

In Gaza, electricity-or lack thereof-powers daily activities

JERUSALEM - The first question friends in the Gaza Strip ask each other when they meet these days is, "Do you have electricity?"

"Three days a week we have no electricity for eight hours straight, depending on the area," said Omar Shaban, project manager for the Gaza office of the U.S. bishops' Catholic Relief Services. He said people no longer greet each other with "How are you?"

"We are unable to organize anything. Productivity is low. People try to reorganize their lives according to the electricity," he told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview.

More than two weeks after Israel cut the electricity supply to Gaza, plunging 40 percent of its residents into darkness for three days, "the situation has become much worse," Shaban said Feb. 11. "There is no petrol for cars, and people have to walk. Many people have stopped going out."

Israel closed the border because Palestinian extremists were launching Qassam missiles into southern Israeli border towns. The missile attacks have continued, and Israel continues to limit the amount of fuel and foodstuffs allowed to go through into Gaza.

According to information compiled by various groups, 25-30 percent of people in Gaza do not have a normal water supply.

Constantine Dabbagh, Middle East Council of Churches executive director in Gaza,

said that by April, the council will have dispensed a one-time emergency cash grant of \$55 to about 12,500 families.

One Christian who asked that his name not be used said that people were waiting for some sort of change - but were unsure if it will be good or bad.

He said basic food staples are available but not always in enough quantities, and the shelves of the few stores that remain open are almost bare.

“My sisters dream of drinking a Coca-Cola and eating sweets,” he said.

While some people were able to bring back supplies with them from Egypt after the border barrier at Rafah was torn down in late January, those supplies have run out, said Monsignor Manuel Musallam, pastor of Holy Family Parish in Gaza.

He said the school did not have enough pencils or paper for the students, and he had to recently ask Latin Patriarchate officials in Jerusalem to send replacement ink cartridges for the parish computer, because none could be found in Gaza.

Monsignor Musallam said he tried to give the children at the parish school an opportunity to express themselves with a special day for activities like folk dancing, painting and singing. Monsignor Musallam said he also spoke against the Palestinians’ launching of rockets on Israeli civilians during the activities.

“We should not employ rockets. We should keep the rockets behind the government and employ ways of (dialogue) more than muscles and force,” he said.

Shaban said CRS is still hoping to begin its youth leadership program, “Gaza Speak Out,” in which about 300 young people would have an opportunity to meet and give voice to their opinions. However, he added, CRS is concerned that because of the lack of fuel and electricity there will be problems with the logistics.

“Such a project is very much needed,” Shaban said. “There are very few places for people to express themselves freely. There are no places for people to meet and discuss things.”

He said people were not happy about the rockets launched by Palestinian militias.

“It is not for the benefit of Palestinians,” he said.

Archbishop Antonio Franco, papal nuncio to Israel and the Palestinian territories, said that like other Gaza residents, Catholics are becoming afraid of what will happen in the territory.

“It may have implications that are wider than the reality of the tensions. We don’t know what will evolve,” he said.