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Famine in Gaza: Will We Continue to Watch as Gaza Starves to Death?



Image by Emad El Byed.

The situation in Gaza today starkly highlights Israeli exceptionalism. Israel is employing the starvation of two million Palestinians in the blockaded and devastated Gaza Strip as a tactic to extract political concessions from Palestinian groups operating there.

On April 23, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) described the current humanitarian situation in Gaza as “the worst ever seen throughout the war”. Despite the severity of these pronouncements, they often appear to be treated as routine news, eliciting little concrete action or substantive discussion.

Israeli violations of international and humanitarian laws regarding its occupation of Palestine are well-established facts. A new dimension of exceptionalism is emerging, reflected in

Israel's ability to deliberately starve an entire population for an extended period, with some even defending this approach.

The Gaza population continues to endure immense suffering, having experienced the loss of approximately 10 percent of its overall numbers due to deaths, disappearances and injuries. They are confined to a small, largely destroyed area of about 365 square kilometers, facing deaths from treatable diseases and lacking access to essential services, and even clean water. Despite these conditions, Israel continues to operate with impunity in what seems to be a brutal and protracted experiment, while much of the world observes with varying degrees of anger, helplessness, or total disregard.

The question of the international community's role remains central. While enforcing international law is one aspect, exerting the necessary pressure to allow a population facing starvation access to basic necessities like food and water, is another. For the people of Gaza, even these fundamental needs now seem unattainable after decades of diminished expectations.

During public hearings in The Hague starting on April 28, representatives from many nations appealed to the International Court of Justice to utilize its authority as the highest court to mandate that Israel cease the starvation of Palestinians.

Israel "may not collectively punish the protected Palestinian people," stated the South African representative, Jaymion Hendricks. The Saudi envoy, Mohammed Saud Alnasser, added that Israel had transformed the Gaza Strip into an "unlivable pile of rubble, while killing thousands of innocent and vulnerable people."

Representatives from China, Egypt, Algeria, South Africa, and other nations echoed these sentiments, aligning with the assessment of Philippe Lazzarini, head of UNRWA, who stated, last March, that Israel is employing a strategy of "weaponization of humanitarian aid".

However, the assertion that the weaponization of food is a deliberate Israeli tactic requires no external proof; Israel itself declared it. The then Israeli Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, publicly announced a "complete siege" on Gaza on October 9, 2023, just two days after the start of the genocidal war.

Gallant's statement – "We are imposing a complete siege on (Gaza). No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel – everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly" – was not an impulsive outburst but a policy rooted in dehumanizing rhetoric and implemented with extreme violence.

This "acting accordingly" extended beyond closing border crossings and obstructing aid deliveries. Even when aid was permitted, Israeli forces targeted desperate civilians, including

children, who gathered to receive supplies, bombing them along with the aid trucks. A particularly devastating incident occurred on February 29, 2024, in Gaza City, where reports indicated that Israeli fire killed 112 Palestinians and injured 750 more.

This event was the first of what became known as the “Flour Massacres”. Subsequent similar incidents took place, and, in between these events, Israel continued to bomb bakeries, aid storage facilities, and aid distribution volunteers. The intention was to starve Palestinians to a degree that would allow for coercive bargaining and potentially lead to the ethnic cleansing of the population.

On April 1, an incident occurred where an Israeli military drone struck a convoy of the World Central Kitchen, resulting in the deaths of six international aid workers and their Palestinian driver. This event led to a significant departure of the remaining international aid workers from Gaza.

A few months later, starting in October 2024, northern Gaza was placed under a strict siege, with the aim of forcing the population south, potentially towards the Sinai desert. Despite these efforts and the resulting famine, the will of the Gazan population did not break. Instead, hundreds of thousands reportedly began returning to their destroyed homes and towns in the north.

When, on March 18, Israel reneged on a ceasefire agreement that followed extensive negotiations, it once again resorted to starvation as a weapon. There was little consequence or strong condemnation from Western governments regarding Israel’s return to the war and to the starvation policies.

“Using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare” is classified as a war crime under international law, explicitly stated in the Rome Statute. However, the relevance of such legal frameworks is questioned when those who advocate for and consider themselves guardians of these laws fail to uphold or enforce them.

The inaction of the international community during this period of immense human suffering has significantly undermined the relevance of international law. The potential consequences of this failure to act are grave, extending beyond the Palestinian people to impact humanity as a whole.

Despite this, hope persists that fundamental human compassion, separate from legal frameworks, will compel the provision of essential supplies like flour, sugar, and water to Gaza. The inability to ensure this basic aid will profoundly question our shared humanity for years to come.

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