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#UNRWAWORKS. FRONTLINE HEROES: THE RACE AGAINST THE CLOCK TO AVERT FAMINE

18 March 2024



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Mahmoud (right) examines a food parcel in an UNRWA storage facility. © 2024 UNRWA Photo by Mohamed Hinnawi

Since the start of the war in Gaza, more than 31,000 Palestinians have been killed. Now, more are dying from the consequences of the imposed siege, including at least 23 children

(<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-138>) who have died of starvation and dehydration. The UN last month

(<https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15604.doc.htm>) warned that a quarter of the population is on the brink of famine.

Yet, the number of aid trucks entering Gaza in March – an average of 169 per day, so far – remains well below the operational capacity of both the Rafah and Karem Abu Salem (Kerem Shalom) border crossings. And is it far, far short of the target of 500 trucks per day that is required to meet the basic humanitarian needs in Gaza.



In a race against the clock, UNRWA staff are trying to deliver as much aid as possible to avert starvation and, even worse, widespread famine. Persisting impossible conditions they face in the near east

humanitarian service in Gaza today.

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humanitarian aid that reaches UNRWA from the [Rafah] **LANDING PAGE/EN_EN)**

insufficient. There is a large shortage of food and non-food items,” confirms Mahmoud, UNRWA’s Senior Fleet Management Officer in Rafah, and a veteran of the Agency.

A recent report by WHO (<https://www.who.int/news/item/19-02-2024-children-s-lives-threatened-by-rising-malnutrition-in-the-gaza-strip>) found that 90 percent of children under the age of two in Gaza face severe food poverty – meaning they have consumed two or less food groups the day before. Over 95 percent of adults reduced their food consumption so that their children had food to eat.

Supplies allowed into the besieged Gaza Strip are simply not enough to feed an entire population.

The recent air drops of food into Gaza by the United States (<https://www.npr.org/2024/03/05/1235940178/more-u-s-aid-air-dropped-into-gaza>) and Jordan (<https://www.npr.org/2024/03/01/1235277071/gaza-jordan-airdrop-aid>) and other nations are not likely to alleviate the urgent and monumental humanitarian needs of its starving population.

Airdrops are extremely expensive, and it is impossible to monitor where the aid goes. They can make logistical sense in some cases — to meet the urgent needs of hospitals, for example — but aid professionals say they should not be the main avenue to feed Gaza’s more than 2 million people.

The UN has used air drops very, very rarely to reach people in need in remote areas and where it was extremely difficult to reach people through other means. For example, the UN used airdrops on very rare occasions in Syria and Iraq. But in the context of Gaza, there is a much easier way to reach people in need: by opening crossings by road, and the regular and increased flow of humanitarian assistance into Gaza via Israel and Egypt, including through longer working hours of current crossings and increasing the number of trucks.

Safety concerns within Gaza, and the failure to receive clearance to move aid to all areas, have compounded the crisis.

“[If this continues] we will not be able to meet all the needs of the internally displaced people (IDPs) inside the shelters because of the challenges faced in the transportation of humanitarian aid, first to warehouses and then to the shelters,” says Mahmoud of the current restrictions of access to aid convoys.

With more than 1.7 million Palestinians displaced, many of them multiple times, the need for food and non-food items is a weight shouldered by UNRWA, the backbone of the humanitarian operation in the Gaza Strip. Many rely on the Agency’s food aid for their survival. With the risk of famine



increasing with every passing day of hostilities, continued access restrictions
 in millions of lives. They have nothing in their tents. The warehouses
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Mahmoud's team in the UNRWA warehouse in Rafah prepares individual food baskets for distribution for internally displaced people containing milk and nutritional supplements for children, as well as lentils rice, various canned goods, sweets, and dates. (c) 2024 UNRWA Photo by Mohammed Hinnawi

"In spite of all the great challenges we face in providing humanitarian aid through [border] crossings, the UNRWA Supply Department has been able to provide a varied food basket containing milk and nutritional supplements for children," Mahmoud notes. The food parcels also include lentils, rice, various canned goods, sweets, and dates. "These are the food items remaining in our stores. They are repackaged as a food parcel and distributed to approximately 8,500 displaced families inside the Tal al-Sultan shelter centre in Rafah," he said.

To date, some 374,800 families have been assisted by UNRWA food distribution, with approximately 164,082 of them receiving two rounds of flour distributions.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini poignantly remarked: "Hunger is everywhere. A man-made famine is looming. [...] Babies – just a few months old – are dying of malnutrition and dehydration. I shudder to think of what will still be revealed about the horrors that have taken place in this narrow strip of land. What is the fate of an estimated 300,000 Gazans isolated in the north, cut off from humanitarian supplies?"



It is in these trying circumstances that Mahmoud and his team's dedication shines in the darkness.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

The difficulty and danger of this life-saving endeavour was highlighted

March 2024: When one UNRWA staff member was killed and another injured when Israeli forces hit an UNRWA food distribution centre

(/newsroom/official-statements/least-one-unrwa-staff-killed-when-israeli-forces-hit-unrwa-centre-used) in the eastern part of Rafah, not far from where Mahmoud and his team work. It was one of the few remaining UNRWA distribution centres in the Gaza Strip and comes as food supplies are running out, hunger is widespread and, in some areas, turning into famine.

Since the war began over five months ago, UNRWA has recorded an unprecedented number of violations against its staff and facilities that surpass any other conflict around the world. More than 150 UNRWA facilities have been hit, some completely destroyed, and at least 168 UNRWA team members have been killed, including in the line of duty.



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