

“Let Them Eat Dirt”. Israel has Given Palestinians in Gaza Two Choices. Leave or Die. Chris Hedges

The final stage of Israel’s genocide in Gaza, an orchestrated mass starvation, has begun. The international community does not intend to stop it.

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There was never any possibility that the Israeli [government](#) would agree to a pause in the fighting proposed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, much less a ceasefire. Israel is on the verge of delivering the coup de grâce in its war on Palestinians in Gaza – mass starvation. When Israeli leaders use the term “absolute victory,” they mean total decimation, total elimination. The Nazis in 1942 systematically starved the 500,000 men, women and children in the Warsaw Ghetto. This is a number Israel intends to exceed.

Israel, and its chief patron the United States, by attempting to shut down the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)), which provides food and aid to Gaza, is not only committing a war crime, but is in flagrant defiance of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The court found the charges of genocide brought by South Africa, which included statements and facts gathered by UNWRA, plausible. It ordered Israel to abide by six provisional measures to prevent genocide and alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe. The fourth provisional measure calls on Israel to secure immediate and effective steps to provide humanitarian assistance and essential services in Gaza.

UNRWA’s reports on conditions in Gaza, which I covered as a reporter for seven years, and its documentation of indiscriminate Israeli attacks illustrate that, as UNRWA said, “unilaterally declared ‘safe zones’ are not safe at all. Nowhere in Gaza is safe.”

UNRWA’s role in documenting the genocide, as well as providing food and aid to the Palestinians, infuriates the Israeli government. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [accused](#)

[UNRWA](#) after the ruling of providing false information to the ICJ. Already an Israeli target for decades, Israel decided that UNRWA, which supports 5.9 million Palestinian refugees across the Middle East with clinics, schools and food, had to be eliminated. Israel's destruction of UNRWA serves a political as well as material objective.

The [evidence-free](#) Israeli [accusations](#) against UNRWA that a dozen of the 13,000 employees had links to those who carried out the attacks in Israel on Oct. 7, which saw some 1,200 Israelis killed, did the trick. It led 16 major donors, including the United States, the [U.K.](#), Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Finland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Estonia and Japan, to suspend financial support for the relief agency on which nearly every Palestinian in Gaza depends for food. Israel has killed [152 UNRWA workers](#) and damaged [147 UNRWA installations](#) since Oct. 7. Israel has also [bombed](#) UNRWA relief trucks.

More than 27,708 Palestinians have been [killed](#) in Gaza, some 67,000 have been wounded and at least 7,000 are missing, most likely dead and buried under the rubble.

More than half a million Palestinians – one in four – are [starving](#) in Gaza, according to the U.N. Starvation will soon be ubiquitous. Palestinians in Gaza, at least 1.9 million of whom have been internally displaced, lack not only sufficient food, but clean water, shelter and medicine. There are few fruits or vegetables. There is little flour to make [bread](#). Pasta, along with meat, cheese and eggs, have disappeared. Black market prices for dry goods such as lentils and beans have increased 25 times from pre-war prices. A bag of [flour](#) on the black market has risen from \$8.00 to \$200 dollars. The healthcare system in Gaza, with only three of Gaza's 36 [hospitals](#) left partially functioning, has largely collapsed. Some 1.3 million displaced Palestinians live on the streets of the southern city of Rafah, which Israel designated a "safe zone," but has begun to [bomb](#). Families shiver in the winter rains under flimsy tarps amid pools of raw sewage. An estimated [90 percent](#) of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been driven from their homes.

"There is no instance since the Second World War in which an entire population has been reduced to extreme hunger and destitution with such speed," [writes](#) Alex de Waal, executive director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University and the author of "[Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine](#)," in the Guardian. "And there's no case in which the international obligation to stop it has been so clear."

The United States, formerly UNRWA's largest contributor, provided [\\$422 million to the agency](#) in 2023. The severance of funds ensures that UNRWA food deliveries, already in very short supply because of [blockages](#) by Israel, will largely come to a halt by the end of February or the beginning of March.

Israel has given the Palestinians in Gaza two choices. Leave or die.

I covered the [famine](#) in Sudan in 1988 that took 250,000 lives. There are streaks in my lungs, scars from standing amid hundreds of Sudanese who were dying of tuberculosis. I was strong and healthy and fought off the contagion. They were weak and emaciated and did not. The international community, as in Gaza, did little to intervene.

The precursor to starvation – undernourishment – already affects most Palestinians in Gaza. Those who starve lack enough calories to sustain themselves. In desperation people begin to eat animal fodder, grass, leaves, insects, rodents, even dirt. They suffer from diarrhea and respiratory infections. They rip up tiny bits of food, often spoiled, and ration it.

Soon, lacking enough iron to produce hemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen from the lungs to the body, and myoglobin, a protein that provides oxygen to muscles, coupled with a lack of vitamin B1, they become [anemic](#). The body feeds on itself. Tissue and muscle waste away. It is impossible to regulate body temperature. Kidneys shut down. Immune systems crash. Vital organs – brain, heart, lungs, ovaries and testes – atrophy. Blood circulation slows. The volume of blood decreases. Infectious diseases such as typhoid, tuberculosis and cholera become an epidemic, killing people by the thousands.

It is impossible to concentrate. Emaciated victims succumb to mental and emotional withdrawal and apathy. They do not want to be touched or moved. The heart muscle is weakened. Victims, even at rest, are in a state of virtual heart failure. Wounds do not heal. Vision is impaired with cataracts, even among the young. Finally, wracked by convulsions and hallucinations, the heart stops. This process can last up to 40 days for an adult. Children, the elderly and the sick expire at faster rates.

I saw hundreds of skeletal figures, specters of human beings, moving forlornly at a glacial pace across the barren Sudanese landscape. Hyenas, accustomed to eating human flesh, routinely picked off small children. I stood over clusters of bleached human bones on the outskirts of villages where dozens of people, too weak to walk, had laid down in a group and never gotten up. Many were the remains of entire families.

In the abandoned town of Mayen Abun bats dangled from the rafters of the gutted Italian mission church. The streets were overgrown with tussocks of grass. The dirt airstrip was flanked by hundreds of human bones, skulls and the remnants of iron bracelets, colored beads, baskets and tattered strips of clothing. The palm trees had been cut in half. People had eaten the leaves and the pulp inside. There had been a rumor that food would be delivered by plane. People had walked for days to the airstrip. They waited and waited and waited. No plane arrived. No one buried the dead.

Now, from a distance, I watch this happen in another land in another time. I know the indifference that doomed the Sudanese, mostly Dinkas, and today dooms the Palestinians. The poor, especially when they are of color, do not count. They can be killed like flies. The starvation in Gaza is not a natural disaster. It is Israel's masterplan.

There will be scholars and historians who will write of this genocide, falsely believing that we can learn from the past, that we are different, that history can prevent us from being, once again, barbarians. They will hold academic conferences. They will say "Never again!" They will praise themselves for being more humane and civilized. But when it comes time to speak out with each new genocide, fearful of losing their status or academic positions, they will scurry like rats into their holes. Human history is one long atrocity for the world's poor and vulnerable. Gaza is another chapter.

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