

Israel-Gaza war

Unicef official tells of ‘utter annihilation’ after travelling length of Gaza

Tuesday 26 March 2024, by [BURKE Jason](#) (Date first published: 22 March 2024).

James Elder describes children on the brink of death and families desperate for clean water, food and shelter

An aid official who travelled the length of Gaza this week has described scenes of “utter annihilation”, with “nothing left” of what were once thriving and crowded cities in the territory.

“The depth of the horror surpasses our ability to describe it,” said James Elder, a spokesperson with the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef).

“As soon as you drive through the north, you get that universal gesture of hunger of people putting their hands to their mouths. A lot of children, women with very gaunt faces. In [the city of] Khan Younis, there is utter annihilation.

“I’ve not seen that level of devastation in 20 years with the UN. People’s coping capacity in the north has been smashed and in the south it is hanging by a thread,” Elder said in an interview on Friday.

Elder said that he saw a dozen “skeletal” children at Kamal Adwan hospital in Beit Lahia in the north of Gaza.

“We are seeing severe malnutrition cases ... Children who are on the brink of death, just skin and bones ... and these are the ones who have managed to get to hospital. There is a real fear for those that can’t,” Elder said. “This is man-made and preventable.”

Medical staff at the hospital worked 36-hour shifts and then joined their families to search for clean water, food or shelter, Elder said.

The comments come amid increasingly frantic diplomatic activity aimed at ending hostilities in Gaza and allowing “a flood” of aid to reach the territory after nearly six months of war, during which supplies of basic necessities have been drastically cut.

Palestinian children stand amid the rubble of a building destroyed after Israeli bombardment in Rafah, in southern Gaza. Photograph: Mohammed Abed/AFP/Getty Images

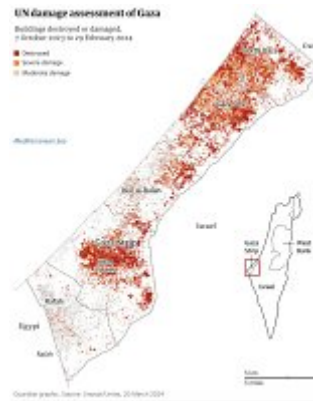
A report from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification initiative (IPC) this week warned that any escalation of the war could push half of Gaza’s total population to the brink of starvation within months. Famine is imminent in northern Gaza, where 70% of people are experiencing catastrophic hunger, the IPC said.

Elder said there was massive overcrowding on Gaza’s coastal road, one of the few existing

thoroughfares in the territory usable by trucks and other vehicles.

“As you drive up on the coastal road [from Rafah heading north], you see just hundreds of thousands of people. They are sleeping in the streets, on the beach, on the sand behind the beach, in any available space,” he said.

His description was supported by multiple interviews with other aid workers and residents in the territory. Most describe appalling conditions, with no or limited sanitation for huge numbers of people, inadequate food supplies even in the more accessible areas and a wide-scale breakdown of civil order.



Israel is now under unprecedented pressure to allow more aid to enter Gaza. The UN security council is expected to vote on Friday on a US-sponsored resolution declaring that “an immediate and sustained ceasefire” is “imperative” to protect civilians and enable humanitarian aid to be delivered.

Aid officials say the number of aid deliveries via land needs to increase fast and that it needs to be sustained over a long period to come close to meeting needs.

Israel denies it is blocking food aid, but aid agencies say bureaucratic processes and checks are slow and opaque and that Israel is not providing enough access or security. Experts say recent efforts to send aid by sea or airdrops are not effective and that entry points that would allow the direct supply of aid to the most needy areas in the north of the territory have remained shut since the beginning of the conflict.

Children wait to receive food from a charity kitchen in Rafah. Photograph: Ismael Mohamad/UPI/Rex/Shutterstock

On Friday, the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, met the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, for talks aimed at ensuring more aid gets into Gaza, amid increasingly tense relations between the two allies over the war.

Blinken’s sixth trip to the Middle East since the war broke out on 7 October comes as talks continued in Doha aimed at securing a ceasefire in the conflict.

“One hundred per cent of the population of Gaza is experiencing severe levels of acute food insecurity. We cannot, we must not allow that to continue,” Blinken told a news conference late on Thursday.

Blinken is also expected to discuss Israel’s intention to launch a ground offensive on Rafah, where more than half of the population of Gaza is sheltering in makeshift accommodation.

Netanyahu has repeatedly vowed to launch an attack into the city, which he says is the final stronghold of Hamas. The US president, Joe Biden, has said this would cross a “red line” for the US.

The war was triggered by a surprise attack into southern Israel by Hamas militants who killed 1,200 people and took about 250 hostages, mostly civilians. More than 32,000 Palestinians have been killed in the subsequent Israeli bombardments, mostly civilians, Gaza health authorities say.

Elder described the prospect of an attack into Rafah as “terrifying”.

“A military offensive in Rafah would be utterly catastrophic. The last remaining water points and hospitals [in Gaza] are there and there is nowhere else to go. Khan Younis, Gaza City barely exist any more,” he said. “Rafah is Gaza’s last hope and it is utterly bewildering that a conversation on a potential military operation is still continuing.”

Jason Burke *in Jerusalem*

P.S.

• The Guardian. Fri 22 Mar 2024 14.07 CET:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/22/unicef-official-utter-annihilation-gaza>

• *Jason Burke's articles in the Guardian:*

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/jasonburke>

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