

Gaza's Unfolding Disaster: When Humanitarian Aid Is Your Last Meal

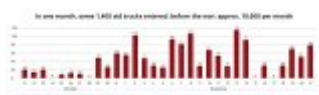
Sunday 3 December 2023, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 28 November 2023).

Orphans are multiplying in the streets, the bombing survivors are traumatized and once the truce ends, everybody knows death may fall again from the sky at any moment. Many are left without medicine, and there is also almost no clean water or food.

As the scene of trucks carrying so-called Humanitarian aid to Gaza Strip becomes commonplace, it's important to grasp the dimensions of the ever-expanding disaster. That's hard to do for anybody outside Gaza, even those maintaining continuous contact with its residents, watching the reports from bombing sites, and receiving daily updates about entire families getting killed.

When every Gazan family faces the prospect that at any given moment, an Israeli bomb can land on their home and obliterate them or leave some of them wounded and disabled, the deliveries waiting at the Rafah crossing are considered a last meal for those condemned to death.

"What Gazans need is not a truce of a few hours, a few days, but rather a total [cease-fire](#)," said representatives of several aid and human rights organizations at an online press conference just before the expected four-day lull came into effect. Desperation, anxiety and the loss of all vitality are felt especially by children, who pay a particularly heavy price, said a representative of Save the Children. He stated, "Every ten minutes, a child in Gaza is killed by a bomb and every five minutes, a child is wounded, in an asymmetric warfare situation that testifies to the failure of international law, whose aim is to protect civilian lives."



Children waiting at a water distribution point in Gaza, last week. Credit: Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters

At least 6,000 Palestinian children and 4,000 women are known to have been killed in the [Israeli bombings](#) in the last seven weeks, according to figures from the Hamas-controlled authorities in Gaza. The international organizations accept these data as accurate. A new phenomenon is children wandering alone, their parents killed or injured in the bombing and missing. It is known that some children don't eat even when there is food, and others who are suffering from dehydration because they refuse to drink, even when water is available. Still, one aid organization representative said, "Don't underestimate any bottle of clean water that comes in because it literally could save a human life."

This contradiction is lived by the residents who nevertheless anticipate the [entry of the trucks](#) with essential items for their continued survival. "We women do not have sanitary pads and we're using all kinds of torn clothing," wrote one displaced person from northern Gaza, who is staying in a

shelter in Khan Yunis, to an Israeli relative of hers.

Injured children inside Nasser Hospital in Gaza, last Wednesday.Credit: Mohammed Salem/Reuters

"For a month, I've not found medication for my arthritis, and I can hardly move due to the pain," said another displaced person in a phone call. He added there are no mattresses in the school-turned-shelter, so people sleep on the floor. A third displaced person told Haaretz that she and her many relatives crowded into her brother-in-law's house in Rafah eat only once a day. She said it's become difficult to find wooden beams to light a fire to bake bread or boil water for tea. A published author of several books of poetry and stories, she hasn't written a word since fleeing her home.

She said she's been busy with "details, details vital for survival: standing in line for clean water, standing in line for bread, calming the children, charging the phone at a store that has solar panels, finding out if there is any medicine anywhere for the son who had surgery right before the war, searching for diapers for the elderly uncle who suffered a stroke, buying second-hand clothing at the market."

She noted last week, before the truce started: "We've been in the same clothes for 25 days without washing them since we left home with just the shirts on our backs. There's no water for laundry. Now it's also getting colder outside and we don't have warm clothing. At night, I can't write because there's no electricity and there's no diesel fuel for the generator. It's terribly dark in the apartment. We all sleep on the floor, together. Even when there is water, I don't drink before going to sleep, because it's impossible to go to the bathroom at night without stepping on somebody on the way.

An aerial view of trucks carrying humanitarian aid headed toward Gaza, last month.Credit: Maxar Technologies/Reuters

A man standing amid the rubble in Rafah on Wednesday.Credit: Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters

Hundreds of people, one toilet

The trucks entering Gaza aren't solving the logistical problems faced by those who wish to write. But boxes of canned food like tuna and peas, baby formula, essential food supplements, water purification tablets and water bottles, blankets and mattresses, personal hygiene kits and [medicines for chronic diseases](#) are, or are supposed to be, in the humanitarian aid shipments.

The UN and aid organizations have several teams, each of which monitors and deals with issues related to a specific area: food security, health, hygiene and accessibility. Each team prepares a list of items, so that the donors and organizations collecting the money and goods for Gaza will be aware of what is urgent and essential. "If one donor sends, for example, teddy bears for children, it takes up a crucial spot in the delivery, but it's not exactly what is needed right now," pointed out an aid organizer.

Gazans standing amid the rubble in Rafah, last Tuesday.Credit: Hatem Ali/AP

Let's momentarily ignore the fact that not a single carton unloaded from a truck or a water tanker is protection against violent death by bombing or shelling. Even so, the quantities of essential products being brought in, on Israel's terms, are far from sufficient to meet people's ordinary needs. They are all the more so insufficient amid an ongoing disaster with a soaring number of people who are injured, sick with diarrhea and infected with various diseases.

On October 21, the first time since Hamas' attack two weeks earlier, 20 trucks containing

humanitarian supplies entered Gaza through the Rafah terminal. On the evening of November 21, 79 trucks were brought in. During the intervening month, loads of provisions and aid, excluding fuel, arrived in Gaza in 1,399 trucks.

This figure pales in comparison to the monthly average, on “normal” days, of nearly 10,000 trucks carrying commercial and humanitarian goods (excluding fuel). Each truck carries a load weighing between 60 and 70 tons. The gap remains, even though about 200 aid trucks have been entering Gaza each day of the truce.

Since October 21, the supply trucks to Gaza have traveled from Egypt to a security inspection at the Israeli Nitzana commercial crossing in the Negev, where they’ve undergone screening and a check by a canine unit. If the inspection reveals that a truck contains dual-use goods – that is, items that can be used for both civilian and military purposes – the entire truck is disqualified.

A boy walking past a destroyed building in Gaza City last month.Credit: Fatima Shbair/AP

It could be an ultrasound machine, if the donor didn’t consult with the aid organizations to know what Israel allows and doesn’t allow. Haaretz was told that some trucks were barred because, Israel claimed, the donations came from Iran. From Nitzana, the trucks return to the Egyptian side, and from there go about 45 kilometers to the Rafah crossing.

The negotiations between the Israeli authorities and the Palestinian or international representatives over the entry of various items into Gaza and the security inspection process of each item were long and exhausting even before the war. Today, they are many times longer and more exhausting. Besides the types of items, three new issues were added in the near-daily meetings between the Coordination of Activities Office of the Ministry of Defense (COGAT) and the representative of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

One issue: the aid groups’ request to resume having the supplies enter through the commercial crossing at Kerem Shalom. According to the organizations, it can accommodate security checks and the entry of goods in much larger quantities than Nitzana can, even with two inspection teams working in shifts and on weekends. Meanwhile, Israel refuses.

A woman holding a child following an Israeli strike in Rafah last Wednesday.Credit: Mohammed Abed/AFP

The second issue: the transfer of supplies to northern Gaza, an area that has been intensively bombed and where ground battles are expected to resume once the lull is over. The international groups don’t know how many people remain there.

Many are sick, disabled and elderly, who couldn’t leave their homes, aid representatives said at the online press conference. Quite a few residents returned to the north, especially in the first two or three weeks of the war, a representative of one of the UN organizations told Haaretz.

They preferred to take the risk of returning to the privacy of their homes, so long as the walls are still standing, for two main reasons. First, they experienced unbearable overcrowding with thousands of people, with just one toilet available for hundreds of people. Second, they realized that even in the so-called safe south, Israel was bombing residential buildings with all their inhabitants inside.

Smoke rising after Israeli air strikes in north Gaza, as seen from southern Israel last Wednesday.Credit: Alexander Ermochenko/Reuters

At the virtual press conference, spokespersons for the organizations emphasized that access to food, water, medical care, and medicine in the north is even more limited than in the south, so that it's impossible to speak of "humanitarian aid" without guaranteeing access to these areas. Israel initially rejected this request as well, but seems to have relented. The United Nations reported on Saturday 61 trucks carrying humanitarian supplies to the north, and another 100 reportedly reached the area on Sunday.

The third request of the aid organizations is to renew the supplies to the private sector, and not to suffice with the emergency supplies donated and delivered through them, which mainly reach the overcrowded shelter facilities and not the people who found shelter with their relatives in private homes.

Israel refuses this request, too. One of the organizations' representatives told Haaretz: "Our claim is that nowhere in the world do we rely on humanitarian aid alone in emergency situations. It's impossible to distribute food to two million people. The aid system cannot meet all the needs alone. Significant help to residents is impossible without opening the door to commercial goods." Already, the sugar and flour that transported to Gaza in the aid trucks are bought from Israel and arrive directly in Rafah, indicating that the purchase of goods, as before, can be done in transactions between businessmen in Gaza and in Israel.

Distributing flour in Gaza last Wednesday.Credit: Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters

Aid for diplomatic purposes

In the past seven weeks, the food and essential supplies in Gaza's warehouses have either run out or been spoiled due to bombings. Sheep and chickens were killed in the bombings or slaughtered because their owners couldn't feed them. Agricultural crops were severely damaged or impossible to harvest.

The shortage and difficulties in transporting what is still available have led to records price hikes. With the little money they have left, people must pay triple the normal price for rice, lentils or vegetables. The return of the private sector and the reopening of the Kerem Shalom crossing are, therefore, basic conditions for anyone who takes humanitarian aid seriously and doesn't see it merely as lip service for diplomatic or public relations aims.

The donations so far have come mainly from citizens and organizations in Arab countries such as Egypt, the Gulf Emirates, Qatar and Jordan. The Egyptian Red Crescent has been the biggest provider, with 651 trucks that entered through November 21. The UNRWA refugee agency is also responsible for bringing in a significant part of the cargo.

According to the data collected through November 19, 519 UNRWA trucks transported foodstuffs, 217 had medicine and medical equipment, 186 brought water and various sanitation and hygiene products, and 167 transported equipment for shelter facilities. Another eight trucks transported food supplements, vitamins and more, under the title "nutrition" and 168 had mixed cargo.

All the aid organizations stress that fuel is a basic component of any humanitarian assistance. Indeed, U.S. pressure has been required for Israel to allow fuel into the Gaza Strip. Around 350,000 liters of fuel entered Gaza from November 15 to November 21, and another 129,000 liters of fuel entered each day on Friday and Saturday.

Children carrying water in Rafah last Wednesday.Credit: Hatem Ali/AP

UNRWA is responsible for the distribution of the fuel among various vital facilities and aid organizations. Without fuel, humanitarian organizations assert, they can't distribute the water or food supplies that have arrived, as vehicles need fuel to run. Without fuel, which is supposed to reach the communication facilities of the Palestinian Telecommunication Company, Paltel, according to agreements, aid groups cannot contact army representatives and COGAT to coordinate the delivery of supplies or the transportation of ambulances with premature babies and wounded individuals to Egypt. They're also unable to secure passage for the employees of the terminal from the Egyptian side to the Palestinian side.

Due to the shortage of fuel and communication breakdowns, there have indeed been instances when supply trucks were stranded on the Egyptian side for long hours, fearing that the Israeli army might fire upon them. The UNRWA installations have, on average, one shower unit for every 4,500 people, according to an agency report. These are generally not structures intended for residential use. It was impossible to bring additional mobile shower units due to lack of space in the building or the absence of transportation fuel.

More fuel, medications for cancer patients and the many wounded, anesthetics for surgeries and pain relievers for the wounded; water, water and more water; the renewal of the regular food supply through the private market and access for aid organizations to the residents of the northern Gaza Strip are all musts. Without these, the humanitarian aid provided now will be considered just a fig leaf for unprecedented harm to about two million civilians, about half of them children.

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P.S.

- Haaretz. Nov 28, 2023:
<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2023-11-28/ty-article-magazine/.premium/gaza-unfolding-disaster-when-humanitarian-aid-is-your-last-meal/0000018c-10c7-dd2e-a5ae-d3cf31b00000>

- Amira Hass' articles in Haaretz:
<https://www.haaretz.com/ty-WRITER/0000017f-da24-d494-a17f-de27b9aa0000>