

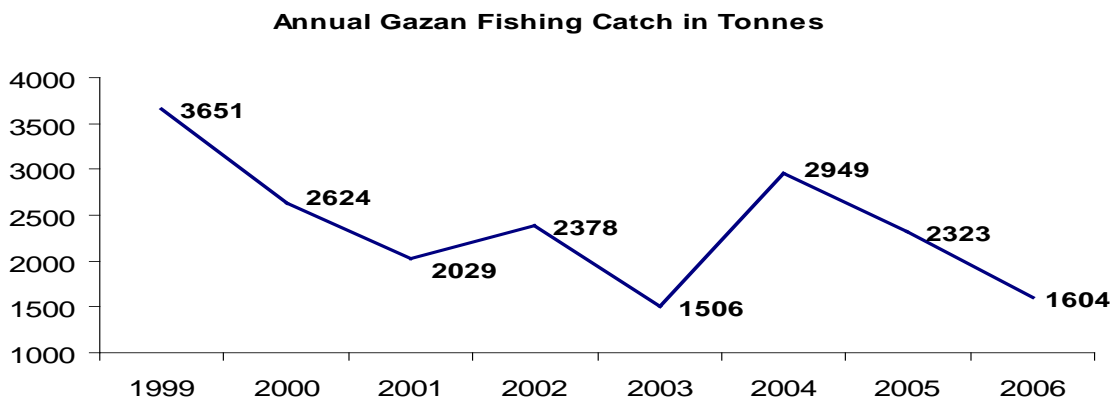


Gaza Fishing: An Industry in Danger

Key Observations

- After a near total ban on fishing since June 2006, fishermen have finally been allowed back into coastal waters off the Gaza Strip for the high season.
- There needs to be an immediate increase in the current fishing range beyond six nautical miles (nm) for fishermen to enjoy the full economic benefits of the high season which began at the start of April.
- The fishing industry faces long term decline and even possible extinction if the current restrictions are maintained. Annual income has dropped from \$10m to less than half of that since the start of the intifada, according to the Palestinian Authority (PA) Department of Fisheries (DoF).
- The restrictions have been imposed by the Israelis on the grounds of security, and particularly in relation to concerns over the smuggling of weapons and other contraband items.
- No formal communication exists between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and fishermen. Such a system could help prevent the deaths and injuries to fisherman that have occurred.
- Restrictions on fishing rights has led to overfishing in shallow coastal waters and resulted in the depletion of breeding grounds. If the restrictions continue future fishing stocks will be threatened.
- Fishermen and those who depend on the industry for livelihoods are moving from self-reliance to dependence on food aid and job creation schemes provided by the UN and other humanitarian organisations.

Figure 1:



Source: Palestine Ministry of Agriculture - Directorate General of Fisheries

BACKGROUND BOX: Fishing Restrictions

- The Oslo Accords stipulated that Palestinian fishermen were entitled to fish up to 20 nm off the Gaza coastline.
- An agreement reached between the Personal Humanitarian Envoy for the Middle East for the Secretary General, Ms Catherine Bertini, and the Israeli government in August 2002 allowed for fishing up to 12 nm, however this was never realised according to the DoF.
- Fishing rights have been imposed arbitrarily with the Israeli navy allowing fishing in some locations but not others, on some days and not others. Currently, fishing limits are effective up to six nm.



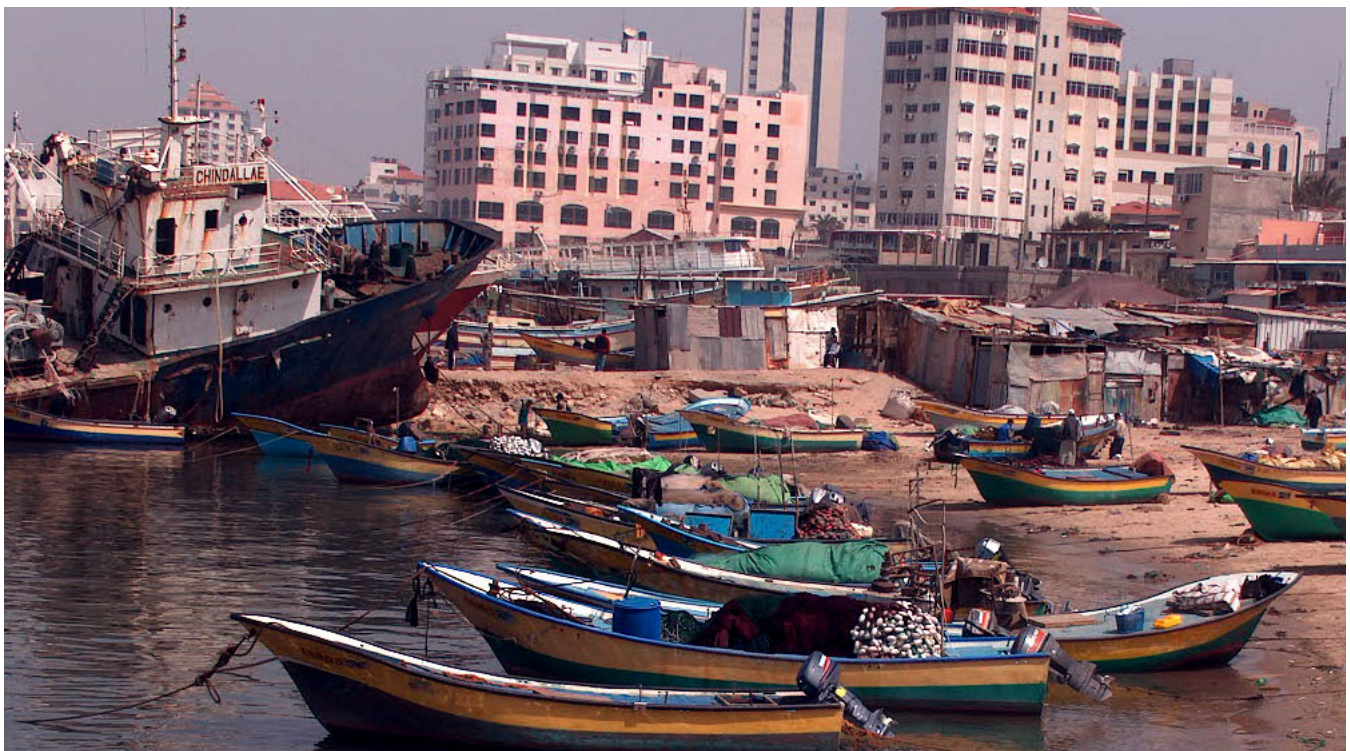
Fishing Trends

In the late 1990s annual catches from the Gaza Strip's four fishing wharves located in Rafah, Khan Younis, Deir Al Balah and Gaza City averaged more than 3,500 tons and generated an annual income of over \$10 million. Between 2001 and 2006 income was almost halved and was substantially lower for the fishermen in Rafah and Khan Younis who faced the most sustained closures. For example, Khan Younis wharf was closed for the whole of 2003 and 2004 and open for only 95 days in 2005.

While there are just under 3,000 registered fishermen in the Gaza Strip, 2,000 others are dependent indirectly upon the fishing industry for their livelihoods through the servicing and maintenance of the fleet of vessels. A further 35,000 dependants (assuming a seven-person family size!) rely upon the industry as their primary source of income and have become progressively impoverished over the course of the last six years.

International agencies including the WFP, UNRWA, ICRC and CHF have been forced to step in to provide food parcels and job creation initiatives to the beleaguered fishing communities. Fishermen struggle to feed their families, let alone have any reserves to maintain the upkeep on their vessels.

The fishing high season is upon us. Every year from April onwards there is a migration of fish, and particularly sardines, from the Nile Delta to Turkish waters and typically the larger schools of fish are at a distance of around 10 nm west of the Gaza Strip coast. While not being a high revenue product, sardines are essential to the livelihoods of Palestinian fishermen, making up approximately 70% of the annual catch. Other fish include tuna, cuttle fish, mackerel and shrimps. The value of the Gazan catch accounts for 4% of the Palestinian Gross Domestic Product (GDP).



Idle fishing boats outside one of Gaza City's wharfs.
OCHA / Gaza, City March 2007



A Dangerous Way of Life

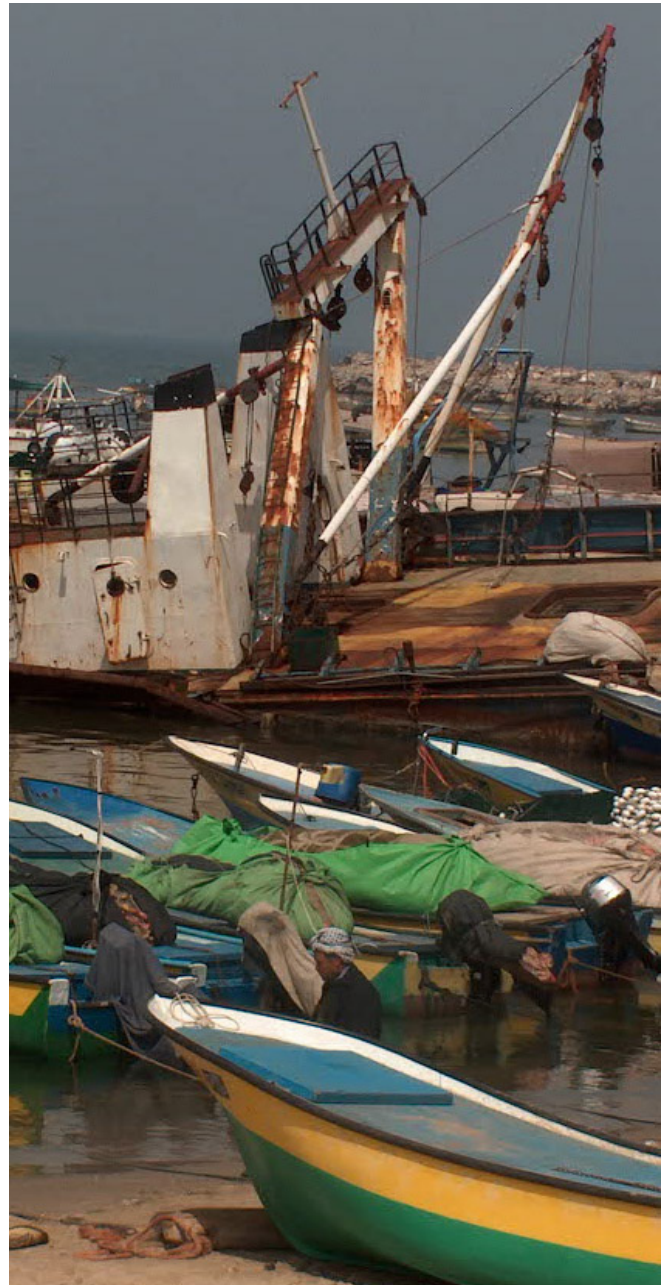
Fishing has become an increasingly hazardous industry in the Gaza Strip. Three Palestinian fishermen have been killed by gun fire from Israeli naval vessels in the last 18 months and scores of others have been arrested and had their boats fired on by Israeli security forces.

In theory, fishermen should have been able to reach a distance of 6 nm from 24 October 2006 when the IDF relaxed the restrictions imposed along the coast since the seizure of an IDF soldier on 25 June 2006 in the Gaza Strip. In practice, however, little fishing took place south of Deir Al Balah from the end of October 2006 to early March 2007 due to the periodic firing on Palestinian fishing boats by Israeli navy vessels.

Gaza fishermen point to the fact that there are no formal lines of communication between themselves and the Israeli authorities which has led to confusion. In most cases they are reliant upon instructions relayed by third parties, such as the UN and ICRC in terms of the range to which they can fish. This creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and a lack of confidence on the part of the fishermen.

Similarly, fishermen highlight the arbitrary way in which the fishing range is imposed by naval vessels once at sea. While some fishermen have handheld Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) units and so are able to monitor their distance from the shore, they claim that Israeli naval vessels still regularly fire on their boats on the grounds that they have strayed beyond the officially permitted distance.

It is essential that clearly-defined fishing limits are marked, perhaps involving the dropping of maritime buoys, to ensure that all parties are in agreement as to where fishing is permitted.



Equipment rusting at a Gazan wharf
OCHA / Gaza, City March 2007



The Threat to the Economy

Being confined to short distances from the shore also means the quality of the fishing catch is poor in terms of size of fish and so the market value is low. Higher value fish such as tuna are not present in-shore meaning a potential source of income is being lost. As the average cost of one fishing trip can vary between NIS 500 and NIS 2,500, depending on the size of the vessel, nets and crew, many fishermen cannot even cover their costs from the resulting catch and so have no option but to remain on shore.

As a result of Gazan fishermen being unable to access “quality” fish nor sufficient quantities in general, Gazan consumers are resorting to buying fish in the market place that has been imported from Israel. An average of 1,300 tonnes of fish is imported from Israel each year at significant additional cost per unit to the consumer than if it had been caught in local waters by local fishermen. For many of the Gaza Strip’s 1.5 million population, the precipitous rise in the cost of fish has put it beyond their reach.

Gaza fishermen have also faced difficulties in exporting higher value produce such as shrimps over the last six years due to periodic closures at Karni commercial crossing and the lack of cold chain facilities at the crossing in the event of closure.

The Threat to the Environment

The restrictions imposed by Israel over the course of the last six years have led to intensive, close-shore fishing which has depleted stocks from the natural breeding grounds and threatened the fisheries resource base. Fishermen have been forced to drop their nets in waters that contain young fish and spawning species meaning that the fish caught are typically small, not to mention the longterm damage that is being done to marine habitats.

The situation is of such concern that the DoF has submitted a proposal to a donor country to build eight artificial reefs off Gaza City and Deir el Balah to create an environment for new breeding grounds.

Endnotes

1 - According to PCBS Q4 2006 the dependency ratio currently stands at 7.9 in the Gaza Strip (Source: PCBS Labor Force Survey)