Gaza telecom companies warn of coming blackout

Telecommunications companies Paltel and Jawwal have announced the network is operating on batteries after fuel ran out, with only a few hours left.

Gaza City, November 15 (RHC)-- The two main telecommunications companies in Gaza have warned of a "complete telecom blackout in the coming hours" due to a lack of fuel amid an Israeli siege on the Palestinian territory.

"Main data centers and switches in the Gaza Strip are gradually shutting down due to fuel depletion," Paltel and Jawwal said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

The companies said "all generators" operating network elements in Gaza have ground to a halt, and that basic network elements were now relying on batteries.

"The countdown has begun for the halt of all communications and internet services in the Gaza Strip," Laith Daraghmeh, CEO of the Palestinian telecommunication regulatory authority, said in a statement cited by the Turkish state news agency Anadolu. He said talks were under way with international institutions "to ensure the entry of quantities of fuel necessary for the operation of the communications service".

On Sunday, Palestinian Communications Minister Yitzhak Sidr warned that all communications and internet services would stop in the Gaza Strip by Thursday due to depleting fuel.

Israel cut off fuel shipments into the Gaza Strip as part of a "complete siege" on the territory after Hamas fighters from Gaza launched an attack on southern Israel on October 7, killing around 1,200 people, according to Israeli authorities.

Since the attack, Israel has bombarded the Palestinian territory, launched a ground offensive and severely restricted supplies of water, food and electricity. More than 11,300 people have been killed in the Israeli assault, according to Palestinian authorities, including more than 4,600 children.

The first fuel truck to enter Gaza since Israel imposed the siege arrived in the besieged territory on Wednesday. The UN agency for Palestine refugees said it received 23,000 litres of fuel, which Israel said could be used to transport aid coming in via Egypt. UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said that 160,000 litres a day are needed just to run basic humanitarian operations.

"It is appalling that fuel continues to be used as a weapon of war," Lazzarini said. "This seriously paralyses our work and the delivery of assistance to the Palestinian communities in Gaza."

Since Israel launched a ground invasion in late October, Gaza has experienced two blackouts previously, after Israel cut communications and internet services.

Humanitarian agencies and first responders have warned that blackouts severely disrupt their work and put lives at risk.

"Telecom blackouts enable Israel to cover up the mass atrocities being committed against the Palestinian people in Gaza and to maintain its chronic impunity," said Al Mezan, a Gaza-based human rights group, in a statement.

Communications networks in Gaza have been unreliable since the war began due to lack of electricity and damage to infrastructure. The Palestinian Ministry of Communications has previously appealed to neighbouring Egypt to operate communication stations near the Gaza border and activate roaming service on Egyptian networks.

The warning comes after the Israeli military entered Gaza's largest medical complex, al-Shifa, in what they called a "targeted operation" to search for Hamas weapons and infrastructure. Several people have been detained during the raid at the hospital.

The raid comes after Israeli forces besieged the hospital for several days amid growing alarm over the deteriorating conditions in the facility, where the UN says thousands of people have sought shelter from the war. Hundreds of patients remain at the hospital, which ceased to function at the weekend due to a lack of fuel.

Ahmed Mokhallalati, a surgeon at the hospital, told Al Jazeera that Israeli forces moved tanks inside the hospital grounds after "continuous, aggressive gunshots, bombardments and attacks since yesterday evening."

"Imagine being in a hospital where the water is not there, the basic hygiene of the people going to the toilet is a challenge. Food and drinking water haven't come to the hospital for the sixth day now, with no way of getting anything in the hospital," Mokhallalati said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said in a statement it was "urgently exploring the possibility for evacuating patients and medical staff" in al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza in discussions with Palestinian Health Minister Mai al-Kaila and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

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