

BBC MEDIA ACTION

Gaza Lifeline – Water – Episode 20

Introduction:

Welcome to a new episode of our program “Lifeline Gaza”. This program is broadcast especially for our listeners in Gaza on both BBC Arabic and Radio Alwan, and is presented to you by Dima Hamdan.

The Lifeline Gaza program provides you with information, and answers any of your questions that are related to electricity and water, and how to deal with trauma, in addition to a variety of subjects that you yourselves ask to be discussed.

We also feature literary works presented by young men and women from Gaza, who carried on being creative during the war and were perhaps even inspired to write more by this situation.

Dear listeners in the Gaza Strip, this program is for you. Therefore if you have any questions or suggestions, we invite you to contact us by text messages (SMS) on the number is 0595011115. The number once again is 0595011115. This number receives text messages but does not receive phone calls.

You can also reach us by emailing us on the address: lifelinegaza@gmail.com

The subject of our episode today is water.

A man’s voice: Water, my dear brother, is purified in two ways: either by chlorine or by ultraviolet light. Ultraviolet light is usually used in purifying desalinated water, or they use chlorine to purify desalinated water and then they remove it again, because Palestinian citizens are not used to drinking water with a high percentage of chlorine.

Dima: That was Dr. Fouad Al-Jmassi from the Department of Education and Counselling at the Palestinian Ministry of Health speaking about methods of purifying polluted water.

The Gaza Strip is currently suffering from a serious scarcity of water, but what worries the inhabitants most is whether the available water is fit for consumption, especially after the Israeli bombing. In a moment we will listen to Dr. Fouad Jmassi and the Ministry of Health’s evaluation of the situation of water, but let us first listen to Madeline Shaqaleh’s report on the suffering of the population caused by water scarcity.

Madeline: Inhabitants of the Gaza Strip receive water either scarcely or it is not clean and the constant cuts in water and electricity are weighing heavily on the people. This is what Ayman, who lives in one of the tower blocks of Gaza told us. He also pays large sums of money to enable water to reach his apartment:

Ayman: We suffer from the scarcity of water because it is irregular. We receive water for 3 hours every 2 days only. During these 3 hours you find that the water pressure is weak. It’s not regular and

so is electricity, so we find that we have to buy solar to add it to the motor to make it work extra hours and to push the water up. We demand an increase in the period we get water, because we get it for 3 hours every 2 days. It is very difficult. You can't do anything in that time.

Madeline: Let us move now from Ayman's demands to the reality of the Gazan woman, reflected by Umm Kareem. She can no longer prepare food or wash clothes as her house errands are all over the place:

Umm Kareem: We get water one day and then we don't get it for 3 days. We don't know how to plan our program or improve our situation. On top of the difficulties that we face in our everyday lives we get power cuts. We can't do anything, and when the water comes, its pressure is mediocre. We don't know what to do. You sort one thing out, then.... You don't know the schedule of things. I mean you want to run some errands but you can't, because you are tied to the water or electricity. Washing, cooking, tidying....This is our problem with the municipality. The municipality itself tells us that our problem is the electricity, when we get electricity then we can give you water. But there is solar. Get solar, find solutions. They say solar is expensive, petrol is expensive. Everything is now related to the word "expensive".

Madeline: We move on once again from the citizen to the official. Engineer Khaled Zeidan from the Qatari Red Crescent in Gaza explains to us the situation of water in the Strip and the main obstacles that they face, in addition to how they deal with citizens' complaints and their advice to them:

Khaled: There is no doubt that the drinking water networks were severely damaged during the aggression. This way water supply to the citizens of Gaza City was cut off, and so was the case in all of the Gaza Strip. The damage occurred mainly in the water pumping networks and the wells that pump water to the inhabitants and this damage was critical. We can say that during the war around 600,000 citizens were denied water while many of the water wells were directly damaged by this aggression; more than 30 wells around the Gaza Strip were bombed. The first and fastest solution is to repair the water distribution networks and pump water in them again, in addition to repairing the wells, buying new motors and carrying out maintenance works on both wells and the networks. Because as you know, 80% of the Gaza Strip is sandy areas and if there is a glitch in the network or if there is a leak in certain places it is not easy to find out, especially that the water will infiltrate into soil. There is also a glitch in the network and what amounts to 40% of water is lost and no one knows where. We need to pay more attention to this too. As for...Citizens have a big responsibility, they need someone who would advise them in how to use water and how to ration their consumption: every citizen has to ration their water consumption and I have to say that 40% of the use of water is achieved through rationing.

Madeline: And while they are stuck between problems and demands, people are waiting and expecting a future solution that would bring back water and life to the people of Gaza.

Dima: That was Madeline Shaqaleh's report and as we heard, more than 600,000 citizens were denied water during the war because the groundwater wells were targeted. But what about the existing wells? Is the water in them fit for consumption or is it polluted due to the bombing? Colleague Mohammad Al-Sawafeeri asked this question to Dr. Fouad Al-Jmassi from the Department of Education and Counselling at the Palestinian Ministry of Health:

Fouad: We suffer from water scarcity in the Gaza strip in general. And the reason we say there is water shortage is because the international organisations' reports and the Water Authority reports say that by the years 2016-2017 there won't be a drop of water in our groundwater, fine? This means we have a severe shortage in water. That is one point. The other point is that water salinity is caused by water depletion, which was a problem during the Occupation and is still a problem today. This is mainly caused by some inhabitants imposing a monopoly on the wells in their private homes without having the right to do so. This also leads to water depletion and sea water can infiltrate into groundwater. Hence we get salt water. That is one point. The second point is whether the water is clean or not. Let me divide water into two aspects. The first aspect examines the bacterial content in water, or the microbiological content and the second one examines its chemical content. The bacterial content in water in the Gaza Strip is said to be 85-90% suitable for human consumption; that is from the aspect of bacterial content and there is no harm in using this water for regular tasks. But notice I am saying "human consumption" and not "drinking". Because when we talk about drinking, we can say that 85-90%, in fact 95% of water is not suitable for drinking from a chemical perspective. But it is suitable from a chemical perspective, because of the high percentage of chlorine and nitrates in this water, which is why we say it is suitable for human consumption but not for drinking.

Mohammad: Alright, and in case water is polluted; how can the citizens avoid illness and its harmful effects as a result of this pollution?

Khalid: We do not at all tolerate water pollution, if it is polluted by the sewer system. But if there is chlorine in water then it purifies it, because chlorine purifies water. During the last war we have inspected water both in the wells (which is pumped to the citizens) and in our networks, and we found that there is a percentage of chlorine. Therefore there is an agreement between the Ministry of Health and our colleagues in the Coastal Municipalities Department and the municipalities to increase the percentage of chlorine in the networks and wells in order to avoid any possible water pollution.

Mohammad: Fine doctor. And regarding water inspection: does the ministry inspect water on a regular basis in cooperation with the relevant parties or...

Khalid: Yes. The Ministry of Health takes samples regularly. With regards to the microbiological tests we conduct them continuously throughout the year. We take samples and inspect them in the Public Health Laboratory for Food and Water which falls under the Ministry of Health. And when it comes to chemical tests we take two samples, I mean twice a year: one in autumn and one in spring.

Mohammad: What types of coordination do you have in place with different organisations regarding water purification and desalination?

Khalid: There is complete coordination between the Ministry of Health and the Water Authority and the Coastal Municipalities Department. We exchange thoughts and opinions and discuss any pressing matters. There is total consultation and cooperation between these official institutions.

Mohammad: Alright. What advice can you give the Palestinian citizen when it comes to water purification, especially that there are power cuts for long hours in the Gaza Strip and there is no gas available sometimes?

Khalid: Water, my dear brother, is purified in two ways: either by chlorine or by ultraviolet light. Ultraviolet light is usually used in purifying desalinated water, or they use chlorine to purify desalinated water and then they remove it again, because Palestinian citizens are not used to drinking water with a high percentage of chlorine. It is worth noting though that the presence of chlorine is actually healthier for the consumers than its absence. As for the advice that we can provide for the Palestinian public, we tell them that when they buy desalinated water, they should add some local water to it in order to make up for the lack of minerals in the desalinated water and because the local water has a percentage of chlorine that will purify water in general; both the desalinated water and the added water. So there should be no fears there. On the other hand we say that all desalinated water distribution vehicles should carry a bottle of chlorine with them and they should immerse the edge of the hosepipe that lies on the floor in the chlorine bottle to disinfect it and disinfect the water that comes out of it.

Mohammad: In case the citizens have any questions or complaints: who can the citizens of Gaza turn to?

Khalid: It depends on the type of complaint they have. If water is polluted by sewer water, then they should go to the Ministry of Health, but if there is any other reason then they should go to the municipality or the Coastal Municipalities Department, or the Water Authority.

Dima: We were listening to Dr. Fouad Al-Jmassi from the Education and Consultation Department at the Palestinian Ministry of Health speaking to colleague Mohammad Al-Sawafeeri. And as we heard, he has confirmed that most of the water available in the Gaza Strip is suitable for consumption in terms of the bacterial content, although this does not make it suitable for drinking. He has also confirmed that the water consumption is possible if it is treated by chlorine.

Dear listeners, what do you think of this information? Do you have any specific problems related to the water available in your area? Share your views on Lifeline Gaza.

You are listening to the Lifeline Gaza on BBC Arabic and we invite you to share your questions and views by texting us on number 0595011115

Or you can write to us on the email: lifelinegaza@gmail.com

Also, don't forget to visit our Facebook page simply called: Lifeline Gaza

Dima: Returning to today's subject about water and its purification. We had some questions regarding the method we discussed recently about placing water under the sun for 6 hours. This advice comes from the WHO, since sun is granted to destroy 99% of bacteria although it can't get rid of some of the harmful chemicals, if present. Let us remind you again of this method:

You can purify water by pouring it into plastic bottles that are no larger than 2 litres. Then you place them under the sun for a period of 6 hours to get rid of the bacteria. The water needs to be transparent and colourless. If it is coloured then you have to filter it first before exposing it to the sun. We would also like to remind you that the sun can kill bugs and harmful materials in bed sheets,

towels, clothes and the like. This may be a simple and primitive method, but we should not belittle it as a means of avoiding skin diseases that are transmitted by contaminated water.

Dear listeners, we would like to inform you that in the next 3 days we will be broadcasting previously aired episodes in which we discussed subjects important for the citizens of Gaza, such as dealing with trauma. We will return again on Sunday with new episodes where we discuss matters that you suggest and that influence your daily lives.

With this we come to the end to today's episode of Lifeline Gaza; a BBC Media Action production. This episode will be broadcast again on BBC Arabic tomorrow at 9:30pm Gaza time and you can also listen to it on Alwan Radio at 11am and at 6pm.

You were accompanied by Dima Hamdan. And until we meet in a next episode, we wish you and your loved ones to be safe wherever you are.