

**Israel-Hamas war**

## Israel behind forced population transfer in Gaza, Human Rights Watch says

Rights group alleges mass displacement of 1.9mn of enclave's 2.2mn residents is a 'crime against humanity'



According to the UN, 1.9mn of Gaza's 2.2mn people have been displaced © Omar Al-Qattra/AFP/Getty Images

**James Shotter** in Jerusalem 7 HOURS AGO

Israeli authorities have deliberately caused the mass displacement of Palestinians in Gaza and are responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in the enclave, Human Rights Watch said in a report on Thursday.

The report comes amid mounting international alarm over the catastrophic humanitarian conditions in Gaza, huge swaths of which have been reduced to uninhabitable rubble by the massive offensive the Israeli military has been waging there since Hamas's October 7 2023 attack on Israel.

The rights group said Israel's conduct during the hostilities — during which 1.9mn of Gaza's 2.2mn people have been displaced, according to the UN — amounted to "forced displacement" and that these acts had been "widespread and systematic".

"Statements by senior officials with command responsibility show that forced displacement is intentional and forms part of Israeli state policy and therefore amount to a crime against humanity," the report said. "Israel's actions appear to also meet the definition of ethnic cleansing."

Israel's foreign ministry and prime minister's office did not respond to requests for comment. However, Israeli officials have previously repeatedly insisted the country's forces are acting in full compliance with international law in Gaza, and that

evacuations of civilians are being carried out to ensure their safety and for military reasons.

They have also accused Hamas of using the civilian population as human shields by placing military infrastructure in or near buildings such as schools and hospitals or in densely populated areas.

Israel's assault has killed more than 43,000 people in Gaza, according to Palestinian officials. Hamas militants killed 1,200 Israelis and took 250 hostage during their October 7 attack, according to Israeli officials.

The hostilities have already sparked proceedings in international tribunals. The UN's top court is hearing a case brought by South Africa accusing Israel of genocide. Meanwhile, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has sought arrest warrants against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former defence minister Yoav Gallant as well as three now-dead Hamas leaders over alleged war crimes.

Israel vehemently rejects the allegation of genocide, and Netanyahu has dismissed the request for arrest warrants as "absurd and false" and "a distortion of reality".

Under international law governing armed conflicts in occupied territories, the forcible transfer of civilians is prohibited. The only exception is if people are evacuated for their security or due to "imperative military reasons".

However, even in such cases other conditions must be met: civilians must be evacuated as safely as possible and people must be able to return to their homes once hostilities have ceased.

HRW's 154-page report, based on interviews with 39 displaced Palestinians in Gaza, analysis of Israeli evacuation orders, footage of strikes on evacuation routes and safe zones, and satellite imagery of destruction in the enclave, said Israel had failed to meet these criteria.

The rights group said Gazans had not been able to evacuate safely, arguing that Israel had "repeatedly" attacked evacuation routes and designated safe zones. It added that Israeli evacuation orders telling people where to flee had been "unclear, inaccurate and contradictory", and gave people too little time to escape.

It also said the level of destruction caused by Israel's offensive — which has flattened homes, hospitals, bakeries, energy and water supplies and agricultural land — and the razing of land in areas such as the Netzarim corridor suggested Israel did not intend to allow civilians to return to some parts of Gaza

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To support its argument that the forcible transfer was intentional, and thus a war crime, the report cited quotes from Israeli officials saying that Gaza's territory would be reduced and calling for the emigration of Gaza's residents and the re-establishment of Israeli settlements in the territory.

"Given the sheer number of Palestinian civilians in Gaza driven from their land and the manner of their displacement, and the attempts to make their return impossible, the forced displacement is widespread, systematic, and intentional, and amounts to a crime against humanity," the report said.

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