provides humanitarian assistance to close to one million Palestinian refugees in Gaza, announced on Thursday that its supplies had run out.

John Ging, UNRWA's head of operations in Gaza, told the media: "We have been working here from hand to mouth for quite a long time now, so these restrictions affect us immediately."

The agency had been warning for some days that its supplies were running out.

At the same time, the Israeli authorities have been denying access to Gaza to foreign journalists for a week and a convoy of European diplomats were likewise refused entry on Thursday.

"Gaza is cut off from the outside world and Israel is seemingly not keen for the world to see the suffering that its blockade is causing the one and a half million Palestinians who are

virtually trapped there," said Philip Luther.

The breakdown last week of a five-and-a-half-month ceasefire between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants in Gaza has generated a renewed wave of violence. The killing of six Palestinian militants in Israeli air strikes and ground attacks on 4 November prompted a barrage of Palestinian rockets on nearby Israeli towns and villages.

Five other Palestinian militants have been killed by Israeli forces in recent days. Palestinian rocket attacks have continued. No Israeli casualties had been reported until earlier today, when one Israeli was lightly wounded by shrapnel in an attack on the Israeli city of Sderot.

"This dangerous spate of attacks and counter-attacks must be swiftly halted. Both sides know from past experience that their actions are putting the lives of the civilian populations of Gaza and southern Israel at risk," said Philip Luther.

Prior to the coming into effect of the ceasefire on 19 June 2008, some 420 Palestinians had been killed by Israeli forces, half of them unarmed civilians, including some 80 children, since the beginning of the year. In the same period, Palestinian armed groups killed 24 Israelis, 15 of them civilians, including four children.

The five-and-a-half-month ceasefire had brought a welcome respite for the civilian populations in Gaza and southern Israel. Daily attacks had blighted their lives for the past eight years, during which some 4,750 Palestinians and 1,100 Israelis were killed.

Most of the victims on both sides have been unarmed civilians, including some 900 Palestinian children and 120 Israeli children.

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