



EU and UNICEF lay first stone of €10 million seawater desalination plant in Gaza

Gaza, 20 March 2013 – Today the European Union and UNICEF launched the construction of a major seawater desalination plant which will provide 75,000 Palestinians with safe drinking water in Gaza.

The project, to be implemented by UNICEF thanks to a €10 million grant from the European Union, will provide 6,000 m³ of desalinated seawater per day, to serve residents in Khan Yunis and Rafah in southern Gaza. The plant is being installed on land adjacent to the sea near Deir al-Balah.

The European Union Representative, John Gatt-Rutter, laid the first stone in the presence of representatives of the Palestinian Water Authority, Gaza's Coastal Municipal Water Utilities, the local municipalities and UNICEF.

In his speech at the ceremony **Mr Gatt-Rutter said:** *"Access to clean water is a fundamental human right for all. And yet many Gazans face acute water shortages on a day to day basis. Others can only access water of very poor quality. The launch of construction work on this desalination plant, offers the prospect of access to clean water for many thousands of families in Khan Yunis and Rafah. It forms part of the EU's wider commitment to improving the lives of Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank in particular in the area of water, sanitation and solid waste management".* The **EU Representative added** that: *"the situation in the Gaza Strip, including the recent dangerous escalation and the deteriorating humanitarian conditions, underlines once more the urgent need to bring a durable solution to the conflict".*

Desalination is one of the strategic options chosen by the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA). A comparative study conducted in 2011 concluded that it was an essential, pragmatic solution to provide a consistent supply of safe, drinking water to the expanding population in Gaza.

The desalination of seawater from the Mediterranean will also help alleviate the over-extraction of groundwater, and preserve Gaza's sole aquifer from total collapse. A 2012 United Nations' report warned that over-extraction of groundwater could render the coastal aquifer unusable by 2016.

"Thanks to generous support from the European Union, there will be greater access to safe drinking water in Gaza," said **June Kunugi, UNICEF Special Representative.** *"This medium to long term intervention will remove the daily struggle of 75,000 people to have sufficient access to water to meet their basic needs."*

The plant is expected to become operational in 2015.

Only five to ten percent of the water extracted from the Coastal Aquifer has been found to be suitable for human consumption. Seawater, sewage and agricultural fertilizer intrusion have contaminated the water with high levels of chloride and nitrates, in some areas as high as six times the World Health Organization (WHO) limit.

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As a result, more than four out of five Palestinians in Gaza buy their drinking water from unregulated, private vendors, a heavy burden on impoverished families and the 1,6 million Gazans living in one of the highest population-density areas in the world. Some are paying as much as a third of their household income on water whose quality they cannot trust, as an estimated four-fifths of the water sold by private vendors is contaminated.

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About UNICEF

UNICEF works in more than 190 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments. For more information about UNICEF and its work visit www.unicef.org.

About the European Union

The EU is a major actor in water and environmental protection in Palestine. Since 2006 it has invested nearly €74 million in the water, sanitation and solid waste management sectors, including €26 million exclusively on Gaza. In Gaza, apart from this short-term low-volume sea water desalination plant in the south, the EU is providing support for a large-scale solid waste management programme and the wastewater treatment plant (NGEST) in the north of the Strip. In the West Bank the EU is supporting the development of wastewater treatment plants in areas where water supply is scarce, such as Nablus, Tubas and Hebron.

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