

Disease and death: The shock wave of collective punishment against Gaza

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A few days after the South African government filed an indictment against Israel for genocide at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and a hundred days into Israel's ongoing military offensive, the civilian death toll has surpassed 26,000 and the number of injured people has exceeded 60,000. Although the casualties continue to rise at an average rate of 125 deaths per day,¹ the greatest threat comes not from shelling, but from hunger and disease.

Giora Eiland, former head of Israel's National Security Council and one of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's closest advisors, insists that Israel must ignore the worldwide protests that respond to the humanitarian disaster its attacks have imposed on Gaza, claiming that "epidemics in the south of the Strip will accelerate our victory."²

The restriction of water, food, and energy sources imposed by Israel on Gaza's population is more of a collective punishment than a military strategy. In a statement describing Palestinians as human animals, Gallant announced a total siege on Gaza.³ This severe restriction was imposed on a population already suffering from years of chronic shortages due to Israeli occupation.

Disease and hunger constitute a second, deadlier battlefield. The Israeli siege alone would be enough to inflict enormous suffering on the Palestinian population. On top of that, two thirds of the

population are homeless due to forced displacement and the destruction of their homes; for them, the cold and the rain combine with indescribably unsanitary conditions caused by the destruction of water and sewage pipes, the lack of toilets, garbage, and large quantities of unburied corpses. This situation is worsening day by day and has already become one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes generated by human actions, as Yara Asi, a Palestinian international health expert, reports.⁴

UNICEF spokesperson James Elder stated that since the beginning of 2024, 424,639 cases of infectious diseases have been recorded in Gaza. Since official data only includes cases that were able to reach a medical facility, the number of sick people is undoubtedly much higher. The enormous number of sick people would have been enough to overwhelm the medical services in Gaza even in the condition they were in before October 7. Currently, 27 of Gaza's 36 hospitals have been destroyed by indiscriminate Israeli bombardment, which has also wiped out all public services. Elder notes, "There is no need for further bloodshed to end the lives of many more people."⁵

Prior to October 2023, water in Gaza was already increasingly scarce and 97% was unfit for human consumption.⁶ Data from 2018 indicated that contaminated water and diarrhea were responsible for a quarter of all children's deaths. As part of its offensive against Gaza, Israel cut off the water supply, bombed distribution networks and drainage, and paralyzed the operation of desalination plants by preventing the entry of fuel. As a result, most of the population has been forced to drink, wash, and prepare their food with highly contaminated water. There is a general shortage of soap, sanitary napkins, and diapers. The degree of human suffering is indescribable, especially that of mothers who watch helplessly as their children

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waste away from malnutrition and diarrhea. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA),⁷ diarrhea cases reported in Gaza among children under five are 25 times higher than the monthly average before the war, and cases of hepatitis A are already being reported. Fear of an eventual cholera epidemic is growing daily.

Over the last two months, 160,000 cases of acute respiratory infections, such as COVID-19, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), along with other conditions such as scabies, lice, and chicken pox, have been reported in Gaza. There is also concern about potential outbreaks of other diseases, such as West Nile virus, which is transmitted by mosquitoes that thrive in stagnant water. Measles, polio, and other vaccine-preventable diseases could also spread if children are not vaccinated.

Growing concern in Israel about the health problems in Gaza responds primarily to diseases being contracted by its soldiers and the fear of epidemic boats reaching its population.⁸

All these data indicate the beginning of a health crisis that will turn into an epidemiological disaster of much greater proportions if the hostilities are not stopped, and borders will not be able to stop its spread.

There are no statistics on the number of people who have died or may die because they have not received dialysis or chemotherapy, or been able to obtain insulin or hypertension medication. Nor can we know for sure how many are dying from flu or diarrhea, or from hospital overcrowding, or from infected wounds due to lack of sanitation and antibiotics.

The lack of medicines and healing materials is severe and is failing to improve despite the best efforts of Palestinian doctors and nurses, WHO, UNICEF, and non-governmental organizations such as Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders.

Fear, sadness, and hopelessness among the people of Gaza are on the rise. However, for Israel, this is not only a collateral effect, but one that is

deliberately provoked: Likud party lawmaker Tally Gotliv argued before the Knesset, Israel's highest body of authority, that "hunger and thirst among Gaza's population" will help the military efforts, allowing for the recruitment of desperate collaborators for intelligence purposes. Gotliv is one of the Knesset members who suggested dropping the Jericho atomic bomb on the Palestinians at the beginning of Israel's offensive.⁹

Recent history shows that in major humanitarian crises generated by armed conflicts, famine and disease take a greater toll than armed attacks. Darfur, Yemen, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo are some examples.¹⁰

Devi Sridhar, a public health specialist, published an article in The Guardian¹¹ in which she states that "unless there is a drastic change that includes immediate rehabilitation of the health system, half a million people - a quarter of Gaza's population - could die from preventable health causes by 2024". This figure would be equivalent, according to the same author, to a proportion of fifteen indirect deaths for every direct death caused by military action.

Before Israel unleashed its offensive against Gaza, some 30,000 children under five years of age had already been found to suffer severe malnutrition. This figure has now grown tenfold. UNICEF declared 335,000 children at serious risk of severe malnutrition (wasting), a situation that can quickly evolve into famine.¹² Although the number of children who have died due to malnutrition is unknown, it is feared that this figure could reach numbers comparable to those killed by bombing.

In addition, the systematic crimes being carried out by the Israeli army against Palestinian pregnant women and newborns are unprecedented in recent human history.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), at the beginning of Israel's military operation, there were about fifty thousand pregnant women in Gaza and, according to the same source,¹³ an average of 180 women give birth daily (5,400 per month). It is difficult to conceive women delivering their babies amid a shattered medical system, deprived of access to medicine, food,

shelter, and even clean water. There is no single statistic that better illustrates the genocide than the deaths of mothers and their newborns. Numerous accounts of the suffering and deaths of pregnant women and newborns attest to this dramatic situation.¹⁴

In Palestine, the estimated maternal mortality rate in 2020 was 28.5 per 100,000 live births.

This had increased by 43.2% over the previous year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ However, despite great difficulties, a slow but significant reduction in maternal deaths had been achieved. Now, however, maternal, and perinatal mortality are subject to an exponential increase that will not only cancel out the improvements of the past decades but also undoubtedly position Gaza as the most dangerous place in the world to give birth.

The number of newborns surviving in Gaza will probably never be reliably counted because the risks of pregnancy and childbirth complications and disease are compounded by incessant bombardment and forced displacement. The international press has documented cases in which a death certificate was issued before a birth certificate.¹⁶ Now, not even that; the escalating aggression has caused the fleeting existence of many Palestinian children in Gaza to go unrecorded.

Mothers and babies who have managed to survive are exposed to the cold weather and the enormous risk of disease that stems from an increasingly unhealthy environment. In this context, there is no doubt that breastfed babies will undoubtedly be much better off than those who have been formula fed or given whatever food their mothers could get their hands on, diluted in the most unhealthy and contaminated water conceivable.

Despite unimaginable adversity, many Palestinian mothers have continued to breastfeed their babies,¹⁷ thereby decreasing their risk of death. Many newborns have been rescued from the rubble. Many others have lost their mothers during bombings or have been separated from them by constant forced displacement. The urgent measures that should be put in place to ensure safe feeding for babies who are not breastfed for these reasons

cannot be implemented if military attacks do not stop. Without safe water, soap, and fuel, bottle-feeding is deadly.

The world press gave extensive coverage to cases of premature newborns in hospitals who died or had to be relocated to hospitals where functional incubators were still available. The critical situation of these infants also highlighted the need to implement measures in which preterm infants can be kept warm by their mothers' skin and by fed with their milk, without the need for incubators. Babies should not be separated from their mothers and, despite the difficulties, should be given as much support as possible to continue breastfeeding. In the current conditions in Gaza, more than ever, to breastfeed or not can make the difference between life and death. The extremely critical conditions in Gaza should not be a reason to send and distribute huge quantities of infant formula, which as in other humanitarian crises, could do more harm than good.

Even the children who survive until the collective punishment imposed by Israel ceases will suffer serious consequences for the rest of their lives, which may extend into other generations. The metabolic stress infants, young children, and pregnant women are exposed to due to insufficient food will force their bodies to set into motion physiological and metabolic mechanisms for survival and adaptation. These mechanisms will help many children to survive, but they will also take a very high toll on their development and health for the rest of their lives. Like the survivors of the famines in Holland,¹⁸ Biafra,¹⁹ Darfur, or the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, they will be at a very high risk of diabetes and other chronic diseases as they grow into adulthood.

The most widespread aftermath will undoubtedly be psycho-emotional; it will reach all Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and the diaspora in many countries around the world; in fact, it will affect the entire world; we are already beginning to see its effects. Once the ceiling of what was permissible in a war has been broken by the systematic crimes committed by Israel and its allies, the deadliest message is triggered when countless children, women and journalists can be murdered; hunger, thirst and disease can be used as weapons of war; hospitals, schools and universities can be destroyed

without any consequences for the perpetrators.

South Africa has asked the International Court of Justice to declare that Israel has violated the prohibition of genocide - perhaps the greatest charge under international law - and one of particular resonance for Israel. The African country has asked the court to order the immediate cessation of Israeli military operations in Gaza while it prepares a ruling on whether Israel has indeed violated its obligations under the Genocide Convention. The court is expected to announce soon its decision on whether to grant the preliminary injunction requested by South Africa.²⁰ Only if the ICJ decides to do so will it open a window of hope for change and the avoidance of further catastrophe.

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