

Gaza's undrinkable water is slowly poisoning Palestinians

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Palestinian children fill up containers with water in Gaza City in May [File: Mahmud Hams/AFP]

Gaza City, October 13 (RHC)-- The water crisis in the Gaza Strip affects every one of the coastal enclave's two million inhabitants. Many people in Gaza must resort to buying their drinking water from

private suppliers as municipal tap water often does not work because of long power outages, and is usually too salty to drink even when it does.

Heavily polluted water resources in the strip also have a serious impact on public health, with children, in particular, facing the risk of water-borne disease. The crisis has worsened during the past decades years because of the punishing Israeli blockade, the reduction of humanitarian funding, and the series of Israeli military attacks.

Falesteen Abdelkarim, 36, from the Al-Shati refugee camp, told Al Jazeera that water in her area is “undrinkable.” “It tastes as if it is coming from the sea. We cannot use it to drink, cook or even to shower,” she said.

Abdelkarim said residents have access to municipal water only three times a week, and sometimes, it comes “mixed with sewage” because the failing infrastructure in the refugee camps is unable to properly treat it.

“Life in the refugee camps is miserable. We always buy drinking water from the vendors,” said Abdelkarim, a mother of five.

Many private vendors in Gaza desalinate water and sell it to people on the strip. The average cost is 30 shekels (\$7) for 1,000 litres of water.

Muhammad Saleem, 40, from the Al-Sheikh Redwan neighbourhood in northern Gaza, said efforts to grow a garden at his home had failed because the water was too polluted. “All my plants dried up and died because of high water salinity and high chloride,” he told Al Jazeera.

Muhammad added it is has been “impossible” for years for him and his family to use the municipal tap water for drinking, cooking, or any other needs. “If the plants have died because of this water, what will it do with people’s bodies?” he asked.

Human rights organisations have warned for years about the deteriorating water situation in the Gaza Strip. At the 48th session of the UN Human Rights Council last Monday, the Global Institute for Water, Environment and Health and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor said water in Gaza is “undrinkable” and “slowly poisoning” people.

“The long-term Israeli blockade has caused a serious deterioration of water security in Gaza, making 97% of the water contaminated,” a joint statement said. “The residents of the besieged enclave are forced to witness the slow poisoning of their children and loved ones.”

The acute electricity crisis also hinders the operation of water wells and sewage treatment plants, leading to 80 percent of Gaza’s untreated sewage to be discharged into the sea, while 20 percent seeps underground, according to the statement.

Muhammed Shehada, chief communications at Euro-Med Monitor, said in his speech to the Human Rights Council that about one-quarter of disease spread in Gaza is caused by water pollution, and 12 percent of the deaths of young children are linked to intestinal infections related to contaminated water.

He added the 11-day Israeli offensive on Gaza last May has severely affected basic water infrastructure and exacerbated the crisis in the besieged enclave.

Gaza municipality authorities said in a statement that 290 water supply facilities, including the sole desalination plant in northern Gaza, were damaged during the attack and are in urgent need of repair. Sewage networks were also destroyed, flooding streets with dirty water.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), both salinity and nitrate levels in Gaza's groundwater have been "well above" the guidelines for safe drinking water. About 50 percent of Gaza's children suffer from water-related infections, the WHO said.

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