On 27 December, the IDF launched an attack of unprecedented scale on the Gaza Strip, labelled “Operation Cast Lead”, the stated aims of which were to end the firing of rockets into Southern Israel since the end of the 19 December Egyptian-negotiated “calm”.

The exact casualty figures are unknown at the time of publication. However, as of 11 January 2009 it is estimated that over 800 people have been killed and over 3,300 Palestinians injured. The Israeli offensive has resulted in the largest number of forcibly displaced Palestinians since 1967; over 21,000 displaced persons are currently taking shelter in UNRWA facilities across the Gaza Strip. For the latest OCHA situation reports on Gaza, please visit www.ochaopt.org

Bombings have affected thousands of civilians including refugees, who represent over 70% of the population in Gaza. The bombing campaign has already wrought extensive damage to public infrastructure and hundreds of civilian homes and businesses. Coming in the wake of a year and a half of severe blockade that has brought the Gaza economy to the brink of collapse, the ongoing operation is dealing another severe blow to an already impoverished population whose coping mechanisms are nearly exhausted. For several days, the International Red Crescent Society reported that the Israeli authorities refused to allow their medical team into Gaza. The team, which consists of four specialists led by an experienced ICRC war surgeon, is to help the staff of Shifa hospital with complex operations on people injured by the bombing.

Humanitarian agencies launched appeals to assist the victims of this bombing campaign. UNRWA launched a Special Appeal for US$34 million to provide emergency assistance for four months, with a focus on the provision of emergency shelter support, cash assistance and food to affected families; and the provision of fuel to municipalities and utilities (for full details, please visit www.unrwa.org). The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) has launched a preliminary emergency appeal for US$ 6.8 million to support its response to the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza strip (http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/News/08/08123101/index.asp).

Priority Needs:

- Protection of civilians: Civilians, notably children who form 56 per cent of Gaza’s population, are bearing the brunt of the violence. As one of the most densely populated places in the world, it is clear that many more civilians will be killed if the conflict continues. Israel must respect the norms of International Humanitarian Law, in particular the principles of distinction and proportionality.

- Access for ambulance and rescue teams: An unknown number of dead, injured and trapped people remain in houses which have been shelled and in areas where there are ongoing hostilities. Due to attacks on ambulances, medical staff are fearful of reaching these places.
Electricity is necessary for the operation of services within the Gaza Strip notably health, water and sanitation services. What is needed includes repairing damaged electricity lines, bringing in needed transformers, and allowing fixing of other transformers.

Supply of fuel: Industrial fuel is needed to power the Gaza Power Plant, which has been shut down since 30 December. Nahal Oz crossing must remain open as it is the only crossing which can facilitate the transfer of sufficient amounts of fuel to restart and maintain operations of the power plant, and restock other types of fuel needed in the Strip.

Wheat grain is essential to provide flour for local bakeries and humanitarian food distribution to the population of Gaza. The Karni crossing conveyor belt is the only mechanism which can facilitate the import of the amount of grain required in the Strip at this time.

Lebanon

The Brazilian Government gave US$ 200,000 to aid the reconstruction of Nahr el-Bared Camp in Northern Lebanon. UNRWA has appealed for US$ 282 million to rebuild the camp. Approximately 27,000 Palestinian refugees were displaced from Nahr el-Bared camp and adjacent areas in northern Lebanon in mid-2007, as a result of the conflict between the Lebanese Armed forces and the Fatah Al Islam group.

Syria

Syria is still responding to the influx of refugees from Iraq and the worst drought in four decades. UNHCR continues to provide assistance to refugees from Iraq, in cooperation with partner agencies in the sectors of food, education, health, psycho-social support and protection. Two more NGOs (Action Against Hunger and Terre des Hommes) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, allowing them to start assistance programmes for Iraqi refugees in Syria. Up to now there are twelve international NGOs which are fully accredited to work with Iraqi refugees.

UNDP, in cooperation with the Government of Syria and international experts in disaster management, launched The National Center for the Coordination of Disaster Management. The Center has four areas of cooperation in disaster management:

- Sub-regional Cooperation among Arab countries for disaster management.
- National capacity-building project in the area of disaster reduction and management
- Comprehensive Program aimed at building institutional system and support for disaster management in Syria.
- National Urban Observatory recently established by the Ministry in cooperation with UNDP and UN-HABITAT.

Afghanistan

From 9 - 16 December, the Head of OCHA’s Consolidated Appeals Process Section and the Regional Disaster Response Advisor from OCHA ROMENACA went on mission to Afghanistan to support the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in developing a Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) for Afghanistan. The HAP was endorsed by the HCT on 16 December. There are 108 projects and 46 organizations included in the plan. At the moment, the requested amount for the HAP stands at approximately US$ 517 million.

Iran

The Head of Building and Housing Research Center announced that the Center would soon be equipped to predict earthquakes 24 hours in advance. There are currently 1200 Stations of Earthquake Velocity Tomography in Iran, 45 of which are based in Tehran.

On the 5th anniversary of Bam Earthquake, the First Emergency and Mass Evacuation Simulation Exercise was held in Tehran by the collaboration of Tehran Disaster Mitigation & Management Organization, Iranian Red Crescent Society, Firefighter’s House, the Police as well as Neighborhood Disaster Volunteers. The main purpose of the exercise was to perform evacuation training among employees who work in large buildings with complex floor plan and evacuation routes.
Yemen

On December 9, the Government of Japan allocated approximately US$ 800,000 to UNHCR and UNICEF to support the victims of the floods that were the result of the heavy rains across the south east of Yemen at the end of October 2008. With this grant, the total of emergency assistance from Japan for this disaster will amount to approximately US$ 1.2 million. Excluding this latest contribution from Japan, thus far the Yemen Floods Response Appeal is over 35% funded.

The International Federation of the Red Crescent Society has revised its own Flood Appeal, seeking US$1.6 million to support the Yemen Red Crescent Society to assist 1,500 beneficiaries over a period of 12 months. This Revised Emergency Appeal is based directly on a plan of action developed in coordination with the International Federation’s Field Assessment and Coordination Team and the Yemen Red Crescent branch, and aims to cover activities under relief, recovery, risk reduction, health and care (including water and sanitation), shelter and capacity building needs of the National Society.

Thanks to a contribution from DFID, the funding gap for the current cycle of WFP’s emergency operation in Sa’ada has been filled. The extension of WFP’s operation through June 2009 to feed 100,000 war-affected persons has been approved, bringing the total cost of the operation (Sept 2007-June 2009) to US$ 13.63 million, leaving a shortfall of US$ 2.5 million. The situation in the governorate remained quiet but tense in light of the Shia celebration of Eid al-Ghadeer. Security conditions along the main Sana’a-Sa’ada road are unpredictable and closed to UN vehicles. A UN mission to Sa’ada was denied security clearance by the government multiple times over the past two months due to insecurity along the road. The mission is intended to follow-up on operational issues and to determine the feasibility of converting Sa’ada into an official sub-office.

Morocco

The IFRC’s Emergency Appeal for US$ 1.4 million to assist 10,000 flood victims in Morocco was launched on 7 December 2008. The coverage of the Appeal remains very low. Morocco has been affected by torrential rains since early October, causing 40 deaths and hundreds of homeless being accommodated in temporary shelters or at relatives’ homes in 16 provinces of the country.

Since the beginning of December, snow falls, coupled with an unprecedented cold wave, have been recorded. The Moroccan Red Crescent (RC) has so provided 6,000 people with food, blankets, kitchen utensils and clothing. More than 200 National Society volunteers and staff participated in the rescue operations and evacuations, and provided first aid and psycho-social support to the families affected by the disaster. A comprehensive plan to deal with the effects of cold temperatures and snowfalls is targeted at 400,000 people and around 1,000 villages across 19 provinces. The Moroccan RC is on stand-by, reassessing its reserves and stocks, planning for dispatching the relief items in key strategic areas, and preparing its volunteers locally for action. Contacts are kept with local authorities, both at central and local level.

United Arab Emirates

Preparation for the 2009 DIHAD (Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development) Conference and Exhibition are underway. More details will be announced next month. For more information please visit www.dihad.org

Useful Links
- www.reliefweb.org
- www.humanitarianappeal.net
- www.ochaopt.org
- www.ochairaq.org
- www.irinnews.org
- www.unhcr.org
- www.wfp.org

Upcoming Events
- 12 January: Donors’ meeting on Gaza, Inter-Continental Hotel, Abu Dhabi
- 15 January: Dubai International Scientific Advisory Board (DISAB), Dubai

For more information, please contact:
Nadia Evans, OCHA Dubai, 00971 50 2279808, evans2@un.org