

# Gaza Sewage Crisis, Festering in Conflict, Poisons Coastline

Population growth, war-damaged infrastructure and electricity shortages blamed for water pollution

By Fares Akram and Daniella Cheslow, Associated Press

SHATI REFUGEE CAMP, Gaza Strip— Each day, millions of gallons of raw sewage pour into the Gaza Strip's Mediterranean beachfront, spewing out of a metal pipe and turning miles of once-scenic coastline into a stagnant dead zone.

The sewage has damaged Gaza's limited fresh water supplies, decimated fishing zones, and after years of neglect, is now floating northward and affecting Israel as well, where a nearby desalination plant was forced to shut down, apparently due to pollution.

spell even more trouble on both sides of the border.

But while Israel has a clear interest in Gazans repairing their water infrastructure, that would likely require it to ease restrictions on the import of building materials — which it fears the territory's Hamas rulers could divert for military purposes — and increase the amount of electricity it sells to Gaza.

Poor sewage treatment in Gaza is the result of a rapidly expanding population, an infrastructure damaged during wars with Israel and a chronic shortage of electricity to run the wastewater plants that still

Israel and Egypt have maintained a blockade of Gaza since Hamas, an Islamic militant group committed to Israel's destruction, seized power in 2007.

Nasser Abu Saif said he was once happy to live in a beachfront apartment in Shati refugee camp. Now, he avoids swimming in the fetid water near his house.

"There are mosquitoes in the summer and even in the winter," he said. "It makes our lives unpleasant."

Several aid groups have attempted to solve the sewage problem.

Steen Jorgensen, country director for the World Bank in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, said the fatal sewage flood spurred his office to build a \$73 million sewage treatment plant nine years ago. He said the facility, meant to treat at least one-fifth of Gaza's sewage, would already be operational if it had a reliable power supply.

Disagreements between Hamas and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority over fuel taxes have left Gaza's only power plant functioning at reduced capacity. Electricity from neighboring Israel and Egypt help alleviate the



AP PHOTO/DEL HANA  
Palestinian farmer Jamal El Jedi, 60, inspects the damages on his chicken farm following a sewage reservoir collapse causing a flood and damaging farms, in the Sheikh Ejeleen neighborhood of Gaza City, Wednesday, May 4, 2016. A sewage reservoir in Gaza has collapsed, flooding about 25 acres of farmland and signaling yet another warning of the need to address the exacerbating water and sewage crisis in the Hamas-run territory.

shortages, but usually there are only six to eight hours of power each day.

"That's just not reliable enough for a sewage plant," said Jorgensen. He said foreign donors, including the United States, have offered to fund a power supply to the plant, but he said Israel has not agreed to run a dedicated electricity line. Other options have not been found.

COGAT, the Israeli defense body responsible for Palestinian affairs, said Israel supplies 125 to 140 megawatts of power a day to the Gaza Strip.

"The decision of distributing the electricity falls under the responsibility of the Palestinians," COGAT wrote. In all, Gaza needs some 400 megawatts for its daily needs.

Jorgensen said the World Bank plans to start running the plant in the coming months using backup diesel generators, which will increase the cost and leave sewage treatment vulnerable to fuel shortages.

He said the plant will also have solar panels, but they will only generate a fraction of the needed power.

“If we don't get this operational, then I think it's going to be very hard to raise money for other necessary projects in Gaza

"It's certain that Gaza Strip's beaches are completely polluted and unsuitable for swimming and entertainment, especially in the summer," said Ahmed Yaqoubi of the Palestinian Water Authority.

Environmentalists and international aid organizations say that if the problem isn't quickly addressed, it could

function. In 2007, a sewage reservoir overflowed in a village in northern Gaza, drowning five people.

An Israeli blockade that has restricted imports, coupled with Palestinian infighting and mismanagement by the Hamas-run government, has compounded the problems for the enclave's 1.8 million resi-

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