



## **Starvation and Sexual Assault as Tools of Warfare in Gaza**

The last six months of Israel's ongoing war on Gaza since 7 October has resulted in the most grievous violations against Palestinian civilians; to date, over 32,300 Palestinians have been killed, over 74,600 injured, and 1.7 million have been displaced, living in the most dire conditions<sup>1</sup>. Recently, we are witnessing an alarming rise in the death tolls as a result of Israel's starvation policy, projecting 1.1 million Palestinians to face catastrophic levels of food insecurity. In addition, new testimonies of sexual assault against Palestinian women and girls in Gaza are emerging from a significant number of witnesses and/or victims.

### **Starvation**

The gradual imposition of a starvation policy by Israel in Gaza has escalated to a deliberate, critical humanitarian crisis, meticulously implemented through a series of calculated actions. Initially, this approach was characterized by the absolute severance of essential supplies, including food and water, accompanied by indiscriminate bombings targeting farmlands. The bombardment of Gaza's agricultural farms was further compounded by a complete blockade, effectively isolating the Gaza Strip and preventing the ingress of humanitarian aid from the outside world.

As the blockade intensified, forcing people to flee towards the southern expanse of the Gaza Strip, the north and the south have become two completely separate areas. This division, ostensibly strategic from a military standpoint, has had devastating humanitarian implications, essentially depriving those in the northern parts of basic necessities for survival. Concurrently, the dense concentration of displaced individuals in Rafah has morphed into a grim testament to the severity of the crisis, with around 1.5 million people crammed into makeshift shelters, desperately lacking sufficient food and clean water. The closure of the Rafah crossing, coupled with Israel's prohibition against the entry of aid trucks into Gaza, underscores a deliberate strategy to impose starvation upon the Palestinian people living in Gaza.

In the war's initial phases, Israeli officials' public declarations of their intention to deprive Gaza's civilians of food, water, and fuel starkly reflect in the operational tactics of the Israeli forces<sup>2</sup>. What it actually

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<sup>1</sup>UNOCHA: Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel - reported impact | Day 169

<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-169>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch: "Israel: Starvation Used as a Weapon of War in Gaza"

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/18/israel-starvation-used-weapon-war-gaza#:~:text=The%20Israeli%20government%20is%20using,in%20Israeli%20forces%20military%20operations>.

means to hear such clear statements from officials cannot but emphasize that starving a whole population is a systemic strategy. The United Nations has unequivocally stated that Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war, marking a blatant breach of International Humanitarian Law<sup>3</sup>. Yet, the international community's response has been largely characterized by silence, an unsettling passivity in the face of Gaza's unfolding tragedy.

The tactic of leveraging starvation as a weapon of war is not new, with historical precedents in various oppressive regimes and conflict zones around the globe, including recent instances in Congo and Syria. The situation in Gaza, however, serves as a harrowing reminder of the consequences of deploying starvation, a war crime, in warfare. Images and reports of children dying from starvation, while their mothers slowly watch them dying, have spotlighted the urgent need for humanitarian intervention and international action. The Health Ministry in Gaza reports that malnutrition and dehydration have led to the deaths of at least 20 individuals in Gaza's northern hospitals, most of them are children up to 15 years of age and a 72-year-old man<sup>4</sup>.

A United Nations Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis from December 2023 alarmingly highlights the deepening food insecurity crisis in the Gaza Strip. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a significant portion of Gaza's population is sliding into catastrophic levels of hunger, with the situation expected to worsen in the forthcoming months<sup>5</sup>. Currently, as we approach the end of March, Northern Gaza has reached the verge of famine, with the larger Gaza Strip also facing significantly unbearable food insecurity risks. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes a stark transition from Gaza's previously rare malnutrition cases to a scenario where over a million people suffer from catastrophic hunger, necessitating an immediate increase in food supplies. Malnutrition rates among children under five have surged, indicating a crisis that is likely to have long-lasting impacts on their health and development<sup>6</sup>.

Exacerbating the situation, the recent suspension of funds to the UNRWA, the leading humanitarian aid agency in Gaza, by nine countries poses a significantly grave threat to Palestinian refugees in and out Gaza<sup>7</sup>. This decision closes yet another gate for urgent humanitarian aid for Gazans. The latest update indicates that the Israeli authorities informed the UN that they will no longer approve any UNRWA food

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<sup>3</sup> The New Arab: "UN Accuses Israel of Using Starvation as 'Weapon of War' as Dozens Killed at Al-Shifa Hospital" <https://www.newarab.com/news/un-says-israel-using-famine-weapon-war-gaza>

<sup>4</sup> AP News: It Is Not Just Israeli Bombs that Have Killed Children in Gaza <https://apnews.com/article/gaza-malnutrition-famine-children-dying-israel-palestinians-2f938b1a82d7822c7da67cc162da1a37>

<sup>5</sup> UN News: Imminent Famine in Northern Gaza <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147656#:~:text=Data%20indicates%20that%20the%20%E2%80%9Ccentire,Read%20our%20explainer%20here>.

<sup>6</sup> WHO: Famine in Gaza Is Imminent with Immediate and Long-term Consequences <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-03-2024-famine-in-gaza-is-imminent--with-immediate-and-long-term-health-consequences>

<sup>7</sup> UNRWA: Suspension of Aid <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa%E2%80%99s-lifesaving-aid-may-end-due-funding-suspension>

convoys to the north. “This is outrageous and makes it intentional to obstruct lifesaving assistance during a man-made famine,” Philippe Lazzarini, the UNRWA Commissioner-General said<sup>8</sup>.

The deliberate starvation of civilians, whether in international or non-international armed conflicts (IACs or NIACs), is prohibited under international humanitarian law (IHL) as outlined in Article 54(1) of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions and Article 14 of the Second Additional Protocol.<sup>9</sup> This prohibition is recognized as customary IHL, evidenced by the ICRC’s Customary Humanitarian Law Database. Moreover, intentional starvation is considered a crime under international criminal law (ICL), as affirmed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2417. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) also criminalizes deliberate starvation in both IACs and NIACs. By controlling the borders of Gaza and preventing humanitarian aid from entering the Gaza Strip, alongside direct attacks on civilians attempting to gather food, Israel demonstrates its intention to starve the civilian population in Gaza. This renders Israel responsible for human rights violations and breaches in international humanitarian law (IHL). This lays a responsibility on the international community to interfere and stop these grave violations of the Palestinians human rights.

### **Sexual Assaults**

There has been a recent emergence of testimonies regarding sexual assaults perpetrated against women and girls in Gaza. The genocide unfolding in Gaza had its horrible impact on the whole fabric of the Palestinian society, severely affecting women. The reality there exhibits women forced to undergo their pregnancies and endure childbirth under appalling conditions—lacking water, food, hospital access, and essential healthcare. Pregnant women have faced the most dire circumstances, deprived of the basic necessities for a healthy pregnancy, while others have suffered risky miscarriages due to malnutrition, starvation and mental distress. These egregious violations of basic human and women's rights have remained largely unreported, despite being a stark reality for women in Gaza.

A couple of weeks ago, the United Nations voiced its concerns regarding reported sexual assaults in Gaza, emphasizing the gravity of these allegations<sup>10</sup>. Today, more testimonies are coming to light, revealing the harrowing rape and severe sexual assaults Palestinian women in Gaza have lived during this war. Testimonies revealed women have faced extreme sexual violence, with some even being raped in front of their family members. Among these specific reported incidents is the harrowing story of a woman subjected to rape for two consecutive days until she tragically lost her ability to speak<sup>11</sup>. In a separate, yet equally, distressing incident at the Nasir hospital, another woman was stripped of her clothing in front of her husband and brother. In a desperate attempt to cover her, one of them removed his clothes, leading to

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<sup>8</sup> Relief Web: UNRWA’s Access to Northern Gaza

<https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/israel-tells-un-it-will-reject-unrwa-food-convoys-northern-gaza>

<sup>9</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross: Starvation <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule53>

<sup>10</sup> UN Human Rights: Appalled by Reported Human Rights Violations Against Women in Gaza

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/israelopt-un-experts-appalled-reported-human-rights-violations-against>

<sup>11</sup> Middle East Monitor: Women in Gaza are Being Raped

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240324-women-in-gaza-are-being-raped-and-this-is-not-being-investigated-or-reported/>

both men being fatally shot by Israeli soldiers<sup>12</sup>. Further compounding these atrocities, recent testimonies include rape incident of a pregnant woman in front of her family, eventually killing her, and stripping both Palestinian women and men completely naked, forcing them to stand in lines facing each other and to stare at each other under the threat of death if they averted their gaze.

Targeting women, girls, and civilians with any form of sexual violence is completely prohibited and considered a crime under international law and international humanitarian law. According to Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Articles 75(2)(b) and 76 of Additional Protocol One, women must be protected from all forms of sexual violence, including but not limited to rape, prostitution, and assaults that would affect their honor.<sup>13</sup> Committing any of these sexual crimes is a grave violation of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights (IHR), as testified by eyewitnesses from Gaza, Israel has been engaging in such violations and crimes. The weaponization of sexual assault by Israel can be considered a systematic form of torture applied against women and girls in Gaza, which is also prohibited under the Convention against Torture (CAT).

The conservative nature of the Palestinian society means that the release of these stories marks a significant breach of privacy— revealing much that families and individuals would have preferred to keep private due to societal norms surrounding such sensitive topics. What has come to light represents only a fraction of the untold stories lived and the underlying suffering endured by Palestinian women in Gaza. The reticence within the Palestinian society to reveal these incidents only underscores the depth of trauma and the urgent need for a comprehensive and transparent investigation into these war crimes and extreme violations of human rights.

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<sup>12</sup> Middle East Monitor: Women in Gaza are Being Raped  
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240324-women-in-gaza-are-being-raped-and-this-is-not-being-investigated-or-reported/>

<sup>13</sup> Diakonia International Humanitarian Law: Sexual Violence and IHL  
<https://www.diakonia.se/ihl/resources/international-humanitarian-law/ihl-protection-sexual-violence/>