

Israel-Hamas war

Israel's allies condemn far-right minister's Gaza starvation remarks

Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich said allowing 2mn civilians in Gaza to die of hunger would be 'justified and moral'



Palestinian children queue for food distributed by aid organisations in Gaza © Abood Abusalama/AFP/Getty Images

Mehul Srivastava in Tel Aviv 5 HOURS AGO

Israel's European allies have condemned its far-right finance minister after he suggested that Israel might be justified in starving 2mn Gazans to force Hamas to release hostages.

Bezalel Smotrich, a crucial ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a leader of the Jewish supremacist Religious Zionism party, told a conference this week that Israel was being forced by international opinion to allow food and medicine into Gaza for civilians.

"We bring in aid because there is no choice," he said on Monday, according to reports in Israeli media. "Nobody will let us cause 2mn civilians to die of hunger, even though it might be justified and moral, until our hostages are returned."

"What can we do?" he added. "We live today in a certain reality, we need international legitimacy for this war."

Germany's ambassador to Israel, Steffen Seibert, called the comments "appalling", the French foreign ministry described them as "disgraceful", and the EU called his comments "beyond ignominious".

"Deliberate starvation of civilians is a war crime," the EU said. "Minister Smotrich

saying that ‘it might be justified and moral’ to let Israel ‘cause 2mn civilians to die of hunger’ until the ‘hostages are returned’ is beyond ignominious.”

“It demonstrates, once again, his contempt for international law and for basic principles of humanity,” it added.

UK foreign secretary David Lammy said: “International law could not be more clear — the deliberate starvation of civilians is a war crime. There can be no justification for Minister Smotrich’s remarks and we expect the wider Israeli government to retract and condemn them.”

Israel’s closest allies, including the US, have struggled so far to convince Netanyahu to increase the stuttering pipeline of humanitarian aid into Gaza since the October 7 attack by Palestinian militant group Hamas triggered Israel’s retaliatory offensive in the strip.

That pipeline has been even more deeply constricted by the May seizure of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt by the Israeli military. After Egypt subsequently closed its side of the crossing. The resulting reduction in aid deliveries has pushed hundreds of thousands of Gazan civilians to the edge of famine, while talks to reopen it have not borne fruit.



Bezael Smotrich says food and medicine should be used as bargaining chips to release Israeli hostages © Bloomberg

In June the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a UN advisory body, said that 96 per cent of Gaza’s population faced high levels of acute food insecurity, while

more than 495,000 faced “catastrophic” levels of food insecurity, including “an extreme lack of food, starvation, and lack of coping capacities”.

Netanyahu’s ruling coalition depends on the support of Smotrich, and the National Security Minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, also a far-right figure, who has been accused by human rights groups of allowing rightwing demonstrators to block the transport of humanitarian aid into Gaza, while allowing conditions for Palestinian pre-trial detainees to deteriorate.

Both Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have demanded that the Israeli military use food and medicine as a bargaining chip to force Hamas to soften its demands for the release of the remaining hostages it is holding captive in Gaza, a move that would violate international and Israeli law.

More than 100 hostages seized on October 7 were released during a temporary ceasefire in November, but some 115 are believed to remain captive in Gaza, at least a third of who are no longer alive. Several hostages have died in captivity in recent months.

Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have also threatened to bring down Netanyahu’s governing coalition if he accepts a hostage swap deal that brings the war with Hamas to an end.

Prosecutors at the International Criminal Court on May 20 requested arrest warrants for Netanyahu and his defence minister, Yoav Gallant, for using “starvation of civilians as a method of warfare” after months of warnings from the UN and other international aid agencies that Israel was deliberately slowing the entry of aid into Gaza.

At the same time, the UN and other agencies have struggled to distribute what little aid makes it into Gaza through Israeli checkpoints, since the enclave has become increasingly lawless, with churned up roads that make it nearly impossible for trucks to move safely.

Smotrich’s spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

