

## **STARVATION AS A WEAPON OF WAR**

### **Background**

Major international human rights organisations including Human Rights Watch<sup>1</sup> and Oxfam<sup>2</sup> have concluded that Israel is deliberately using starvation as a weapon of war. Israel has wilfully restricted and impeded food aid, senior government officials have made public statements expressing these aims and the Israeli military has also destroyed food infrastructure and sources. These actions have significantly increased food insecurity in Gaza and now the UN World Food Programme has indicated that the Gaza Famine could begin as early as May.<sup>3</sup>

### **International Humanitarian Law- Starvation as a weapon of war**

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) strictly and explicitly prohibits the use of starvation as a weapon of war. In 2018, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2417 which unequivocally condemned the use of starvation against civilians as a method of warfare.<sup>4</sup> Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court provides that intentionally starving civilians by “depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies” is a war crime.<sup>5</sup>

The Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant explicitly outlined the intention to restrict food on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 2023, when he ordered the total siege on Gaza. Gallant said: “We are imposing a complete siege on Gaza. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything will be closed.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Restriction of food aid**

An Oxfam report in late October 2023, which analysed UN data, found that just 2% of the typical amount of food delivered had entered Gaza since the total siege,<sup>7</sup> which began on the 9<sup>th</sup> October. A minimal amount of food aid was allowed in, whilst no commercial food was. This total siege was a tightening of the existing land, sea and air blockade that had cut resources from Palestinians in Gaza since 2007. Food insecurity was already precarious in Gaza, with the World Food Programme indicating that two out of three Palestinians in Gaza relied on food aid prior to the war on Gaza.<sup>8</sup>

In February 2024, Philippe Lazzarini, Director of UNRWA, the main U.N. agency providing aid in Gaza, said that Israel is preventing food aid from entering Gaza.<sup>9</sup> Lazzarini said that a food convoy from Turkey has been sitting for weeks in the Israeli port city of Ashdod, following an order from Israeli customs authorities not to process UNRWA goods. This stoppage has prevented 1,049 shipping containers of rice, flour, chickpeas, sugar and cooking oil are stuck – which would provide food to 1.1 million for a month. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has stated that had been a

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch (18<sup>th</sup> December 2023) [Israel: Starvation Used as Weapon of War in Gaza](#).

<sup>2</sup> Oxfam. (25<sup>th</sup> October 2023) [Starvation as weapon of war being used against Gaza civilians](#).

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press. (14<sup>th</sup> February 2024) [WFP: Famine could strike Gaza as early as May](#). Associated Press Archive.

<sup>4</sup> UN. Adopting Resolution 2417 (2018), [Security Council Strongly Condemns Starving of Civilians, Unlawfully Denying Humanitarian Access as Warfare Tactics](#). SC/13354. 8267<sup>th</sup> meeting (AM).

<sup>5</sup> International Criminal Court. (1998) [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#). ICC. A/CONF.183/9.

<sup>6</sup> Fabian, E. (9<sup>th</sup> October 2023) [Defense minister announces ‘complete siege’ of Gaza: No power, food or fuel](#). Times of Israel.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Haq, S. N. and Rahimi, R. (1<sup>st</sup> February 2024) [‘We are dying slowly:’ Palestinians are eating grass and drinking polluted water as famine looms across Gaza](#). CNN.

<sup>9</sup> Frankel, J. (9<sup>th</sup> February 2024) [Israel is holding up food for 1.1 million Palestinians in Gaza, the main UN aid agency there says](#). Associated Press News.

sharp increase in the number of aid missions denied access to northern Gaza: with 56% of deliveries denied access in January, up from 14% in October to December.<sup>10</sup>

Israeli civilians have also coordinated efforts to block aid trucks by sleeping in front of them. One coordinating group is called 'Tsav 9' and others have arranged shuttle buses for protesters.<sup>11</sup> This position is supported by two-thirds of Jewish Israelis.<sup>12</sup>

### **Targeting of food sources**

Food insecurity has been worsened by the targeting and destruction of bakeries, wheat mills and water desalination plants. Fishing boats, grocers and farms have all been disrupted by the heavy bombardment, including 18% of all agricultural land.<sup>13</sup> This has further disrupted internal food sources in Gaza. By December 2023, 96% of World Food Programme bakeries in Gaza had been destroyed in the bombardment.<sup>14</sup> Limited access to electricity from the siege has also made perishable goods impossible to refrigerate, further exacerbating the food crisis. Shortages have led to high inflation, meaning many families cannot afford to buy what little food is available.

### **Integrated Food Security Phase Classification**

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is a tool devised by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's Food Security Analysis Unit (FSAU) to analyse food insecurity. The IPC now indicates that from 8 December – February, 1.75 million people in Gaza are in the two highest phases of food insecurity, Phase 4 (Humanitarian Emergency) and Phase 5 (Famine/Humanitarian Catastrophe).<sup>15</sup> In January 2024, the IPC warned that if the situation does not change imminently, Gaza will have the highest share of people in the world facing acute food insecurity.<sup>16</sup> UNICEF said these findings suggest 335,000 children are at high risk of severe malnutrition and preventable death, and it poses concerns for 155,000 pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers.<sup>17</sup>

### **Effects of food insecurity – Humanitarian aid gap and famine**

The UN has estimated that \$1.2 billion is required in urgent humanitarian relief, with more than 90% needed for Gaza residents. Food security is the area with the most funding required. \$304 million is required but there is currently a \$59 million funding gap. This has been exacerbated further by the defunding of UNRWA by several countries including the United Kingdom.

UN Emergency Relief Chief Mark Griffiths indicated that risk of famine understated the current situation. He said that the 'great majority' of the 400,000 Gazans that UN agencies have categorised as at risk of starving are 'actually in famine, not just at risk'. He said that the war 'has brought famine with such an incredible speed' to Gaza.<sup>18</sup> By December 2023, 90% of Palestinians in Gaza were eating less than one meal a day and struggling to find clean, drinkable water.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Williamson, L. (11<sup>th</sup> February 2024) [Gaza residents surviving off animal feed and rice as food dwindles](#). BBC News.

<sup>11</sup> Ward, C. and Swails, B. (8<sup>th</sup> March 2024) [At the edge of Gaza, Israelis try to stop aid trucks](#). CNN.

<sup>12</sup> Hermann, T and Kaplan, Y. (2024) [Most Israelis: an "Absolute Victory" to the War is Unlikely. War in Gaza Survey 11](#). Israel Democracy Institute.

<sup>13</sup> CARE International. (25<sup>th</sup> January 2024) [The long shadow of starvation](#).

<sup>14</sup> Awad, M. (20<sup>th</sup> December 2023) [Gaza on the brink as one in four people face extreme hunger](#). UN World Food Programme.

<sup>15</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (2023) [Gaza Strip: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for 24 November – 7 December 2023 and Projection for 8 December 2023 – 7 February 2024](#). IFPSC.

<sup>16</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF. (22 December 2023) [Statement by UNICEF on the risk of famine in the Gaza strip](#). UNICEF.

<sup>18</sup> Regan, H and Lau, C. [Hundreds of thousands are starving in Gaza as famine arrives at 'incredible speed,' UN aid chief warns](#). CNN.

<sup>19</sup> Awad, M. (20<sup>th</sup> December 2023) [Gaza on the brink as one in four people face extreme hunger](#). UN World Food Programme.

