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First, it was Food as Weapon of War– & Then Came Water...



A family cooks a meal in a temporary accommodation in the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. Credit: UN World Food Programme (WFP)

UNITED NATIONS, Jul 22 2024 (IPS) - The Palestinians in Gaza have been victims of a double tragedy: killings by Israel's mostly American-made weapons and deaths by starvation.

And now comes a revelation of a new weapon of war: how Israel has been systematically weaponizing water against Palestinians in Gaza, according to a new report from the global human rights organization, Oxfam.

The report, "Water War Crimes", finds that Israel's cutting of external water supply, systematic destruction of water facilities and deliberate aid obstruction have reduced the amount of water available in Gaza by 94% to 4.74 litres a day per person – just under a third of the recommended minimum in emergencies and less than a single toilet flush.

Oxfam analysis also found:

- Israeli military attacks have damaged or destroyed five water and sanitation infrastructure sites every three days since the start of the war (last October)
- The destruction of water and electricity infrastructure and restrictions on entry of spare parts and fuel (on average a fifth of the required amount is allowed in) saw water production drop by 84% in Gaza. External supply from Israel's national water company Mekorot fell by 78%.

– Israel has destroyed 70% of all sewage pumps and 100% of all wastewater treatment plants, as well as the main water quality testing laboratories in Gaza, and restricted the entry of Oxfam water testing equipment.

James E. Jennings, PhD, President of Conscience International and Executive Director, US Academics for Peace, told IPS aid and development organizations know what they call WATSAN, or Water and Sanitation, are more basic for human health and survival than even food and shelter.

Conscience International realized in the early days of Israel's genocidal campaign of destruction in Gaza that the absence of safe water supplies for Gaza would eventually kill far more people than even the bombs, he pointed out.

"The only thing we got wrong was estimating how long it would take to reach the deadly point where we are now. It is a tribute to the resilience and talent of Gaza's citizens that clean water somehow continues to flow in small amounts, despite Israel's destruction of an estimated 94% of Gaza's purification facilities."

Gaza's deliberately imposed dearth of drinking water cannot continue through the stifling heat of July, August, September, and October without condemning multitudes of civilians to death. Children and the aged—who had no part in the conflict—are the most vulnerable, said Dr Jennings.

"Even if all aid access restrictions were lifted immediately—which Israel continues to refuse to do—many innocent people will still die, because logistical and technical challenges make it nearly impossible to meet the need for drinkable water".

This humanitarian crisis was predictable and inevitable. The international community has so far failed to intervene to stop the ongoing genocide. Now it is too late, he declared.

The Oxfam report also highlighted the dire impact of this extreme lack of clean water and sanitation on Palestinians' health, with more than a quarter (26%) of Gaza's population falling severely ill from easily preventable diseases.

In January, the International Court of Justice demanded that Israel immediately improve humanitarian access upon finding that South Africa had brought plausible claims under the Genocide Convention. Since then, Oxfam has witnessed firsthand Israel's obstruction of a meaningful humanitarian response, which is killing Palestinian civilians, according to the report.

Scott Paul, Oxfam America's Associate Director of Peace and Security, said, "Oxfam's new analysis leaves little doubt that Prime Minister Netanyahu's government has systemically obliterated Gaza's clean water supply and infrastructure.

"Today, Palestinians in Gaza have almost no water to drink, let alone to bathe, cook, or clean. Prime Minister Netanyahu must restore sufficient water, food, electricity, and other vital assistance for all people in Gaza. Instead of granting him the platform to double down on his deadly offensive to Congress, US leaders must cut off the supply of bombs that are being used to kill civilians and destroy Gaza and with it, any hope for peace."

Oxfam Water and Sanitation Specialist Lama Abdul Samad said it was clear that Israel had created a devastating humanitarian emergency resulting in Palestinian civilian deaths:

"The deliberate restriction of access to water is not a new tactic. The Israeli Government has been depriving Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza of safe and sufficient water for many years," she said.

"The widespread destruction and significant restrictions on aid delivery in Gaza impacting access to water and other essentials for survival, underscores the urgent need for the international community to take decisive action to prevent further suffering by upholding justice and human rights, including those enshrined in the Geneva and Genocide Conventions."

Monther Shoblak, General Manager of the Gaza Strip's water utility CMWU, said: "My colleagues and I have been living through a nightmare these past nine months, but we still feel it's our responsibility and duty to ensure everybody in Gaza is getting their minimum right of clean drinking water. It's been very difficult, but we are determined to keep trying – even when we witness our colleagues being targeted and killed by Israel while undertaking their work."

Oxfam is calling for urgent action including an immediate and permanent ceasefire; for Israel to allow a full and unfettered humanitarian response; and for Israel to foot the reconstruction bill for water and sanitation infrastructure.

Dr Jennings also recounted that as long ago as 2017 Amnesty International signaled to the world the potentially dire consequences of Israel's control over the water resources for the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza, calling it "systematic," "devastating," and "discriminatory."

Years before that report appeared, Gaza's sewage crisis was also the concern of multiple local administrative agencies.

Oxfam now claims that Israel's "Water War Crimes" have reduced the available clean water in Gaza to 6% of what it was when the war started. One water drilling company in Africa uses the slogan, "Water is Life," and it truly is.

What's more, experts have recently detected the Polio Virus in mud puddles and wastewater pools in the tent cities of Gaza where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have taken refuge to escape Israel's deadly nine-month bombing campaign, he noted.

Meanwhile, a staggering 186,000 killings in Gaza — compared with the official figure of over 37,000—has resurrected accusations of genocide and war crimes in the devastating nine-month-old war between Israel and Hamas, with no signs of a cease-fire.

The new estimates have come from The Lancet, one of the most prestigious peer-reviewed British medical journals.

In recent conflicts, says the article, titled "Counting the Deaths in Gaza: Difficult but Essential", indirect deaths range from three to 15 times the number of direct deaths.

"Applying a conservative estimate of four indirect deaths per one direct death to the 37,396 deaths reported, it is not implausible to estimate that up to 186,000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current conflict in Gaza," according to The Lancet.

The disproportionate killings in Gaza are in retaliation to the 1,200 killed by Hamas inside Israel on October 7.

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