

UNRWA suspends humanitarian aid to Gaza after Israel allows armed gangs to rob convoys

Jean Shaoul

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Last week, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) suspended humanitarian aid for Palestinian refugees in Gaza, citing repeated and systematic attacks by armed gangs on aid convoys.

Last month, criminal gangs seized 98 of the 109 UN trucks in full view of Israeli soldiers, tanks or surveillance drones.

Not only do the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) refuse to intervene against these armed criminals, but they also open fire on local police attempting to stop the looting. As a crucial element of Israel's starvation strategy, allowing these attacks to proceed is clearly aimed at obstructing humanitarian aid, starving the Palestinians, undermining law and order and causing societal collapse. UNRWA's decision shows this has been successful.

It comes as the UN's ReliefWeb has reported alarming levels of food and water shortages, amid signs of starvation. Israel's massive military operations, both its ground invasion and aerial bombardment, along with unexploded ordnance contamination, have destroyed local food production and distribution systems as well as public infrastructure, forcing the Palestinians to burn waste amid a severe fuel shortage. Community kitchens are in danger of closing due to lack of supplies, while market prices for basic commodities have surged.

This has prompted global food security experts to warn of a "strong likelihood that famine is imminent in areas" of northern Gaza.

Announcing the decision, UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said several trucks carrying food supplies had been looted the day before on the road from Kerem Shalom on the border with Israel, the main aid crossing point into Gaza, after the closure of the southern

crossing at Rafah, on the border with Egypt.

He said that the route had not been safe for months, referring to the hijacking of nearly 100 aid trucks in November alone. In a statement on X, he explained, "This difficult decision comes at a time hunger is rapidly deepening ... due to the ongoing siege, hurdles from Israeli authorities, political decisions to restrict the amounts of aid, lack of safety on aid routes and targeting of local police. All of the above led to a breakdown in law and order."

Lazzarini added that it was Israel's responsibility under international law as the occupying power to protect aid workers and supplies and once again called on Israel to "ensure aid flows into Gaza safely" and to "refrain from attacks on humanitarian workers". According to the UN, at least 333 humanitarian workers in Gaza have been killed in Israeli attacks.

His remarks follow extensive investigations by the *Washington Post* and the *Financial Times* into the systematic theft of aid in Gaza. The newspapers describe their interviews with truck drivers, traders, aid workers, security providers and UN officials in Gaza, many of whom had firsthand experience of the looting. Criminal gangs and networks had replaced individual looters as aid deliveries plummeted after the IDF's invasion of Rafah in May.

Consistent figures on truck numbers entering Gaza are hard to come by. The pre-war average was around 500 *a day*, with most trucks transporting construction and other commercial goods, which was still not enough to meet the population's daily needs. This fell to just 800 for the whole of October 2023 before rising in January this year to about 100 a day. The BBC's graphs indicate that about 310, 370, 310, 450 and 430

food trucks *per month* were entering Gaza from May to September respectively. In the first 10 days of October, as the IDF mounted a renewed offensive against the Palestinians, only 30 lorries a day entered, the lowest level since the start of the war. In November, just 65 humanitarian trucks a day were getting through, due to the IDF deliberately refusing to let aid convoys pass.

With the reduction in deliveries and the destruction of local food production, even the most basic supplies have become valuable theft targets. One crate of cigarettes sells for \$400,000. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that up to 30 percent of aid is stolen.

The main gangs are thought to be led by two wanted criminals, thought to be linked to Islamic State groups operating in Egypt's Sinai desert, who together have set up gangs of around 200 people and have their own warehouses for storing looted goods that they later sell to local traders. These gangs also demand "protection fees" of over \$4,000 per truck to allow safe passage without being looted for the aid agencies.

Gaza's transport association refused to deliver UN aid after looters killed their drivers and damaged their trucks. Interviewees were virtually unanimous in saying that these criminals, often operating in broad daylight right under the eyes of the IDF, could not carry out such brazen theft without the support of the IDF. Anyone else operating so close to the military would get shot.

Israel is also suspected of directly providing arms to gangs, with the IDF stating explicitly in March that it was considering arming clans in Gaza that were rivals with Hamas.

While the Biden administration demanded—for public relations purposes—that Israel allow in more aid, it did nothing to ensure compliance, ignoring its own agencies that concluded that Israel had deliberately blocked deliveries of food and medicine to Gaza in violation of US law that requires arms shipments to countries that block the delivery of US-backed aid be stopped. It is 100 percent behind, even directing, Israel's war of annihilation of the Palestinians.

Since October 2023, Israel's onslaught has killed at least 44,580 people in Gaza, according to official statistics, with the "indirect" death toll as a result of disease, lack of medication, food and clean water likely to be far higher—at around 186,000—according to a

study in the *Lancet* earlier this year. That number will have risen since then. Belying Israel's claims that it is targeting Hamas, the UN's human rights office report states that 70 percent of verified deaths in Gaza were among women and children. More than 105,000 people have been injured, with Gaza now having the highest number of child amputees per capita anywhere in the world.

More than 1.9 million people, or 90 percent of Gaza's population, have been internally displaced. But so far, according to UNRWA, only 23 percent of the needs to protect displaced people in Gaza from rain and cold weather have been met, leaving 945,000 people at risk of exposure this winter.



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