

Israel-Hamas war

Israeli proposal to control aid inside Gaza sparks backlash

Humanitarian agencies condemn plans they say do not meet 'minimum bar' for relief after two-month blockade



Many Palestinians are now forced to survive on a single, meagre meal a day © Omar Al-Qattaa/AFP/Getty Images

Mehul Srivastava in London, **Heba Saleh** in Cairo and **Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper** in Beirut

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The Israeli military is proposing a new system of aid distribution points inside Gaza manned by soldiers or private contractors, sparking condemnation from aid agencies.

For the last two months, Israel has blocked food, medicine and even fresh water from entering the strip, where some 2mn Palestinian civilians now face extreme food shortages. Many survive on a single, meagre meal a day.

Under the proposal, Palestinians would have to travel to a so-called humanitarian zone and pick up food parcels to carry back to their families, according to several humanitarian workers and an Israeli official.

The Israeli military has ruled out distributing the aid itself, but the system would allow Israel to screen Palestinians and decide which ones are allowed to receive food, the people said.

If implemented, this system could remove some of the largest, most experienced and deeply resourced relief agencies from the process of distributing aid to a besieged population that has endured 19 months of war.

It is one of multiple options discussed by Israeli officials for allowing aid back into Gaza, a prospect that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right coalition allies are bitterly opposed to.

Until now, the UN and other agencies have brought aid into Gaza via Israeli-controlled crossing points to their own warehouses, from where it is sent out to smaller distribution points, or given to community kitchens or charity-run bakeries.



A Palestinian woman receives medicine at an UNRWA-run clinic west of Gaza City last month © Majdi Fathi/NurPhoto/Reuters

Israel has claimed, without providing evidence, that Hamas diverts aid to its fighters and replenishes its finances by charging protection money. Proponents believe the new system will prevent this.

The UN has said it cannot participate in a system that would give Israel the power to vet beneficiaries, which would violate its principles of neutrality and independence, a UN official who asked not to be named said.

“The latest modality proposed by Israeli authorities does not meet the minimum bar for principled humanitarian support,” Tom Fletcher, the UN humanitarian relief chief, said in a statement this week without specifying what proposal he was referring to.

“What we’re seeing is an attempt to . . . essentially instrumentalise the delivery of aid to pursue military objectives,” said Gavin Kelleher, of the Norwegian Refugee Council. “The suggestion that a party to the conflict can vet the employees or

Council. The suggestion that a party to the conflict can vet the employees of civilians of another party to the conflict . . . is just not something that lines up at all with a principled humanitarian response.”

Kelleher added that the system would implicate aid organisations in the forced displacement of people by agreeing to distribute humanitarian supplies in some areas while restricting it in others.

The IDF did not respond to a request for comment.

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Food supplies have become scarce in Gaza © Reuters

One Israeli official familiar with the discussions dismissed the UN’s objections, saying it was likely other relief agencies would end up participating in what he described as a “pilot scheme” given it may be their only opportunity to get aid into Gaza.

The IDF’s proposal has yet to be formally debated by Israel’s security cabinet. The official also warned that it was preliminary and could take weeks, even months, to put into place.

Israel in March broke a ceasefire with Hamas and imposed a blockade on the enclave. Israeli officials have said the siege is necessary to weaken Hamas and force it to release the remaining 59 hostages, around 24 of whom are still believed to be alive.

Netanyahu has repeatedly refused to agree to a longer ceasefire to secure their freedom. His decision to restart the war shored up support from his far-right coalition allies, with ultranationalist finance minister Bezalel Smotrich saving last

month that “not even a grain of wheat will enter” Gaza.

The dispute over aid came as several countries this week told the UN’s highest court, the International Court of Justice, that blocking international aid organisations from bringing food and other aid into Gaza violates international law.

Fresh fruit, vegetables and meat are no longer available in markets in Gaza, the UN’s World Food Programme has run out of stocks, and smaller relief agencies like World Central Kitchen are scavenging wood to try and keep running a handful of bakeries.

Meanwhile, aid officials say thousands of tons of food are rotting in the summer heat outside Gaza.

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