

## Oxfam GB Briefing: Israel Gaza War

Since Saturday 7 October 2023, **1,400 Israelis have been killed, and over 4,932 injured**. The brutal violence against Israeli civilians is horrifying and Oxfam condemns these attacks. **In Gaza, over 4,651 people have been killed, and 14,245 injured**<sup>1</sup>. Last week, Israel announced it was stopping all supplies of food, fuel and water from entering Gaza and **ordered an evacuation of northern Gaza** to the south ahead of a ground invasion. On 22 October, the Rafah crossing with Egypt opened for the second consecutive day, allowing the entry of 14 trucks carrying food, water and medical supplies. This is equivalent to about **three per cent of the daily average volume of commodities entering Gaza prior to the hostilities**. The escalating violence and the endangering of life through a near 'total blockade' is a humanitarian crisis that must end. The figures above include the **471 Palestinians killed after a strike on Al-Ahli Hospital** on 17 October. Bombing hospitals is against basic humanity. It is still unclear what, and who, caused the damage to the hospital, but it must be investigated immediately, independently and impartially.

Aid deals that have been negotiated in recent days by the US government are welcome. However, as the humanitarian crisis continues to spiral out of control, **the international community must use all diplomatic tools at its disposal to immediately de-escalate and cease the violence and ensure unimpeded access for humanitarian aid in Gaza**, including food, water, electricity and fuel. **There is no military solution to this conflict**. This is a moment of huge instability but what is certain is that without stopping the hostilities now, thousands more civilians will die. The risk of the conflict escalating, spilling over into the wider region, and the further displacement of millions of Palestinians and Israelis, is of huge concern. **All political parties in the UK must ensure they are supporting calls for a ceasefire, the protection of Israeli and Palestinian civilians and humanitarian access, in line with international humanitarian law, in the strongest possible terms.**

### MSPs should call on the UK Government to urgently:

- Work to ensure an **immediate de-escalation and cessation of hostilities**. The international community, including the UK, must use all diplomatic tools at its disposal to secure an immediate ceasefire.
- Press Israel to **immediately recall the evacuation order**, in line with International Humanitarian Law.
- Press Israel to **end to the total siege of Gaza**, ensuring unfettered humanitarian access, including delivery of medical supplies, food, fuel and water. Press Israel to **allow sufficient emergency aid to be delivered in Gaza** through all routes.
- Press all parties to prioritise the **protection of all civilians** from military action, and work within the constraints of Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions, to respect International Humanitarian Law and to work to ensure all States and other armed actors do so. Including the immediate **unconditional release of all hostages** held captive by armed groups in Gaza.

### A humanitarian catastrophe

The Gaza strip is the most densely populated place on earth. At just 365 km<sup>2</sup> it is home to 2.2million people – half are under the age of 18. By comparison, the Isle of Wight is approximately the same size, and only houses 150,000 people. The UN reports that Israeli bombardments, from the air, sea and land have continued almost uninterrupted. Entire neighbourhoods have been destroyed and turned to rubble and **it is**

*“People here are shouting of hunger. Families are trying to afford the basic needs of their children, like water, food, milk and so on. Food has run out from the markets and the supermarkets. No water to drink. We are talking about a humanitarian catastrophe here in the Gaza strip.”*

– Oxfam staff member in Gaza

<sup>1</sup> Figures correct as of 17:00 EEST on 22 October, according to UN OCHA: <https://www.ochaopt.org/>

estimated that [one million people](#) have been internally displaced. Border crossings are closed, so the people of Gaza have nowhere to go, and essential medical supplies and humanitarian aid cannot be brought in. Indiscriminate bombing of a densely populated area [is in contravention to international humanitarian law](#). **In such a densely populated area, explosive weapons are almost impossible to use in a way that does not contravene international humanitarian law.**

*"We are on the way, people are flooding the streets with their necessities and most precious belongings and walking and begging any passing car to help them or take them. My heart is shattering. I can't take pictures because people are humiliated enough. It's disastrous. There are old and sick people walking in the streets. Children are running for "safety". My tears don't seem to want to stop.*

*I'm not afraid. I'm not sad for me. I'm sad for everybody else left behind. How will those people survive?*

*It felt like we are saying goodbye to Gaza, its people, and ourselves. It felt like we are never going back. Our souls were stripped away, our dignity, our lives. I don't know what comes next, I don't know if we are safe."*

- Oxfam staff member on travelling south in Gaza

### Collective punishment

While the Israeli government has the right to protect its citizens within the bounds of international law, **imposing a near total siege of essential supplies including food, water, fuel, and medicines** to civilians who are trapped in Gaza **constitutes collective punishment of a population** that bears no responsibility for the violence and is illegal under international law. Before the escalation of violence, Gaza was already under blockade – one already declared illegal by the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) as it amounts to collective punishment – and **80% of the population were already reliant on humanitarian assistance**. Imposing a near total siege on an already vulnerable population running out of vital supplies and services has caused a humanitarian catastrophe. It is essential that emergency aid continues through Egypt, though the scale of aid entering so far is a drop in the ocean to need. However, even when open, the Rafah crossing does not have the infrastructure to deliver the quantity of aid needed and will create a bottleneck if relied on as the only point of delivery. **Israel bears the primary duty to meet the needs of the population in Gaza** and can – and must – lift the blockade and allow aid in through crossings from Israel as well.

The **electricity blackout** has pushed vital services, including health, water and sanitation to the brink of collapse. All five of Gaza's wastewater treatment plants and most of its 65 sewage pumping stations have been forced to close. **Untreated sewage is now being discharged into the sea** and, in some areas, solid waste is accumulating in the streets. **Clean water has now virtually run out**. Some people are being forced to drink from farm wells. **Only three litres of water a day per person is now available**. The World Health Organisation recommends one person needs between 50-100 litres of water each day to meet basic health requirements.

### Forcible transfer

On Friday 13 October, the Government of **Israel issued an order to the citizens of northern Gaza – approximately 1.1 million people – to evacuate to the south** of the Gaza Strip in preparation for a potential escalation of Israeli military attack on Gaza. This order has heightened the dangers that civilians are suffering.

For many, this move is impossible. There are six hospitals and 26 health facilities in Northern Gaza, including Gaza's largest hospital, Al-Shifa Hospital, which has 500 beds. Already, the hospital is overflowing with patients being treated for complex injuries. Al-Shifa is already at full capacity and under immense strain treating the thousands of people injured in airstrikes. With beds full, patients are in hallways, while medical supplies dwindle, and staff are exhausted. **The healthcare system is nearing collapse**. A crucial neonatal intensive care unit is also nearing breakdown and cannot be evacuated without serious loss of life. There are not enough

ambulances to evacuate patients or to support those who have injuries from the ongoing bombardment. **All medical facilities have either run out of fuel for generators or will do so imminently.** The case of Al-Ahli Hospital shows that evacuations of hospitals is not feasible, and that nowhere in Gaza is currently safe. The need for an immediate ceasefire is now more evident than ever.

For those who have made the difficult decision to move, **there is limited water, food and power, and nowhere safe to go** or equipped to host such numbers of people. Humanitarian agencies operating in Gaza are reporting a humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented scale. The evacuation to the South **will cram 2.2 million people into 60% of the total area of Gaza** with no access to basic services and humanitarian support. There are not adequate facilities to safely accommodate residents from northern Gaza, and their safety remains jeopardised as Israeli airstrikes persistently target central and southern Gaza.

Under international law Israel is bound to ensure the protection of all persons there and that proper accommodation, health, safety and nutrition is provided to the people it is moving, and that the evacuation zone is not under attack. None of this has been provided and Israel's near total blockade of Gaza makes this impossible. An instruction to relocate under threat of violence, without any guarantee of safety or return and without providing for the needs of the protected population, **risks amounting to forcible transfer, is a grave breach of international humanitarian law and codified as a war crime.**

### **The future for Palestine and Israel**

Continuing a pattern that has brought only violence and instability for 70 years will not bring a solution this decades-long crisis. **It is long past time to break the cycle of war**, temporary truces, and pledges of humanitarian aid which are only sticking plasters on deep wounds. It is now more crucial than ever to genuinely **tackle the root causes of the injustice and violence** in Palestine and Israel, through a negotiated end to the blockade and occupation of the Palestinian territory.

*"We travelled [south]. I travelled with my family three days ago and now have no food, no water, no internet. We are more than 120 persons in two flats. We are struggling with securing food for people. The main issue is water. We didn't have water for two days. Today we managed to purchase water from a private vendor. My son told me today that his dream is to have a shower.*

*My daughter asked me why we didn't bring the school bag, "how will I go to school if I don't have a school bag?"*

- Oxfam staff member in Gaza

### **Oxfam's response**

Oxfam has been working in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel since the 1950s, and we have over 30 members of staff in Gaza currently. At the time of writing, all of our staff are safe, but many have had to move to try and find relative safety. Some have lost family members, friends, and their homes.

We are raising funds and preparing to respond in Gaza – as we have many times before – though this remains impossible under bombardment, when our staff are displaced, and when there is no route for essential supplies to enter.

Our decision to respond in any crisis is always driven by humanitarian need alone – ensuring that people most in need of help are prioritised and taking into account the ability of states to provide assistance for its people.

**For more information, contact**

**Lewis Ryder-Jones, Advocacy Adviser, Oxfam Scotland on [lryder-jones1@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:lryder-jones1@oxfam.org.uk)**