

UN distributes food supplies to the local people.



Getting Humanitarian Aid Into Gaza

The Struggle Continues

Before 7 October 2023, over 80% of Gaza's population relied on humanitarian aid. Now, a year into the deadly conflict, with over half a million facing "catastrophic" food insecurity, a 170% increase in malnutrition, a collapsing health system and over one million Palestinians in need of shelter kits before winter, getting aid in has never been more crucial, or challenging. *Report by Christine Maguire.*

It is almost impossible to get aid inside Gaza since the seizure by Israel and subsequent burning of the Rafah crossing on the Egyptian border in May 2024, according to a spokesperson for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

"This was where the majority of aid came in and the only way for Palestinians to leave the Gaza strip," Tomasso Della Longa told *'Emergency Services Ireland'*. He described a "nightmare" situation where the local people's needs continue to grow heavily, day after day, but not the number of trucks with the necessary level of humanitarian aid.

"Food, water, medicine and everything needed to run a hospital, and medical post are now a matter of priority, together with fuel supplies," Della Longa explained. "Without fuel, you don't have hospitals, ambulances, refrigerators. You don't have anything, because there is no electricity."

Thousands of aid trucks are waiting to cross into Gaza, with the food inside spoiling as the threat of famine looms. Israel has been accused by UN officials of blocking aid and the EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said it was "provoking famine" and using starvation as a weapon of war. The US Government's development and refugee agencies both found Israel was deliberately blocking food and medicine deliveries in April.

After Israel's High Court of Justice ordered the state to demonstrate it was meeting its legal obligations to provide enough humanitarian supplies to Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announced "tactical pauses"

in military operations near its Karem Shalom crossing. However, the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) Director Cindy McCain said this "made no difference at all".

A HOT WAR ZONE

"A tactical pause is not a ceasefire. This remains a hot war zone. No place is really safe in which to operate," Jonathan Fowler, Senior Communications Manager with the UN Relief Works Agency's (UNRWA), told 'Emergency Services Ireland'.

Meanwhile, Israel's Co-ordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) agency boasted of the aid it allows into Gaza. It reported that 3,981 trucks entered in September, of which 1,533 were carrying aid, according to its data.

However, before 7 October 2023, an average of 200 aid trucks entered Gaza daily, along with 300 trucks containing imports like food and industrial materials. Aid agencies and UN officials say 500 to 600 trucks a day are needed to meet Gazans' minimum needs.

Israeli authorities also require trucks to arrive half-full, to make

inspections easier, but "that means when we talk about numbers of trucks arriving, it's not actually full trucks," Fowler explained. "This has consequences down the line: a totally inadequate flow of humanitarian aid".

"It's like our colleagues in the Palestine Red Crescent (PRC) are always telling us, 'We know exactly what to do to save lives and alleviate suffering, but to do that we don't have enough aid, we don't have enough access,'" Della Longa said, describing what's coming in as "a drop in the ocean" and "a PR exercise."

Efforts to airdrop aid are insufficient and have injured and even killed people, while the US's 'humanitarian pier' has been marred with issues. Della Longa pointed out that while any aid is welcome, Rafah was "the heart of every humanitarian operation for the strip", with a ready-to-go logistics pipeline. "It's faster, more efficient," he said. "And what you can bring with a parachute, you can bring it probably with a third of one truck."

JOURNEY OF AN AID TRUCK

Aid goes through several Israeli checks before entering Gaza. This



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includes aid being taken off trucks twice and placed on other trucks to be taken to warehouses in the strip, over half of which are no longer operational after being damaged in the conflict.

Israel bans "dual use" items, which it says can be used by Hamas to make weapons, including solar panels and water purification and telecommunications equipment.



Palestine refugees in the Gaza strip relies heavily on UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

GAZA HUMANITARIAN AID

This is “extremely damaging,” Fowler said. “Because humanitarians need proper communications equipment to move around safely.”

Once inside Gaza, ever-shrinking ‘humanitarian zones’ limit NGOs’ abilities to access and store the aid. There are logistical challenges involved in navigating through destroyed roads and multiple checkpoints, and needing to communicate with the IDF, Hamas and other fighters to avoid coming under fire.

Fowler reports “huge issues with denials of permissions from the Israeli authorities to move around safely,” adding: “It’s not been uncommon for 50% of requested aid missions to be denied”.

According to the OCHA, Israeli authorities denied almost twice the number of missions and movement requests in Gaza in August compared to July, and despite an increase in planned movements submitted, facilitated missions in southern Gaza dropped by 28%. In northern Gaza, there was a 10% increase in facilitated aid missions, but the number of denials increased by 140%.

Israel, which accused some of UNWRA’s employees of being involved in the 7 October Hamas attack, lays blame on the UN and humanitarian agencies responsible for distributing aid in Gaza. On 25 June, COGAT accused the WFP of a “lack of motivation”.

This narrative “misrepresents the overall problem,” Fowler said.



Gaza left in ruins with children left homeless.



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He explained that the lack of fuel, the destruction and the fact that people who were displaced to Rafah have been forced to disperse again to “other places which are not necessarily easy to supply” all “come together to make the operating environment in an active war zone extremely complicated.”

DEADLY DELIVERIES

UNRWA has experienced the “highest death toll in the history of the UN for aid workers” in Gaza this year, Fowler said. “We’ve lost 214 of our staff. It’s unprecedented.”

Since October 2023, 19 PRC members have also been killed while working in Gaza. “We start our day talking with PRC colleagues in Ramallah, and the first question is, ‘Did we lose someone?’ It’s shocking because the Red Cross and Red Crescent should be protected,” Della Longa said.

The Israeli drone strike that killed seven World Central Kitchen aid workers in April illustrated that not even clearly marked humanitarian groups are safe. In August, the WFP, citing safety concerns, suspended employee movement in Gaza after its vehicle was “directly struck by gunfire” near a checkpoint, despite “receiving multiple clearances by Israeli authorities”.

ABSOLUTE DESPERATION

In “absolute desperation”, Gazans have also engaged in “self-distribution” of aid. “Jumping convoys, taking food aid, but in many cases, eating it on the spot,” Fowler said. After the younger



Homes in Gaza left stripped.



WHO personnel in the ruins of the Al-Shifa Hospital in April.

men finish taking items, “the weaker people would come and be scrambling around in the dirt to try to get a bit of flour, broken biscuits and these kinds of things,” he explained. “[An] absolutely apocalyptic vision.”

In the case of the February ‘flour massacre’, 118 were killed when Israel opened fire on Palestinians surging around an aid truck. Fowler also described a recent spike in criminality, as gangs involved in cigarette smuggling have been attacking convoys in search of cigarettes – which are now worth €18 each – and are stealing humanitarian aid in the process.

“The situation is getting worse every other day. Probably before, we were able to say every other week, or even month, now it is really every other day; because when you don’t have any more medicine, clean water, food, shelter, then it’s unbearable,” Della Longa said.

“After many months of speaking about this nightmare, I don’t even have any more words to explain it because it’s something that to me, it’s unbelievable...unbearable.”

Irish Government’s Aid to Palestine
Ireland has long worked to reduce the humanitarian needs of the people in Palestine, focusing on education, human rights and governance. It has provided €40m in humanitarian assistance in response to the suffering caused by the conflict in Gaza since October 2023, including €20m million to UNRWA after other countries cut its funding.

Through its Rapid Response Initiative, Ireland has provided over 116 tonnes of emergency items to the Gaza strip. “This included 50 tonnes in December 2023, and 66 tonnes in March 2024, with items such as tents, tarpaulins, blankets, water tanks, kitchen sets and hygiene kits,” a spokesperson from the Department of Foreign Affairs told ‘Emergency Services Ireland’.

All the items have now reached Gaza – the first consignment was distributed in December 2023 and January 2024, while the second consignment has been distributed by the Catholic Relief Services.

The spokesperson explained that most of the aid is channeled through funding to aid organisations on the ground, including the IFRC, UNRWA, the WFP the UN OCHA Occupied Palestinian Territories Humanitarian Fund and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Ireland’s Recognition of Palestine
Ireland’s recognition of Palestine in May (alongside Spain and Norway) sparked outrage from Israel. Its public broadcaster Kann reported that Israel would no longer facilitate diplomats of these countries to travel into Gaza or the West Bank and would isolate them from briefings and requests.

“There has been no discernable increase in access difficulties since Ireland’s recognition of the State of Palestine. However, the access for aid generally continues to pose massive challenges for aid agencies,” Trócaire Communications Officer David O’Hare told ‘Emergency Services Ireland’.