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Gaza: escalating hostilities and deteriorating humanitarian situation in Rafah

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Since 26 May, escalating Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations across the Gaza Strip have led to increased civilian casualties, particularly in western and central Rafah, which, by 29 May, were not subject to evacuation orders (AP 29/05/2024; The Guardian 29/05/2024; IRC 28/05/2024). Escalating IDF operations includes two large-scale attacks on areas sheltering displaced Palestinians.

- **On 26 May, Israeli airstrikes on Rafah triggered a massive blaze that, by 27 May, had killed at least 45 people and injured at least 249 in Tal as-Sultan refugee camp, also known as Rafah camp** in northwest Rafah city (UN News 27/05/2024; BBC 27/05/2024; NPR 27/05/2024; UNRWA 08/2023). At least 23 women, children, and older people were among those killed. **As people who sustained severe burns and other injuries are unable to access healthcare, the death toll is likely to rise** (OCHA 27/05/2024; UN News 27/05/2024; BBC 27/05/2024; Reuters 27/05/2024; AJ 27/05/2024 a). By 28 May, people were still searching through rubble for remains (NBC News 28/05/2024). Tal as-Sultan is not located near to recent military action. According to some sources, the camp is in a designated 'safe zone', where the IDF had instructed civilians in eastern Rafah to flee, though there has been conflicting information regarding the designation (Reuters 27/05/2024; AJ 27/05/2024 b; The Guardian 27/04/2024).
- **On 28 May, several Israeli tanks were reported in the Rafah city centre, near Al Awda Mosque** (AJ 28/05/2024; Reuters 29/05/2024).
- **On 28 May, at least 21 people were killed and between 21-64 were injured in a strike that hit a tent encampment housing displaced people in Mawasi, the Gaza Strip coastal area previously designated as a 'humanitarian safe zone'** (OCHA 29/05/2024; NYT 28/05/2024; AJ Youtube 28/05/2024). **It is important to note that, despite designations, humanitarian responders have expressed that there are no 'safe zones' in Gaza** because combatants do not respect designations and humanitarian needs cannot be met (UN News 27/05/2024).

- **On 28–29 May, further airstrikes hit Tal as-Sultan and surrounding areas, killing more civilians.** The exact number of casualties is unknown (AP 29/05/2024; Euro-Med Monitor 28/05/2024).
- **As at 29 May, the Israeli military reported having established "operational control" of the Philadelphi Corridor,** which is a 14 km strip of land on the border between Gaza and Egypt (CNN 29/05/2024; AJ 29/05/2024).

The 26–28 May strikes occurred only days after the International Court of Justice ordered Israel to 'immediately' cease its offensive in Rafah (NBC 27/05/2024; BBC 24/05/2024). The EU is considering reviving its Border Assistance Mission in Rafah, which has not been operational since 2007 (Reuters 27/05/2024).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim: this report provides an update on the deteriorating situation in Rafah, particularly after the airstrikes of 26–28 May. This report follows the ACAPS briefing note *Palestine: operations in Rafah* from 11 May 2024.

Methodology and limitations: this report is based on a secondary data review. Israeli operations and evacuation orders have significantly disrupted and/or halted already constrained humanitarian activities in Gaza, including by obstructing key border crossings and killing and endangering humanitarian responders, leading to information gaps. This report distils the information available and identifies key gaps.

KEY FIGURES

36,000

PALESTINIANS KILLED

81,000

PALESTINIANS INJURED

500,000

PEOPLE LIVING IN
SHELTERS IN RAFAH

Emergency

LEVELS OF FOOD
INSECURITY ACROSS
THE GAZA STRIP

KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

- **By 29 May, over 36,000 Palestinians had been killed and over 81,000 injured since 7 October 2023**, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza (AJ 29/05/2024; OCHA 29/05/2024). At least 58,000 people with disabilities, mainly children, older people, and women, have been affected in Gaza (OHCHR 27/05/2024).
- Between 6 May – when IDF ground operations in Rafah started – and 26 May, nearly 950,000 of the estimated 1.5 million people displaced in Rafah since 7 October 2023 were again forced to flee after Israel launched ground operations in eastern neighbourhoods. This leaves **up to 500,000 people remaining in shelters in the city, exposed to continuing airstrikes and fighting, as Israeli forces expand operations in western Rafah** (BBC 27/05/2024 and 28/05/2024; AJ 23/05/2024).
- By March 2024, according to the IPC, **all parts of the Gaza Strip – including Rafah – were facing Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels of food insecurity, with Famine (IPC Phase 5) 'projected and imminent' in North Gaza and Gaza City governorates** until 15 July, unless an immediate cessation of hostilities and sustained access to food took place. By 18 March, 49% of the population analysed for IPC classification in Rafah were already facing IPC 4 levels of food insecurity (IPC 18/03/2024 a; IPC 18/03/2024 b). These projections were made prior to Israel's ground operations in Rafah, where food insecurity has been further aggravated by the forced closure of bakeries and the prevention of entry and distribution of food assistance (IPC 18/03/2024 a). By 22 May, the UN had suspended food distribution in Rafah (The Guardian 22/05/2024; WFP 22/05/2024). By 24 May, there were no bakeries operating in Rafah city (OCHA 24/05/2024). Food insecurity and malnutrition will increase people's vulnerability to injuries and diseases potentially resulting from the latest airstrikes.

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

- A lack of essential medicines constrains both health workers and humanitarians' abilities to respond to rising health needs (UNRWA 24/05/2024). **The lack of medicine and medical care means the condition of those who sustained injuries as a result of airstrikes is likely to deteriorate in the coming days.**
- Qatar authorities have warned that recent strikes could complicate its mediation efforts towards a ceasefire and hostage release deal, which likely will only increase attacks and conflict between the parties. As such, the humanitarian situation is likely to worsen (BBC 27/05/2024).

Airstrikes in Rafah along with humanitarian access areas



Source: ACAPS using The Guardian (accessed 08/05/2024)

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

- **Israel's Rafah offensive has also led to the closure of the Rafah Crossing and limited access to Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom border crossing, increasing food, fuel, and medicine shortages.** As at 29 May, the entry of humanitarian assistance into Gaza had decreased by 67% since 7 May (OCHA 29/05/2024). Only 216 aid trucks passed through Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom between 6–28 May (zero through the Rafah Crossing), compared with 1,263 trucks passing through both crossings between 1–5 May (UNWRA accessed 28/05/2024). Between 20–22 May, border crossings into Gaza were only open for one day and only 39 trucks gained entry via Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom (UNRWA 24/05/2024). On 24 May, UNRWA reported that, as a result of blocked access to crossings, its health centres had not received any medical supplies since 12 May (OCHA 27/05/2024).
- The floating pier, constructed to facilitate aid into Gaza, had been completely dismantled because of rough seas, as at 29 May (CNN 29/05/2024).
- **Between 1–26 May, only around half (137) of the 266 attempted humanitarian aid missions gained entry to Gaza.** Israeli authorities denied access to 34 (around 13%) of the missions and impeded 52 (around 20%), including by delaying missions for up to nine hours, detaining aid workers, and firing warning shots. These conditions also forced 43 (16%) officially approved missions to abort (UN News 27/05/2024; OCHA 27/05/2024).
- Groups of Israeli settlers have set up makeshift checkpoints in the West Bank, along the route of the Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom border crossing into Gaza, to interrogate and intimidate drivers of humanitarian aid trucks, reducing the number of trucks that make it to the crossing. In some cases, aid trucks have been ransacked and burnt in coordinated attacks by Israeli settlers, with Palestinian drivers assaulted and left hospitalised (WP 26/05/2024; The Guardian 16/05/2024).
- The lack of fuel has affected hospitals, water systems, communications, and relief operations in the Gaza Strip (OCHA 24/05/2024).
- Mobile operators and internet providers have experienced network disruptions and challenges, hindering the collection of information and understanding of current humanitarian needs and aid coordination (OCHA 24/05/2024).
- During attacks across Rafah, most hospital and health facility infrastructure has been compromised. By 14 May, MSF emergency operations reported having to evacuate 12 different health structures, which had endured 26 violent incidents including airstrikes on hospitals, tanks firing at deconflicted shelters, ground offensives on medical centres, and attacks on convoys (MSF 14/05/2024).

Figure 1. Status of coordinated humanitarian aid missions attempting to access Gaza, 1–26 May

STATUS	NUMBER OF MISSIONS	APPROXIMATE % OF 266 TOTAL
Access denied	34	13%
Impeded	52	20%
Cancelled	43	16%
Entered Gaza	137	52%

Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (27/05/2024)

CRISIS IMPACT

Shelter

The bombing and fire of 26 May destroyed most of the Tal as-Sultan refugee camp, primarily composed of tents and improvised metal and plastic shelters (UNRWA 27/05/2024; AJ 27/05/2024 b; AJ 27/05/2024 c; Reuters 27/05/2024). The number of people in the camp at the time and the number of shelters affected remains unknown, with some reports indicating that ‘thousands’ of people were in the neighbourhood (Reuters 27/05/2024).

Overcrowding and impromptu shelters made of combustible materials without firebreaks (obstacles to fire spread) make IDP camps particularly vulnerable to rapidly spreading fire (Atiyeh and Gunn 30/09/2017). It is likely that Tal al-Sultan experienced significant overcrowding, similar to other IDP camps across Gaza, where there is an average of 1m²/person (OCHA 24/05/2024). This is well below the internationally accepted shelter standard of 3.5m²/person (excluding cooking areas and WASH facilities) (SPHERE 2018). **Shelters’ close proximity in Tal as-Sultan may have facilitated the rapid spread of fire and prevented people from easily escaping, with many of the (at least) 45 people killed being burnt alive in their tents** (AJ 27/05/2024 b). Further, an estimated 41% of shelters in Gaza lack adequate ventilation, potentially contributing to deaths from smoke inhalation (OCHA 24/05/2024).

The attacks in western and central Rafah have prompted further displacement to Mawasi and Khan Younis, where there is no shelter for new arrivals and no infrastructure or services to meet humanitarian needs (AP 29/05/2024). As Mawasi and Khan Younis are also exposed to continued Israeli military operations and attacks, it is likely people may be displaced again.

Health

People report suffering severe burns, fractures, and traumatic injuries, with some requiring amputation, from the fire on 26 May. Injured people were taken to a trauma stabilisation centre in Tal as-Sultan and then referred to surrounding field hospitals for further treatment (MSF 28/05/2024; NPR 27/05/2024; AJ 27/05/2024 c; BBC 27/05/2024).

Most of the health centres in Rafah, however, are destroyed, non-operational, or inaccessible because of evacuation orders, affecting four hospitals, four primary healthcare centres, and 21 medical points in Rafah between 1–24 May (UNRWA 24/05/2024). On 27 May, an attack damaged Rafah’s Indonesian Field Hospital, trapping patients and staff inside. On the same day, an attack killed two medical staff at the Kuwaiti Hospital, the main trauma care provider in Rafah, forcing it to cease operations (AJ 28/05/2024; OCHA 29/05/2024). This left Emirati

Maternity Hospital as the only partially functional hospital in Rafah, with the exception of seven field hospitals (AJ 29/05/2024). By 27 May, only 16 of the 36 hospitals across the Gaza Strip were partially functional (OCHA 27/05/2024). **Those that remain operational lack the supplies necessary to treat severe burns from the 26 May fire** (AP 29/05/2024). On 29 May, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) had to evacuate its teams from Al Quds Field Hospital in Mawasi because of the increasing insecurity, artillery and air bombardments, as well as the evacuation of people following airstrikes (OCHA 29/05/2024). **A lack of resources, infrastructure, and staff has forced doctors to leave severely injured patients to die in an effort to preserve dwindling resources** (The Guardian 27/05/2024).

The impossibility of evacuating patients through the Rafah Crossing, and the limitedness of evacuation through other crossings, with only 4,895 (38%) of the 12,761 critical patients who submitted requests evacuated between 8 October and 18 May, is likely to result in the deaths of those critically injured by the bombings and fire (AJ 27/05/2024; OCHA 20/05/2024).

The open decomposition of bodies still not recovered from the rubble or abandoned increases the risk of disease and other negative health outcomes for people sheltering nearby.

Protection

According to some sources, **the areas targeted by air strikes in Tal as-Sultan had been designated as ‘safe zones’ by Israeli forces, which means there is no guarantee that any areas are safe** (BBC 27/05/2024; Reuters 27/05/2024). Similarly, the IDF declared Mawasi as a ‘humanitarian safe zone’ and ordered people in Rafah to evacuate there. No matter their location, people in Gaza are exposed to airstrikes and ground operations, and further attacks on families seeking shelter have also been reported (Reuters 27/05/2024).