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BBC scuppers TV fundraising appeal for Gaza victims



(Olivier Laban-Mattei/AFP/Getty Images)

Aid for Gaza, at the Egyptian border town of Rafah, after the ceasefire

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A nationwide appeal for money to help the Gaza relief effort has been denied free television airtime because the BBC fears that it would damage confidence in the corporation's impartiality.

A 46-year-old agreement with overseas aid charities guarantees them a two-minute prime-time slot to broadcast appeals. But the BBC said that the risk of compromising confidence in its fairness, coupled with "question marks" about aid getting through, had led to its decision not to go ahead with this one.

The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) announced its national appeal for Gaza yesterday, saying that the devastation after Israel's three-week offensive was so great that the leading aid charities felt "compelled to act". The committee, which is made up of the 12 biggest aid charities, including the British Red Cross and Save the Children, co-ordinates fundraising during international emergencies to maximise the impact of their efforts.

The big advantage of a DEC appeal is the free airtime given to it by the major broadcasters. The agreement dates back to 1963, when big aid charities first came together for a joint appeal, and has the approval of broadcasting regulators. Under its terms the main broadcasters get together and agree what footage to use, and often provide the spokesman for the appeal. The script is agreed and then signed off by the DEC.

In the case of the Gaza appeal, talks stalled on Wednesday when the broadcasters could not reach an agreement. The broadcast would have highlighted the plight of thousands of victims, including many children, who are homeless and without food, power and water.

By convention, if all broadcasters do not agree to carry the appeal, none does. A national appeal from the DEC would normally raise about £10 million, but without the broadcasts the total is certain to be lower.

The BBC is highly sensitive about its coverage of the Middle East, which Israel has alleged to have shown pro-Palestinian bias. The corporation has even held an inquiry into its own coverage.

Last night the BBC denied it was to blame for preventing the appeal broadcasts going ahead. Sources at the corporation insisted that it was not the only broadcaster that did not want to screen it, suggesting that BSkyB — in which News Corporation, parent company of The Times, has a 39.1 per cent stake — was also against it and that ITV was "on the fence".

The BBC statement said: "Along with other broadcasters, the BBC has decided not to broadcast the DEC's public appeal to raise funds for Gaza. The BBC decision was made because of question marks about the delivery of aid in a volatile situation and also to avoid any risk of compromising public confidence in the BBC's impartiality in the context of an ongoing news story. However, the BBC will, of course, continue to report the humanitarian story in Gaza."

Sky immediately denied that it had also had reservations. "We were considering this request internally when the DEC contacted us to let us know that the BBC had decided not to broadcast the appeal at this time. As, by convention, if all broadcasters do not carry the appeal then none do, the decision was effectively made for us," a spokesman said.

Brendan Gormley, chief executive of the DEC, told The Times that he was saddened that the appeal would not be broadcast as it meant thousands of potential donors would not be reached. "We deeply regret this decision if it means our message doesn't reach those who may want to give to a DEC appeal.

"We will soldier on but we recognise it will be much more of a struggle now to reach donors," he said.

He questioned the BBC's suggestion that it might not be possible to get help through to those who needed it. British charities were already on the ground and delivering aid, and one of the criteria that had to be met before the committee's trustees allowed a national appeal to go ahead was firm evidence that aid was reaching its targets.

"Agencies are already providing food, drugs and blankets as well as delivering clean water. But we will soon reach the limit of what we can do, without more money."

ITV confirmed that an agreement could not be reached by broadcasters. "The DEC did ask broadcasters if they could support the appeal. We assessed the DEC's request carefully against agreed criteria and were unable to reach the consensus which is necessary for an appeal," a spokesman said.

Several aid charities announced their own appeals as soon as the conflict began, although these will now give way to the DEC appeal. Islamic Relief, a DEC member, has managed to raise £2 million, although other charities have struggled to get beyond tens of thousands of pounds.

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