

Israel-Hamas war

How Gaza's food queues turned into kill zones



Dozens of Palestinians have been shot dead trying to reach a US and Israeli-backed aid distribution scheme

Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper in Beirut

Published JUN 7 2025

It was their sixth attempt in a week, a perilous trek down Gaza's southern coast towards a US-backed food distribution site. Abed Zaydan, 14, and his mother Reem hoped that, this time, they would arrive before the food ran out.

Eight hours into their walk on Tuesday, as they neared the centre, the sound of tank and gunfire erupted. Zaydan saw dead bodies at his feet. He lay face down on the ground next to them with his sister and mother, waiting for first light. People began to whisper that it might be safe to move.

From the ground, Zaydan saw his mother start to stand up, before a sniper bullet felled her with a shot to the head. "Because I'm young, I got scared and left my mother," he said. "I ran away."

Zaydan is one of eight Palestinians who spoke to the Financial Times about their attempt to reach the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation site in western Rafah over the past week. Their twilight journeys thronged with thousands of people, hoping to get close to the aid centre before its 5am opening time so they might have a chance to get food.

For Palestinians, desperate for supplies after Israel imposed a more than two-month blockade on the strip, their attempts to get food from GHF brought more horror than relief. Each day was different, but the dangers they described were the same.

Tanks, quadcopter drones, and snipers, which they said came from the Israeli army, fired on Palestinians waiting for the site to open.

For telecoms worker Ehab Jomaa, it was 4am on Sunday when shooting flared up at Al-Alam roundabout, the final point at which people waited before sprinting to the distribution site.

He and five friends took cover in the ruins of a bombed-out beach hotel. They turned off their phones, and stayed quiet.

Then a quadcopter appeared, and started to fire warning shots. “It turned on its microphone and said: ‘You must leave, we’ll shoot you.’ As soon as we stood up and got ready to leave, it moved to a different area,” Jomaa said. “It shot a boy seven metres away from us in the chest.”

Witnesses who spoke to the FT said the run down the final stretch to the distribution site began around 5am. Those who arrived at the site often found all the food already gone.

Many tried to reach the distribution site several days in a row, despite the killings. They were so hungry after Israel's siege that they kept trying.

The casualties were heaviest on two days. Israeli forces killed 27 people and injured 161 waiting for aid on Tuesday morning, Gaza's ministry of health said. On Sunday it said 35 people were killed and over 150 injured by Israeli fire on crowds gathered in the Al-Alam area. All of those killed Sunday were shot in the head or chest, the ministry said.

The ICRC said its Rafah field hospital received around 180 patients on each of the two days, with the majority suffering gunshot wounds. All of them said they were trying to reach a distribution site.



Displaced Palestinians walk along a road to receive humanitarian aid packages from a US-backed foundation in Rafah in southern Gaza on Thursday © AFP via Getty Images

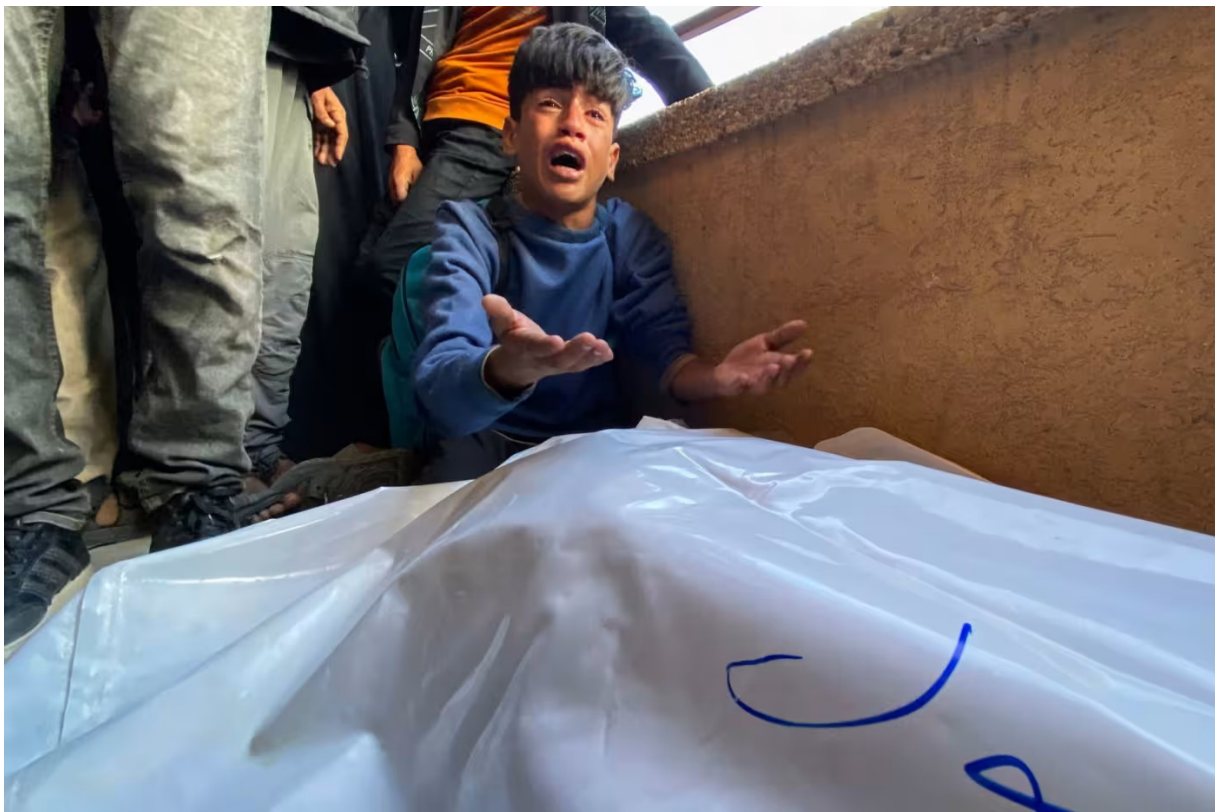
Israel disputed the health ministry's characterisation of the shootings, but acknowledged it had fired "warning" — and on Tuesday "additional" — shots at people who it said had strayed from the designated access route or approached troops.

An Israeli security official said some shootings had taken place outside the hours of operation of the GHF sites, when the surrounding areas were classified as “a war zone that [civilians] are not meant to be in”.

The official added that changes to the access routes were being made to make them safer. The IDF has also claimed some of the shots were fired by Hamas.

On his fifth journey to the distribution site, 45-year-old Hossam Zorab on Tuesday watched as his friend was shot in the head a short distance ahead of him. Zorab could not save him, and he was determined to find food for his eight children, so he waited with others to rush to the site.

There was no check-in system or effective entrance, he said. The crowds were instead kept at bay by the gunfire. “There is no gate, but from 2am to 5am there is constant shooting. The shooting is the gate.”



Israeli forces killed 27 people and injured 161 waiting for aid on Tuesday morning, Gaza's ministry of health said © AFP via Getty Images

Inside the distribution centres, boxes of cans and oil on the sandy floor were ripped open and people took what they could. Foreign mercenaries laughed as they observed the scene, according to two witnesses. Palestinian contractors in fluorescent vests

the scene, according to two witnesses. Palestinian contractors in fluorescent vests looked on.

GHF did not respond to a request for comment, but has previously said the shooting occurred outside its distribution sites.

Ashraf Abu Shbaker, a father of six, went to the site three times: Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. But every time he reached the site, everything was already taken.

He tried to ask one of the security contractors on Tuesday why there was nothing left. He said the contractor pepper sprayed him in the face. Three other witnesses, including one who was sprayed himself, said the contractors used spray and sound grenades within the site.

"Today, I didn't want to go. I'm tired," Abu Shbaker said. "If you want to starve people, go ahead, but don't debase us like this."

Abed Zaydan scoured hospitals hoping to find his wounded mother, imagining her face alive and in an ICU bed. He was at Nasser hospital when a paramedic arrived with three unidentified dead women. Zaydan knew one of them.

"This isn't aid," Zaydan said. "It's a mouse trap."

Additional reporting by James Shotter in Jerusalem, cartography by Aditi Bhandari

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