



Pauses, Corridors, and Safe Zones in Gaza: Rhetoric vs. Reality

On 9 November 2023, it was [announced](#) that Israel had agreed to implement four-hour so-called “humanitarian pauses” in Gaza to relocate civilians out of northern Gaza towards the south. Prior to this Israel had also issued relocation orders telling civilians to move south. Separately, there have been several other unilateral proposals in the media and in public remarks by world leaders to enact so-called “humanitarian pauses”, “humanitarian corridors” and “safe zones” in Gaza. The UN Security Council resolution [passed](#) on 15 November, with a child-centered, humanitarian focus, and also made reference to some of these terms, but does not outline measures for the Council to monitor or implement these arrangements, and has not been accepted by parties on the ground.

While efforts aiming to save lives are welcomed, the terminology and public statements describing measures purported to protect civilians do not accurately reflect the current situation on the ground. Hundreds of civil society organizations, including humanitarian agencies in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and rights groups around the world, have maintained that an immediate ceasefire is the only realistic and effective way to alleviate suffering and save lives.

Reality of “Pauses” and “Corridors”

What’s been announced:

- On 9 November 2023, four-hour so-called “humanitarian pauses” in Gaza to move civilians out of northern Gaza to areas south of Wadi Gaza. Despite the humanitarian reference, there was no indication that the aim was solely to protect civilians from the effects of ongoing hostilities.
- The term “humanitarian corridors” has been used to describe the few one way routes prescribed for civilians to relocate from northern Gaza to areas south of Wadi Gaza, which the Israeli military said would be safer for civilians.
- On 15 November 2023, the UN Security Council passed a resolution (2712) [calling](#) for “urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors.”

Reality on the ground:

- “Pauses”, defined as a suspension of hostilities by all parties, including of bombardment, shelling, artillery fire and close-quarter skirmishes across *all* of Gaza, are not taking place.
- Two one-way routes were prescribed by Israel - the Salah al-Din road from Gaza City and the strip’s coastal highway - to force civilians to relocate from northern Gaza to areas south of Wadi Gaza. Bombardment, shelling, and sniper fire have been reported to obstruct these prescribed routes and interrupt movement.

- These routes do *not*, and were never meant to, facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance to northern Gaza or the orderly evacuation of civilians in keeping with international humanitarian law.
- While thousands of families have managed to reach areas south of Wadi Gaza, others have not been able or willing to use these routes, e.g. those persons with disabilities, elderly, sick, and family members with reduced mobility. In several instances, families have attempted to use these routes only to have to turn back to Gaza City because of heavy bombardment. The [movement](#) of unaccompanied children, as well as separated families, has been observed.
- Public statements by senior Israeli officials of the intent to deport the civilian population out of occupied Gaza and into Egypt would be incompatible with the prohibition on forcible transfer and deportation, amounting to a grave breach of international law.
- A forced relocation without any [guarantees of safety](#) or return and without providing for the needs of the protected population, risks amounting to forcible transfer, which is a grave breach of international humanitarian law and codified as a war crime.
- The Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza is currently the sole operational route to transport the limited aid allowed into Gaza. These efforts have been significantly impeded by the lengthy and cumbersome processes, lack of fuel and the closure of all other crossings by Israel. Consequently, aid agencies are unable to provide aid based on the humanitarian needs of the population of Gaza, including to those in the south.
- No aid has been distributed by UN and humanitarian organizations north of Wadi Gaza since 7 November. Prior to 7 October, three crossings Rafah, Erez, and Kerem Shalom were used for commercial and humanitarian purposes, which aid organizations have asked to be reopened.

“Safe Zones,” “Humanitarian Zones” and related terms

What’s been announced:

- On 13 October, the Israeli forces ordered civilians to relocate from northern Gaza to areas south of Wadi Gaza, indicating that they would be safer there, while providing none of the mandated assurances of safety in transit and the guarantee that persons shall be transferred back to their homes as soon as hostilities in the area in question have ceased.
- Over the course of the last few weeks, various Israeli officials have publicly made reference to a “humanitarian zone” being established for civilians in the southern town of Al-Mawasi, an area approximately 1km wide and 14km long, giving the impression civilians would be safe and [provided](#) with aid if they relocate to this area.
- On 15 November, the Israeli forces [dropped](#) leaflets in southern Gaza towns, including Al Qarrah, Khuza’a, Bani Suhaila, and Absaan, once again asking residents to relocate.

Reality on the ground:

- Airstrikes and shelling, as well as close quarter combat between Israeli ground forces and Palestinian armed groups, have persisted across the entire strip unabated since those relocation orders were issued, with no safety guarantees for civilians, including those forced south of Wadi Gaza.
- UN reports indicate a third of all people killed in Gaza and at least half of the 104 UNRWA aid workers killed were located in areas south of the Wadi Gaza line, where civilians were

told to relocate (accurate as of 19 November). In addition, over half of the UNRWA [facilities](#) hit or damaged during this escalation are south of Wadi Gaza.

- The Gaza Strip is already one of the most densely populated areas in the world with a population of 2.2 million people living across 365 sq km. Forcibly relocating large numbers of civilians to an even smaller strip of land without adequate services only risks creating an even larger humanitarian catastrophe than currently exists, and would amount to prohibitive forcible transfer of the civilian population of occupied territory.
- Under the prevalent conditions, proposals to unilaterally accept prescribed “safe zones” in Gaza would risk endangering civilians even more, heightening their vulnerability to attack, and potentially risking an even larger-scale loss of life. [Humanitarian leaders](#) have unequivocally stated that they cannot participate in unilateral proposals to establish so-called “safe zones.”

EDITOR’S NOTES

- “Humanitarian corridors” are “agreements between parties to the armed conflict to allow for safe passage for a limited time in a specific geographic area. They can allow civilians to leave, humanitarian assistance to come in or allow for the evacuation of the wounded, sick or dead.” (Source: [ICRC](#))
- A “humanitarian pause” is the “temporary suspension of hostilities for purely humanitarian purposes that is agreed between the parties to the conflict. It is usually for a specific time and area, but is not a term defined in international humanitarian law.” (Source: [ICRC](#))
- Definitions for “Safe Zones” or “neutralized zones” are articulated by the ICRC in various publications, including their online [International Humanitarian Law Database](#).
- In at least one instance, a doctor employed by a medical NGO in Gaza [was killed](#) with his family in an Israeli attack on his home after being unable to relocate with elderly and sick family members.

Organizations signed on:

1. Action Against Hunger
2. Handicap International - Humanity & Inclusion
3. Médecins du Monde - France
4. Médecins du Monde - Spain
5. Médecins du Monde - Swiss
6. Norwegian Refugee Council
7. Oxfam
8. Refugees International
9. Nobel Women’s Initiative