

The Impact of the Israeli Re-invasion on the Living Environment in Nablus City

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Introduction

The city of Nablus is one of the oldest in the world and has been a place of habitation for 4000 years (Elmasri, 1996). Located 65 km north of Jerusalem, Nablus is considered the main business and residential center of the northern region of the West Bank. Its prime location also enhances its position in any future development plans, as it is located at the cross roads of the Jerusalem – Jenin road running north to south and Tulkarm-Jordan Valley running east to west. The total Population of Nablus, including the refugee camps built after 1948, stands at about 149,818 inhabitants at the beginning of the year 2002, making it the largest city in the West Bank.

The Israeli army re-invaded the city of Nablus beginning on the evening of Wednesday, 3/4/2002 and continuing up to the evening of Sunday, 21/4/02. Israeli tanks entered the city from its four directions with heavy firing especially on the Old City. A huge amount of destruction was incurred, and several people were arrested or killed. In addition to the Old City, there was also devastation in the Balata, Askar and Ein Beit Alma' refugee camps. Other parts of the city suffered as commercial buildings, institutions, houses and vehicles were burnt and destroyed, mainly on Faisal, Al-Quds, Amman, Governorate, Municipality, and Rafidia streets, among others.

From the outset of the re-invasion, several tall buildings were selected by the Israeli army as surveillance points. People living in such buildings would all be crowded into one apartment, as the army entered the others in the building. Thousands of inhabitants from the city were randomly arrested and sent to Huwwara military camp, 5 km south of Nablus. Most spent 2-4 days there before being released, while others were sent to unknown destinations. Of those who were released, most could not return to their homes because of the curfew imposed on the city and had to stay in adjacent villages until the curfew was lifted. The incursion had impacted different aspects of life in Nablus. Following is a brief

description of the problems and difficulties that arose.

1-Access to health services

At the beginning of the incursion, Nablus was declared a closed military area. Ambulances were not allowed to move in the city for 13 days. During that time no one, including the injured, was able to reach hospitals to receive treatment or medications. There were several reports of women giving birth at home, in some cases assisted only by their husbands, with directions given over the phone. Several reports were also made of newborns dying before their parents could get them to hospital for proper medical attention. Corpses left on the streets constituted another grave problem along with ones that remained inside the houses or under damaged buildings, with the strict curfew making their immediate burial impossible. It was only after ten days that the curfew was lifted for the first time and the collection of corpses could begin. These corpses were kept in large refrigerated trailers to prevent decomposition.

Eighty corpses were reported to have been placed at al-Watani and Rafidia Hospitals. Due to the lack of space in refrigerators, several corpses were reported to have decayed in these hospitals. It was also reported that 13 persons died from different diseases such as heart attacks and strokes, and were left inside their homes because of curfew conditions. Some were buried temporarily outside their homes in gardens as ambulances were unable to collect their bodies and transport them to hospital or for burial during curfew. Six other persons died in hospitals and could not be buried until the curfew was lifted.

2- Water supply systems

The existing water pipe network of Nablus city is about 350 km long covering the Old City and the refugee camps included in the boundary of the city. During the reinvasion, about 25% of the water distribution network inside the city was destroyed.

The main pipeline trunks were also damaged and three main water sources out of four were cut off, resulting in severe water shortage. The fourth water source, which covers only 20% of the city, continued its supply. This situation continued for one week, after which coordination started between the municipality and the Israeli authorities to start the maintenance operations for the water supply network. After 11 days of the devastation, the municipality was able to pump the water from the four sources that feed the city with water. Maintenance operations are still ongoing (as of 30/4/02), and one can easily see the water seepage mainly in the streets of the Old City.

Up to the date of the interview, there were still some areas in the Old City in which the Municipality could not estimate the costs of destruction to the water network due to the huge amounts of debris from the destroyed

buildings, with the cleaning process still ongoing. The preliminary foreseen cost of the destroyed water system is about \$1.5 million.

3- Sewage

The Israeli re-invasion resulted in the destruction in the sewage system, which covers all of Nablus. The foreseen cost of that destruction was estimated at \$100,000. Most of the destruction was in the Old City, and it is expected that the estimate of the destruction will increase significantly after the removal of debris from the street of the Old City.

Additionally, there is some damage of the sewerage lines and manholes in different locations of Nablus, such as Faisal, Al-Quds, Askar, Asera, and Til streets. It is well known that the inappropriate drainage of wastewater and its spread between houses, especially in light of the water shortage, might have an impact on health.

4- Electrical Networks

In electricity networks, damages were logged in transforms, high voltage over head lines networks, high voltage cables networks (due to digging in the streets), main low voltage networks including poles, branches networks, consumer networks, and electricity meters.

The electric current was cut off from the eastern area of Nablus, which represents about 65% of the city, by the beginning of re-invasion. The electric current cut off for the whole eastern area continued up to the end of the third day of re-invasion. After that, there were coordination efforts between the municipality and the Israelis for the repair and maintenance of the electrical networks, and that continued for the eleventh day of re-invasion, when most of the network was repaired. To this date, there remain limited parts of the eastern area without electricity.

In the western area of the city, the electric current was cut off from many parts, and as with the eastern area, repair and maintenance started after the third day of re-invasion. By the end of the seventh day of re-invasion, the electric current was nearly fixed for all the western area of the city.

Regarding the Old City of Nablus, the electric current was cut off from the very beginning of the re-invasion. Repair and maintenance started after the seventh day of invasion and is still ongoing.

The following remarks related to direct delivery problems are relevant:

- Shortage of material is observed. Stores suffer from materials needed for new projects and even for maintenance purposes.
- Workers who live in Area C are not able to attend their posts or are

delayed in arriving to their workplaces.

- Several substations and networks had suffered from the Israeli shelling the estimate damages is around \$308,000.
- All connection points with the Israeli Electric Company (IEC) are in Area C, where staff members are not able to reach for maintenance or management purposes (data collection etc).
- The Electricity department gives services to 18 villages and towns. However, staff members are not able to deliver services (maintenance, new connections etc.) to consumers there, and a maintenance activity may require several days. The absence of meter readers and network supervisors in the villages had encouraged peoples to practice illegal collections to network (electricity fraud).

5- Solid Wastes

Due to the continuous curfew imposed on the city, especially during the first 10 days of the re-invasion, large amounts of solid wastes accumulated and were left either on the streets or inside houses. This situation resulted in the accumulation of flies, insects and rodents. Obviously, the public health impact of this phenomenon is serious. After 3 days of the claimed Israeli withdrawal from Nablus, almost 80% of solid wastes were collected and disposed of, and the clean-up processes are still going.

As for the medical wastes, those were only collected after the first 16 days of the re-invasion. Medical wastes were neither separated nor disposed of appropriately, and they were managed in the same way as domestic solid wastes, adding further hazards to population's health.

6- Food supplies

It was noticed from the interviews with many supermarket owners that the basic provisions missing due to the re-invasion of Nablus city were flour and powdered milk. Those, in addition to other items, such as dairy products and yeast, were reported to be insufficient from the large supermarkets in the center of the city. The situation was different in supermarkets distributed in other areas of the city. The owners of those supermarkets reported that there was a severe shortage in food supplies when the curfew was lifted for two hours after 10 days of re-invasion. Furthermore, it is important to note that there were no taxis or public transport services to reach the center of the city from the different areas during those two hours. Therefore, most of the people living far from the center could not reach the large supermarkets to buy their provisions. Also important is the fact that most of the refrigerated foodstuffs in the supermarkets and in houses were spoiled because of long periods of electrical power outages.

6- Medicines and Formula Milk

Based on interviews with several pharmacists, it became clear that there were two categories of pharmacies regarding the availability of medicines and infants milk:

1. The first category was that of pharmacies that normally keep large stocks of medicine, and some have their own warehouses. Those pharmacies reported no significant shortages in medicine or infant (formula) milk.
2. The second category reported shortages in some types of medicines, especially chronic diseases medications, ranging from 20-70 types. In addition, they reported a shortage of 3-6 types of infant milk. Those pharmacies reported that deficiencies were mainly because the supply system from main distributors became irregular with the imposed curfew and siege on the city. Moreover, electricity interruption for a period between 3-19 days resulted in spoiling different types of medications, especially insulin and hormones.

The strict siege and closure imposed by the Israeli Invasion Army on Nablus and other Palestinian cities and villages resulted in serious loss of lives in addition to severe destruction of the basic infrastructure required for living in a health sustaining environment. The premeditated prevention of access by the population of the city to all avenues of medical treatment, coupled with the grave interruption of water, electricity and waste disposal systems produced serious threats to health. The long-term effects of these violations of the basic principles of the protection of a population under occupation, cannot be assessed until the removal of the rubble from the Old City in addition to the termination of all Israeli hostilities, including the severe siege. The political instability that results from the Israeli army's surrounding the city only ensures prolonging the period of recovery, and increasing the potential for more serious long term effects of the invasion, an invasion, which has not ended, but has instead manifested itself in different ways, resulting in similar violations of basic human rights. Thus any reconstruction planned for the near future is not only unfeasible and unsustainable, but also impossible to achieve unless this military occupation ends.

References:

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