

# Mr. Ramesh Rajasingham updating the Security Council on food security risks in Gaza

27 Feb 2024

## Mr. Ramesh Rajasingham, director of OCHA Coordination Division, on behalf of Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Martin Griffiths

### Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict – Resolution 2417 (2018)

#### Update on food security risks in Gaza

27 February 2024

Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President,

Excellencies,

In resolution 2417 (2018), you requested the Secretary-General report to you swiftly when the risk of conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity occurred in armed conflict. I am here to report on a grave situation in Gaza.

Our discussion today will come as no surprise. Since the start of the current hostilities following the horrific Hamas attacks in Israel on October 7, the UN has warned about the potentially deleterious impact on food insecurity in Gaza, particularly for a population already experiencing high levels of structural poverty after 16 years of blockade.

In December, it was projected that the entire population of 2.2 million people in Gaza would face high levels of acute food insecurity by February 2024 – the highest share of people facing this level of food insecurity ever recorded worldwide.

And here we are, at the end of February, with at least 576,000 people in Gaza – one-quarter of the population – one step away from famine; with 1 in 6 children under 2 years of age in northern Gaza suffering from acute malnutrition and wasting; and practically the entire population of Gaza left to rely on woefully inadequate humanitarian food assistance to survive. Unfortunately, as grim as the picture we see today is, there is every possibility for further deterioration.

Military operations, insecurity, and extensive restrictions on the entry and delivery of essential goods have decimated food production and agriculture.

Food security experts warn of complete agricultural collapse in northern Gaza by May if conditions persist, with fields and productive assets damaged, destroyed, or inaccessible. Many have had little choice but to abandon productive farmland due to evacuation orders and repeated displacement.

The hostilities and shortages of essential supplies, including electricity, fuel and water, have left food production at a virtual standstill. The five mills operating in Gaza prior to October 7 ceased operations as far back as November.

Heavy damage to water infrastructure from fighting and the severing of power and fuel supplies in October have significantly affected access to water that is essential for food production and the prevention of malnutrition and illness.

Fishing, long an important source of nutrition and income in Gaza, has been a practical impossibility since October 7 when sea access for boats was prohibited.

A lack of fodder and water, as well as the fighting, has also claimed the lives of livestock, removing yet another important source of food and income.

And the commercial sector, a key part of the food distribution network prior to October 7, has been crippled by the lack of local produce and extensive restrictions on commercial imports.

Commodities such as wheat flour, eggs and dairy have been almost entirely depleted in parts of Gaza. Meanwhile the scarcity of available products has sent prices soaring to prohibitive levels at a time when livelihoods have been wiped out by the conflict.

Hunger and the risk of famine are exacerbated by factors that go beyond just the availability of food. Inadequate water, sanitation, and health services creates a cycle of vulnerability, where malnourished people – especially among the tens of thousands of people who are injured – become more susceptible to disease that further depletes the body's nutritional reserves.

A steep rise in malnutrition among children and pregnant and breastfeeding women in the Gaza strip is a particularly grave concern. And add chronic overcrowding, exposure to the cold and an absence of adequate shelter to this lack of nutrition, and you have created the conditions for massive disease epidemics.

My colleagues from the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization will address these issues in more detail.

Madam President,

With people in Gaza unable to rely on markets and other usual sources of food, humanitarian food assistance is now nearly the sole source of subsistence.

Yet as we have reported to the Council on numerous occasions, the humanitarian community is facing overwhelming obstacles just to get a bare minimum of supplies into Gaza, let alone mounting the multisectoral response that would be required to avert a famine.

Our efforts continue to be beset by crossing closures, serious movement restrictions, access denials, onerous vetting procedures, incidents involving desperate civilians, protests and a breakdown in law and order, restrictions on communications and protective equipment, and impassable supply routes due to damaged roads and unexploded ordnance.

Security risks remain a significant obstacle. The shelling on 20 February of the Médecins Sans Frontières guesthouse in Al Mawasi highlights the weak implementation of precautions that all parties are required to take, and of the humanitarian notification system that aims to maximize these. This has left operations extremely dangerous for humanitarian workers. We cannot forget the 161 humanitarian workers killed in the hostilities so far.

And the suspension of funding to UNRWA challenges our capacity to mount an effective response. An estimated 1.7 million people, over three quarters of the population of Gaza, reside in UNRWA-run and other public emergency shelters. Last week, the Commissioner-General informed the General Assembly that the Agency's ability to fulfill its mandate is now seriously threatened and that its operations in the region will be severely compromised from March.

Nevertheless, we continue ceaselessly to plan, search and call for solutions to overcome the hurdles that would allow us to scale up food delivery and health services. In the immediate term, this includes clearer security guarantees; a better humanitarian notification system to minimize risks, fewer restrictions on telecommunications equipment; the removal of unexploded ordnance; and the use of all possible entry points.

The stark reality, however, is that a response at the level required will be impossible without immediate and concerted action by the parties, the Security Council, other Member States and the wider international community.

The White Note submitted to this Council sets out recommendations for this action. It includes ensuring respect for international humanitarian law; the resumption of entry of essential food, electricity, fuel and cooking gas, including by the private sector; the protection and restoration of vital infrastructure and services, including cross-border water pipelines, the lifting of restrictions on fishing activity, access to farmland and the entry of agricultural goods; urgently facilitating greater humanitarian access into and within Gaza, including opening additional crossing points and finally concerted efforts towards ending this conflict altogether.

But without a doubt, at this stage, very little will be possible while hostilities continue and while there is a risk that they will spread into the overcrowded areas in the south of Gaza. We therefore reiterate our call, for a ceasefire.

If nothing is done, we fear widespread famine in Gaza is almost inevitable, and the conflict, which since October has claimed the lives of almost 30,000 people, and injured more than 70,000, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, will have many more victims.

We put this before the Council as a matter of urgency.

Thank you.