

Time is running out for international action to protect civilians and prevent atrocity crimes in Rafah, as UN Security Council resolution is ignored

RAMALLAH, 3 April 2024 - A week since the UN Security Council passed a resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire, and days since the International Court of Justice issued additional provisional measures in South Africa's genocide case against Israel, States must act urgently to ensure its enforcement and prevent atrocity crimes in Rafah as attacks intensify, warn 13 humanitarian and human rights organizations.

Last week, the Government of Israel made clear its intention to expand military operations in Rafah irrespective of the UN Security Council's legally binding resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire. In the last week, we have seen this scenario beginning to unfold before our eyes, with Israeli bombardment killing at least 31 people including 14 children in Rafah on 26 and 27 March alone. Humanitarian and human rights organizations have repeatedly warned that the planned Israeli ground incursion into Rafah promises to decimate life and life-saving assistance for the more than 1.3 million civilians, including at least 610,000 children, who are now in the direct line of fire.

There is no feasible evacuation plan or conditions that would protect civilians if a ground incursion moves forward. To abide by the absolute prohibition of forcible transfer and deportation of civilians under international humanitarian law, Israel is obliged to take "all possible measures" to provide evacuated civilians with essential necessities for survival and guarantees of a safe and dignified return once hostilities end. Such measures include ensuring adequate safety and protection, shelter, water, sanitation, healthcare, and nutrition. As of today, no such place inside or outside of Gaza exists. Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip and six months of hostilities has [damaged or destroyed](#) more than 60 percent of housing units and annihilated most of the infrastructure in northern and central Gaza.

There is nowhere safe for people to go in Gaza. Israeli forces have repeatedly attacked areas they previously prescribed as "safe." Israeli airstrikes in and around the so-called safe zone of Al-Mawasi have killed at least 28 people, with Israeli ground forces previously entering and occupying its northern portion. Across Gaza, even when humanitarian organizations provide locations of aid operations and staff members to Israeli forces, these areas have continued to come under attack. Aid workers have been killed, aid convoys have come under Israeli fire, and shelters and hospitals supported by the humanitarian community are being damaged or destroyed under Israeli bombardment. New Israeli government proposals to force civilians into so-called "humanitarian islands" would likely provide another false

pretence of safety and instead squeeze civilians into small, contained and under-resourced areas where they risk coming under attack, whether they are in or outside these “islands.”

There is nowhere in Gaza with access to sufficient assistance and services to ensure the population's survival. In Rafah itself, essential services and infrastructure are only partially functioning, including overwhelmed hospitals, bakeries, and water and sanitation facilities. The centre and north of Gaza are decimated, with entire systems, infrastructure and neighbourhoods wiped off the map and continued restrictions on access for humanitarian agencies and assistance. Further escalation of Israeli military operations in Rafah would also pose catastrophic consequences for an already hamstrung humanitarian response across Gaza, with most aid coordination and infrastructure set up since October 2023 based in Rafah.

All states have the obligation to protect populations from atrocity crimes. Children and families in Rafah have been living in a constant state of fear and danger. The Government of Israel has announced its intention to expand military operations there and this risk has escalated further since March 31, when Israel's war cabinet approved plans for land operations in the southernmost governorate. While some states have publicly expressed disapproval, international diplomatic pressure and statements have so far been insufficient to yield results and avert the planned incursion. Yet there is a suite of protective measures available to states, which are obliged to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian and human rights law, as demonstrated previously in other civilian protection crises.

States must now take urgent action to ensure the immediate implementation of a permanent ceasefire and explore all available options to protect civilians, in line with their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. This includes immediately halting the transfer of weapons, parts, and ammunition where there is a risk they are used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian or human rights law. Anything less is not simply a failure. Anything less fails to fulfil moral, humanitarian, and legal imperatives.

Signed Off

- 1. Save the Children**
- 2. International Federation for Human Rights**
- 3. Amnesty International**
- 4. Doctors of the World/Médecins du Monde France, Spain and Switzerland.**
- 5. ActionAid International**
- 6. Oxfam International**
- 7. Norwegian Refugee Council**
- 8. Plan International**
- 9. Handicap International - Humanity & Inclusion**
- 10. Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP)**
- 11. International Rescue Committee (IRC)**
- 12. Danish Refugee Council**
- 13. DanChurch Aid**
- 14. Avaaz**
- 15. CARE**