



CATASTROPHE IN GAZA: RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE THE DELIVERY OF HUMANITARIAN AID

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Gaza is suffering an acute humanitarian catastrophe. Over three months into Israel’s military response to the October 7 Hamas massacre, the World Health Organization is [warning](#) that the death toll in Gaza from hunger and disease could outstrip the number of people killed in the war thus far. At over [26,000 killed](#) – [thousands](#) of whom were Hamas militants, but the [majority](#) of whom were children and women – this number already exceeds one percent of Gaza’s population. Nine in 10 Gazans are eating [less than one meal a day](#). In addition to the [dearth of food](#), Gazans sorely lack drinkable water, medical supplies, shelter, and fuel.

Prime Minister Netanyahu [stated](#) that Israel is allowing only the “minimum” amount of aid to enter Gaza. [US Senators](#) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs have [reported](#) that Israel is blocking entry of sufficient aid. Among the provisional measures issued in the case brought by South Africa alleging Israel has breached parts of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the International Court of Justice [ordered](#) Israel to take “immediate and effective” steps to facilitate the urgent delivery of basic services and aid to address the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza. The Biden Administration and Congress must use their considerable leverage to ensure that Israel [complies with this ruling](#), international law, and existing US law – including [Section 6201 of the Foreign Assistance Act](#), which [prohibits](#) US security assistance to countries that prevent or restrict US humanitarian assistance to those in need.

This brief lays out the key factors inhibiting the provision of humanitarian aid and recommends steps the US government should take to facilitate a surge of assistance into Gaza.

Key causes of insufficient humanitarian aid delivery to Gaza:

- **Israeli military operations render aid delivery difficult and dangerous:** Areas requiring humanitarian response inside Gaza are [difficult](#) to navigate, as Israeli military operations suddenly close or damage roads, abruptly establish no-go zones, and force Gazan aid recipients to constantly relocate to small, overcrowded spaces. In addition, aid operations [experience](#) “constant bombardments,” with some convoys coming under fire. Aid workers have been killed, including [more than 130](#) UN personnel. Hundreds of UN facilities, hospitals, and other vital aid infrastructure have [sustained](#) damage.
- **Cumbersome entry process stymies Gaza aid operations:** Israel first [screens](#) most humanitarian aid at the Nitzana checkpoint; it is then rerouted to Rafah on the Egypt-Gaza border – a lengthy and expensive process resulting in aid pileups. Primarily a pedestrian crossing, Rafah has limited capacity for processing aid and private-sector goods. The Kerem Shalom crossing on the Israel-Gaza border has greater processing capacity, but has been [reopened](#) by Israel for limited operation only. Thus, aid trucks line up for miles at Rafah and wait for days to enter Gaza through a single gate. Aid traveling via convoy from Jordan to Gaza goes through the cumbersome process of being scanned twice: at the Israel-Jordan border and when entering Gaza.

- **Israeli access denials, restrictions, and closures hamper the entry of aid:** In the first two weeks of 2024, only 24 percent of the aid missions [attempted](#) to northern Gaza were even partially completed, due to access denials by Israel. This is a steep decline compared to October through December, when Israel helped facilitate 86 percent of missions. Israel has instituted seemingly arbitrary [restrictions](#), such as a 170-centimeter pallet height limit for aid trucks. Humanitarian aid entry is also hampered by the closures and limited hours of operation at Israeli border crossings with Gaza, and by Israeli visa restrictions for aid workers. Prior to the war, about 500 trucks of aid entered into Gaza daily. Now, only 100-200 trucks per day are [permitted](#) to enter. Following a visit to the Rafah crossing, Senators Chris Van Hollen and Jeff Merkley [stated](#) that “decisions made by the Netanyahu government have erected a variety of barriers that are preventing the delivery of sufficient life-sustaining goods from reaching innocent Palestinians in Gaza.”
- **Electrical and telecommunications blackouts interfere with aid efforts:** Gaza has suffered an electricity blackout since October 11, 2023, following Israel’s cut off of electricity to the Strip. Some 57 percent of electrical lines have been [damaged](#), and Israel has prevented the entry of sufficient fuel to power the sole power plant in the Strip. The electricity crisis and related disruption in [phone and internet connectivity](#) greatly inhibit the real-time exchange of information – making it challenging to coordinate aid deliveries, respond promptly to developing situations, and make adequate safety assessments.
- **Egypt and Hamas are also hindering the entry of sufficient aid into Gaza.** Egyptian authorities have imposed restrictions on humanitarian aid groups’ operations in the northern Sinai that make it difficult to develop a high-volume aid pipeline from Egypt into Gaza. They also [direct](#) all humanitarian aid solely through the Egyptian Red Crescent, thereby restricting access to the Rafah crossing for UN and NGO staff. While US Special Envoy David Satterfield [stated](#) in November that there was no record of Hamas seizing aid, it appears that Hamas looting has [occurred](#) in isolated incidents.

The US government should urgently utilize its leverage to address the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza by:

1. **Pushing for a negotiated stop to the fighting in Gaza:** Humanitarian aid organizations are [adamant](#) that they “can do nothing remotely adequate to address the level of suffering” while the fighting, especially Israel’s aerial bombardments, continues.
2. **Pressing the Israeli government to restore electricity, water, and fuel to Gaza:** Even greatly enhanced aid delivery [cannot offset](#) the dire scale of need created by the withholding of these critical items; their provision must be restored.
3. **Insisting on Israeli implementation of a civil-military deconfliction mechanism:** As Israel has done previously, including in the 2006 war with Hizballah in Lebanon, it must utilize a [deconfliction mechanism](#) to [protect humanitarian aid workers](#) during military operations. The IDF should maintain a line of communication with UN aid agencies for real-time updates on aid deliveries, convoy movements, and critical infrastructure.

4. **Urging Israel to open the Erez crossing and lengthen operating hours at Kerem Shalom and Nitzana:** Opening the Erez crossing would enable direct access to northern Gaza and has been [advocated](#) by Israel’s security establishment. The Kerem Shalom crossing should be open [seven days a week](#) and operating hours should be extended at the Nitzana checkpoint.
5. **Pressing Israel to open the port of Ashdod for aid deliveries:** In addition to opening Erez, UN agency chiefs have [requested](#) access to the Israeli port of Ashdod – located 24 miles north of Gaza and far closer to the Strip than the Egyptian ports of Al-Arish and Port Said – to deliver aid directly to northern Gaza.
6. **Advocating for Israel to clarify its policies on the banning of goods entering Gaza:** Given [reports](#) of opaque, inconsistent Israeli policy on the entry of goods, Israel must clarify its policy on “[dual-use](#)” items like flashlights (which it has repeatedly banned). Israel should end the practice of [turning away](#) aid trucks carrying a single rejected item.
7. **Pressing Israel to allow commercial goods into Gaza:** Aid agencies [lack](#) the ability to replace Gaza’s private sector. Allowing Gazan merchants access to [commercial goods](#) would permit aid agencies to purchase supplies directly inside Gaza and provide vouchers to residents for purchasing food and other items.
8. **Considering airdrops of humanitarian aid:** [Airdrops](#) – which would require coordination with the Israeli military – could be carried out in partnership with the UN Humanitarian Air Service and countries like [France and Jordan](#), enabling aid delivery to get to areas beyond the reach of humanitarian organizations inside Gaza.
9. **Sending hospital ships for humanitarian support:** As Members of Congress called for in a [bipartisan letter](#) (and as France has [done](#)), the US should send [hospital](#) ships to the shores near Gaza for civilians to receive medical treatment.
10. **Pushing Egypt to streamline procedures for aid agencies to procure goods locally:** Egypt should expand access for UN and NGO staff, allowing for [local procurement of goods](#) and the establishment of more aid facilities at Al-Arish. When aid agencies cannot procure goods locally, Egypt should exempt imported aid from tariffs.
11. **Working with the UN to scale up its humanitarian aid operations:** The UN should declare a system-wide increase of staff and resources for Gaza, providing its [Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza](#) with necessary resources. In addition, the US should move swiftly in reviewing UNRWA’s operations to ensure that a [pause in funding](#) in light of serious Israeli allegations against a small number of UNRWA staff will not impact aid delivery. UNRWA, whose services in Gaza are [irreplaceable](#), has stated that it will [run out of funding](#) in February if donor countries do not resume their support.