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Gaza Needs Humanitarian Assistance Now as Famine Sets In

By Alistair D.B. Cook

SYNOPSIS

Dealing with the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and preventing famine requires increasing airdrops as an interim solution and reinforcing diplomatic efforts to open up more aid channels.

COMMENTARY

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is rapidly deteriorating, with famine setting in, the International Court of Justice warned on 28 March. A separate United Nations report released on 18 March, titled Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) on Gaza, assessed that the entire 2.2 million population of Gaza as suffering [acute levels of food insecurity](#).

The authors say that famine will set in by May 2024 in northern Gaza – a key battleground during the first phase of the Israeli ground offensive – which has been cut off from assistance and where 300,000 Palestinians have been living with little food, sanitation or clean water.

Aid convoys come through the south via the Rafah crossing from Egypt or through Karem Shalom via Israel. While exact figures vary, the Palestinian Red Crescent reported that only an average of 95 aid trucks were able to enter Gaza each day between 10 October 2023 and 1 February 2024, down from 500 commercial and aid trucks before the start of current hostilities, largely as a result of Israeli restrictions.

Even after entering Gaza, moving through the area can be perilous. The destruction of urban areas, coupled with mass displacement, complicates aid distribution. These numbers highlight the logistical obstacles hampering the delivery of food, medicine and other essentials as well as the catastrophe unfolding in Gaza. The dire situation

has prompted many countries and aid organisations to seek out alternative ways to reach civilians in need.

Singapore's Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza

Humanitarian efforts around the world, including in Singapore, for those stricken in Gaza were already in full swing long before the situation reached breaking point.

In Singapore, the public donated US\$1.48 million through the Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation to the UN relief and works agency, UNRWA, in the first round of humanitarian aid in November 2023. A further US\$200,000 was raised through the Singapore Red Cross for the Egyptian Red Cross relief effort through the Rafah crossing. The main challenge for many aid agencies and non-profit organisations, however, was not in starting donation drives or raising funds, but in getting supplies through “the last mile” to affected communities in Gaza.

Amid a near-collapse in security on the ground, the UN World Food Programme suspended aid deliveries in February after the convoy carrying supplies was [surrounded by hungry people and faced gunfire](#). Seeking a “large-scale expansion” of the flow of assistance through multiple routes and access points into Gaza, as well as a stable communication network and humanitarian notification system, the agency issued a dire warning – it said Gaza was hanging by a thread.

Recognising logistical bottlenecks, Singapore's second tranche of humanitarian assistance to Gaza focused on strengthening delivery and distribution. The Changi Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Coordination Centre acted as a liaison between the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and NGOs, facilitating the coordination and consolidation of humanitarian supplies to be airlifted to Egypt for onward distribution to the people in Gaza.

The Republic of Singapore Air Force ([RSAF](#)) deployed a Multi-Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) plane to [deliver medical supplies, blankets, water filters and food](#) from government ministries and local non-governmental organisations like Singapore Red Cross, Mercy Relief, and Relief Singapore to Egypt.

Aimed at facilitating the delivery of aid down to “the last mile”, Singapore's third aid tranche involved an RSAF MRTT, a C-130 Hercules transport plane, along with 69 SAF personnel who were dispatched to Jordan. The C-130 remained there for airdrop operations from Jordan, together with the Royal Jordanian Air Force.

Several other countries have undertaken similar airdrop operations. They include Australia, Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Britain and the US.

Airdrops – Humanitarian Methods of Last Resort

Under the circumstances, airdrops are necessary to deliver urgently needed supplies to avert a looming humanitarian disaster as ground deliveries of aid become increasingly difficult.

Airdrops remain controversial, but they have been used before to deliver aid. The most

celebrated operation in recent memory was that conducted by US and British air forces between June 1948 and May 1949. The Berlin Airlift was intended to resupply food and fuel to two million people after the erstwhile Soviet Union blocked road, rail and canal access to areas of the then-divided city under Allied control. The airdrops were successful, allowing Berliners to survive the blockade. The Soviet Union eventually backed down.

The first airdrop of emergency humanitarian relief by the UN occurred in 1973. The World Food Programme-led operation saw assistance provided for three years in Africa's Western Sahel where six years of drought created a humanitarian emergency for people in Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Burkina Faso (then known as the Republic of Volta).

In both cases, options were limited, and airdrops were required to help those in need.

After Singapore accepted a Jordanian invitation on 12 March to participate in the Gaza airdrops, it took over one week for the SAF to prepare packages, obtain approvals and execute the first mission on 20 March. Similar scenarios had been part of SAF training since the 1990s, and this allowed for a fast turnaround.

The conduct of multiple checks before each airdrop to ensure the appropriate use of a two-parachute system (or larger system depending on the load), has been essential to mitigate the risk of deliveries landing in the sea or a populated area.

While these efforts are no panacea for addressing the humanitarian situation in Gaza, they offer some reprieve, given the reality of poor access in a deteriorating humanitarian situation.

A Diplomatic Push at the United Nations

Airdrops complement but cannot replace unfettered access to humanitarian aid through land crossings, which remain the most effective means to transport deliveries of food, water and medicine at scale.

A diplomatic push to reinstate these routes, amid mounting international pressure on Israel to lift restrictions on aid into Gaza, has seen a flurry of activity at the UN which kicked off with the adoption of General Assembly Resolution ES-10/21 on 27 October 2023, calling for an immediate humanitarian truce and cessation of hostilities. More recently, [Security Council Resolution 2728](#) on 25 March called for a ceasefire, hostage release and unhindered humanitarian access.

With famine starting to take hold in Gaza, efforts are also underway to activate UN Security Council Resolution 2417, which condemns the starving of civilians as a method of warfare as well as the unlawful denial of humanitarian access to civilian populations.

Passed unanimously, it condemned starvation as a weapon of war in all conflicts. It called on all parties to a conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law on the protection of civilians. It stressed that armed conflicts, violations of international law and related food insecurity could be drivers of forced

displacement. The resolution also raised the possibility of sanctions being adopted against individuals or entities obstructing the delivery or distribution of humanitarian assistance to civilians in need.

Conclusion

The devastating situation in Gaza requires the international community to use every tool available to meet humanitarian needs and prevent a further descent into widespread disease and starvation. This immediate support to Palestinians in Gaza is a necessity alongside the near-term need for an immediate ceasefire and a longer-term commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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