

Israel-Hamas war

Gaza aid disruption poses risk to Israel-Hamas hostage deal

Palestinian militant group seeks increase in humanitarian provision as condition of ceasefire agreement



Palestinians wait for humanitarian aid on a beachfront in Gaza City on February 25 © Mahmoud Essa/AP

Mehul Srivastava and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv, **Polina Ivanova** in Jerusalem and **Heba Saleh** in Cairo 4 HOURS AGO

Aid shipments into the besieged Gaza Strip have been so severely disrupted that the barriers to humanitarian provision could imperil a possible prisoner-for-hostage swap between Hamas and Israel, said several western officials.

Hamas has demanded a surge in humanitarian aid as a crucial condition for any hostage swap. In the previous such exchange, in November, [Hamas](#) demanded that at least 200 trucks cross each day before it would release a daily batch of hostages.

In a proposed new deal, yet to be finalised, Hamas is reportedly asking for at least 400 trucks of humanitarian aid to be allowed in each day – still less than the 500-plus trucks in total that would cross daily into the blockaded enclave before the Israel-Hamas war began on October 7.

After aid supplies reaching Gaza slowed to a trickle, Ramesh Rajasingham, co-ordination director for the UN's humanitarian office, warned on Tuesday that a quarter of Gaza's population of more than 2mn was on the brink of starvation and that a widespread famine was "almost inevitable".

Trucks with aid enter via Egypt and an Israeli border crossing, but the Israeli military has opened fire on humanitarian convoys as recently as early February, according to the UN, while Palestinian police are refusing to guard deliveries after an air strike on

one shipment.

One western official familiar with the challenges said they “had concerns [about whether] we can get in what we need in order to satisfy the ceasefire” conditions.

Another official said they had shared with Qatar and Egypt, which are mediating the hostage release negotiations, a list of improvements — ranging from increased security to better communications equipment — needed for any surge in aid.

The Palestinian enclave is becoming increasingly lawless, with widespread looting of trucks, making it unclear how international aid agencies would be able to step up their shipments.

“We call for the hostages to be released, we call for a ceasefire and we are ready to deliver life-saving aid at scale as soon as the conditions on the ground enable us,” said

Scott Anderson, senior deputy director at the UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinians in Gaza.

The UN had requested an urgent meeting with the chief of Israel's military, Herzi Halevi, on February 11 after two convoys — which had been cleared for transport through the Gaza Strip by [Israel's](#) defence ministry — came under attack from Israeli forces on February 5 and 6, according to a letter seen by the Financial Times.

Halevi did not respond to the letter, said a person familiar with the matter. Two Israeli military spokespeople said they were unaware of the letter or the request for a meeting.

Cogat, the Israeli military body responsible for humanitarian affairs in Gaza, said on Wednesday that 31 trucks of food had entered northern Gaza overnight and claimed there was “no limit to the amount of humanitarian aid for the civilians in Gaza”.

Carl Skau, deputy director of the World Food Programme, told the UN Security Council on Tuesday that “the risk of famine is being fuelled by the inability to bring critical food supplies into Gaza in sufficient quantities, and the almost impossible operating conditions faced by our staff on the ground”.

Amid the acute scarcity of food, truck drivers have had to install metal barricades on their windows for protection, as gangs of young men regularly loot flour and other supplies.

Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and France airdropped aid into Gaza on Tuesday, after fewer than 250 trucks managed to enter the enclave in the three previous days, according to UN data.

In a video shared on social media following the airdrop, young men are seen carrying 25-kilo sacks of flour, many of which fell into the sea. “A bag of flour, after a month!” says one man. “It felt like a million years.”

Conditions are especially dire in the northern Gaza Strip, which has been devastated by Israel's military campaign.

In a video seen by the FT, young men immediately descend on four trucks of flour after the vehicles, travelling north, cross an Israeli military checkpoint at the Wadi Gaza rivulet at the weekend.

“The IDF doesn't move its own forces up and down, and south to north, so you expect the UN to do so [with unarmed aid convoys]?” said the second person familiar with

Gaza humanitarian operations.

The UN and other international bodies have been attempting to cajole the Israeli side into greater flexibility and progress on the provision of humanitarian aid, especially the protection of convoys.

“Help me, to help you, so we can work together,” the person added. “But everything is ad hoc, and not subject to an actual plan.”

For at least two days in the past week, UNRWA and WFP ran out of supplies, one of the officials said.

A nascent plan, brokered by Egypt, to allow Palestinian policemen to return to work without weapons or uniforms to guard the convoys has yet to bear fruit, said UNRWA’s Anderson.

“We have a mishmash of police basically trying to show up and help, at great risk to themselves,” he said.

Israel had dropped flyers in Rafah in Gaza this month with a photo of a destroyed Palestinian police car, which had been bombed by an Israeli war plane while guarding a food convoy on February 6. “Our message is clear; the Israeli security services will not allow the security apparatuses of Hamas to continue working,” the flyers said.

Nearly 30,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel’s offensive in Gaza, according to health authorities in the Hamas-ruled enclave, after the militant group’s October 7 cross-border raid into southern Israel that triggered the war. During the raid 1,200 people were killed, according to Israeli figures, and 250 taken hostage.

Efforts to broker a new ceasefire and hostage deal between Israel and Hamas — mediated by the US, Qatar, and Egypt — have not succeeded, despite US President Joe Biden indicating on Monday that a deal could be agreed by early next week.

