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Biden claims Gaza ceasefire in sight as Palestinians starve

A day of speculation about a ceasefire in Gaza sparked by US President Joe Biden has exposed the vicious cynicism of all involved.

Biden told reporters, “My national security adviser tells me that we’re close. We’re close. We’re not done yet. My hope is by next Monday, we’ll have a ceasefire.”

The US president made these claims involving the lives of millions of people during a visit to an ice cream store, cone in hand.



Palestinians line up for a free meal in Rafah, Gaza Strip, Friday, Feb. 16, 2024. The World Food Program said Tuesday it has paused deliveries of food to isolated northern Gaza. [AP Photo/Fatima Shbair]

He later told TV host Seth Meyers, “Ramadan’s coming up, and there’s been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan as well, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out.”

Media commentators were quick to report this “optimism”, but it soon became clear that an agreement was not “close” at all. The Israeli media was widely briefed that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government did not know what Biden was talking about and that Netanyahu himself had been “surprised.”

Hamas sources told Reuters the comments were “premature” and that there were “still big gaps that need to be bridged.” Its opposition is based on the fact that the “ceasefire” being discussed is strictly time-limited and acceptable to Israel on the basis that its ground forces can begin their final assault on Rafah the day after it ends. Its purpose would be to possibly minimise the conflict during Ramadan, beginning March 10, to forestall an explosion of anger across the Middle East which would threaten the anti-Iran war coalition assembled by the US.

An agreement of this kind is not impossible, given Hamas’s weak position, but Biden made his comments when he did to also bolster his chances in the Michigan Democratic primary elections—where “Genocide Joe” faces heavy opposition for his complicity in Israel’s mass murder and ethnic cleansing.

On the ground the reality is that the Palestinians are being starved to death, and Israel is expanding its war.

Within hours of Biden’s comments, the *Times of Israel* published “No longer afraid of sparking war, Israel takes gloves off against IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] in Syria”. It cited Carmit Valensi, head of the northern arena program at the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), who observed, “It seems that Israel is taking advantage of the war momentum to increase its activity against Iran in Syria.”

Valensi “noted that before fighting began in Gaza, killing members of the Quds Force—the IRGC’s expeditionary unit—or Hezbollah operatives, would have been considered a red line, liable to spark a war,” but were now being carried out in a “methodical and brazen way”.

On Israel’s northern front with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the United Nations has warned of a “disturbing shift in the exchange of fire... we are now witnessing an expansion and intensification of the strikes.”

Meanwhile, the war in Gaza is reaching new levels of criminality. In an interview with the *Guardian* Tuesday, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Michael Fakhri called the situation a “genocide”.

Fakhri explained, “Intentionally depriving people of food is clearly a war crime. Israel has announced its intention to destroy the Palestinian people, in whole or in part, simply for being Palestinian. In my view as a UN human rights expert, this is now a situation of genocide.”

He continued, “The speed of malnourishment of young children is also astounding. The bombing and people being killed directly is brutal, but this starvation—and the wasting and stunting of children—is torturous and vile. It will have a long-term impact on the population physically, cognitively and morally...”

“There is no reason to intentionally block the passage of humanitarian aid or intentionally obliterate small-scale fishing vessels, greenhouses and orchards in Gaza—other than to deny people access to food.”

Israel has repeatedly bombed food warehouses, mills and bakeries during its assault, leaving just 15 of 100 bakeries in operation. A quarter of farm holdings in the north have also been destroyed, and access denied to those that remain.

“We have never seen a civilian population made to go so hungry so quickly and so completely, that is the consensus among starvation experts,” said Fakhri. “Israel is not just targeting civilians, it is trying to damn the future of the Palestinian people by harming their children.”

Al Jazeera reported the death by starvation last Friday of two-month-old Mahmoud Fattouh, brought to al-Shifa hospital in an emaciated state, gasping for breath. Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, head of Kamal Adwan Hospital, told the broadcaster, “Many kids have died in the past weeks... if we don’t get the proper aid urgently, we will be losing more and more to malnutrition.”

Over 90 percent of children aged 6-23 months and pregnant and breastfeeding women are in severe food poverty, eating two or fewer food groups per day—and food of the lowest nutritional value. With their immune systems weakened, 90 percent of children under 5 have at least one infectious disease. Roughly 70 percent have had diarrhoea in the last two weeks.

Over 80 percent of households lack safe and clean water, and the average household has to make do with just one litre per person per day, versus the recommended minimum of 15 litres. This is especially concerning given the increased number of babies now reliant on formula milk.

UNICEF's deputy executive director for humanitarian action Ted Chaiban warned last week, "The Gaza Strip is poised to witness an explosion in preventable child deaths, which would compound the already unbearable level of child deaths in Gaza.

"We've been warning for weeks that the Gaza Strip is on the brink of a nutrition crisis. If the conflict doesn't end now, children's nutrition will continue to plummet, leading to preventable deaths or health issues which will affect the children of Gaza for the rest of their lives and have potential intergenerational consequences."

The UN's findings were based on screenings carried out in late January, meaning the reality is already substantially worse. Since then, Israel and its international partners have tightened the noose.

Over a dozen countries have suspending all funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini has explained, "The last time UNRWA was able to deliver food aid to northern Gaza was on January 23."

Last week, the World Food Programme (WFP) suspended aid deliveries to northern Gaza after its last two met with violence. Shane Low, for the Norwegian Refugee Council, told *Al Jazeera*, "There is no guarantee of the safety of humanitarian staff, either because of Israeli targeting of convoys, Israeli targeting of police who are there to protect convoys, and of course due to the desperation because of the lack of aid that's getting in."

Roughly half of planned aid convoys to the north were blocked by Israel between January 1 and February 15. Israel Defence Forces checkpoints have also been reducing the amount of aid allowed into Gaza overall. Just 55 trucks have entered the enclave daily on average since February 9, barely half the 100 the UN warns is a minimum to cover urgent needs, and a fifth of the level of assistance provided before the war.

Israeli government lies that its soldiers are not restricting the flow of aid are exposed by aerial photos showing over 2,000 trucks waiting on the Egyptian side of the border and the statement of the WFP that there is enough food on Gaza's borders to feed the entire population.

February 9 was the date of the International Court of Justice ruling ordering Israel to take steps to increase the delivery of humanitarian aid. Since then, according to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the number of trucks allowed into Gaza has declined by a third. UNRWA says there has been a 50 percent reduction comparing February with January.

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