

Gaza stinks as world focuses on Lebanon

AFP, Gaza City

The foul stench of untreated sewage, an invisible vapour oozing from stagnant cesspits, overpowers the approach to the Gaza Strip's forgotten waste treatment plant.

The plant, "a development project" financed by the German government, has not treated sewage since Israel bombed the territory's only power plant four weeks ago on June 28, plunging the coastal strip into regular black-outs.

With world attention focused on Israel's war in Lebanon, Gaza has been largely ignored. No one from the international community has come to breathe the stench of untreated sewage, says Mohammed Masoud, a plant employee.

While US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said it was "important to end the Gaza crisis", on the morning that eight Palestinians, including a three-year-old girl, were killed by Israeli strikes, international crisis talks in Rome were to focus on Lebanon.

With the 1.4 million residents in one of the most densely populated regions in the world coping with

electricity on average only six to eight hours a day, power-dependent water wells and waste management units are in jeopardy.

Palestinians are struggling to wash; food cannot be adequately preserved; cases of diarrhoea have increased by 160 percent, UN officials say.

"I've been here for three years and don't think I've ever seen people suffering so much," said UN humanitarian officer Stuart Shepherd.

"Clearly the media now is focused on the northern border," he said, referring to Israel's offensive in Lebanon.

Trying to be brave, eight-year-old Amjad Nassir lies on a bed on a dirty balcony just off the surgical ward at the Al-Shifa hospital surrounded by relatives and shrieking at the thought of seeing another doctor.

On July 17, he took an Israeli bullet in each leg when he went to collect his sister during Israel's recent incursion in northern Gaza.

"The Israelis are bulldozing our houses and shooting at children in the street. I hate them. When I grow up, I will fight them," he says listlessly, uninterested in a giant box of

chocolates, his leg in danger of amputation.

His father Abdel Khader says Amjad has been recommended for treatment in Egypt, but Gaza's borders have been basically closed since June 25, when Palestinian militants killed two Israeli soldiers and snatched a third in a cross-border raid.

More than 120 Palestinians have been killed and hundreds wounded in Israel's ensuing offensive, launched to retrieve the soldier and stop rocket attacks.

Ambrogio Manenti, head of Gaza and the West Bank for the World Health Organisation, said less than 10 percent of primary care clinics have generators, which in any case are liable to "break down sooner or later".

Fuel supplies provided by the European Commission to hospitals will not last more than a month, Manenti says.

He plots a 160 percent increase in diseases causing diarrhoea between the last week in June and the first week in July 2006 compared to the corresponding periods last year. He mentions cholera as a risk.

India races to vaccinate children against deadly encephalitis

AFP, Lucknow

Health officials in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh say they face hurdles in their race to complete a mass immunisation of children against deadly Japanese encephalitis.

At least 15 children have died in the state from the illness since June 21, the start of the monsoon season when cases normally rise, assistant government health director DP Mishra said Wednesday.

The disease claimed more than 1,400 lives last summer in the impoverished state, prompting the federal government to launch an immunisation drive to vaccinate 11 million children nationally this year, officials said.

But health workers in densely populated Uttar Pradesh said they were suffering a shortage of Chinese-made vaccines, considered more effective than local ones.

"We received 6.8 million doses of Chinese vaccines and they have been given to children under 10," state health secretary AK Misra told AFP in provincial capital of

Lucknow.

With more than seven million children needing the vaccine in Uttar Pradesh alone, health officials would have to use a less-effective Indian vaccine to immunise the remaining 200,000 children, he said.

The virus, which attacks the central nervous system leading to severe rigours, also causes headaches, convulsions, high fever and breathing problems. Many survivors are left mentally or physically handicapped and children are the most vulnerable.

"Booster doses are mandatory for Indian vaccines while the Chinese is a one-shot vaccine. We are late in giving Indian vaccines as its incubation period is long," said KP Kushwaha, a senior paediatrician at state-run BRD Medical College in Gorakhpur.

The city, 250 kilometres south-east of Lucknow, was at the centre of last year's outbreak.

Mishra said 42 children in Uttar Pradesh were currently in hospital for encephalitis, but a majority of them were out of danger.