

# **Rafah, Gaza: Urgent statement from Chief Executives of humanitarian agencies and human rights organizations**

17 February 2024

We are appalled by the harrowing developments in Rafah, Gaza's most populated area where 1.5 million people are sheltering as their last resort - over half a million of them children. If Israel launches its proposed ground offensive, thousands more civilians will be killed and the current trickle of humanitarian aid risks coming to a complete halt. If this military plan is not stopped immediately, the consequences will be catastrophic.

With significant damage to over 70 per cent of civilian infrastructure, many areas in Gaza have been reduced to rubble and are uninhabitable. Most hospitals are non-functional or only partially operational and are completely overwhelmed. There is little food, clean water, shelter, or sanitation. People are living in the most inhumane conditions, many of them out in the open. It defies belief that the Israeli military has forcibly displaced the majority of the population from their homes into Rafah - with six times as many people than before now squeezed into the area - and then announced plans to attack it.

The Israeli government's strategy of systematic and repeated forcible transfer of the civilian population has led to the forced displacement of more than three quarters of the population, many of whom left without adequate shelter or homes to return to. Collectively punishing civilians by denying them adequate shelter, food, clean water and other essentials needed for their survival and obstructing humanitarian relief consignments destined to alleviate starvation may amount to grave breaches of the obligations of an occupying power under International Humanitarian Law, constituting war crimes.

Last month, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling, mandated Israel to take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance in Gaza. Not only has this not happened, the situation on the ground has deteriorated further. Israel's airstrikes in Rafah killed at least 100 Palestinians in a single day, defying both international calls for moderation and potentially the ICJ order. Over 1.5 million people trapped in Rafah have nowhere safe to go, and many have already been displaced multiple times. All of the Israeli supposed-safe spaces have been compromised, without exception, further proof that there was never truly anywhere safe in Gaza.

Our call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire is more urgent than ever as Israel's relentless bombardment and siege have decimated Gaza and left the Palestinian civilian population starving, facing famine, and with diseases rife while obstructing attempts to alleviate their suffering. The Israeli military offensive has made it virtually impossible for our collective agencies to meaningfully and effectively deliver humanitarian work, compromising not only safety but also the very principles guiding our humanitarian efforts. Rafah has been the primary entry point for aid and bombardment will then prevent any assistance from getting through.

The silence, and at times material support of Israel's military by powerful nations, signals distressing complicity in Gaza's deepening crisis. Whether through the transfer of weapons, diplomatic obstruction of resolutions, or silence, such actions have effectively granted Israel impunity. The harrowing situation in Gaza underscores the urgent need for governments worldwide to stop the supply of arms and ammunition used in these atrocities. We also call for a permanent ceasefire to protect civilian lives and release of hostages and unlawfully detained Palestinians, and full, unhindered access for humanitarian aid and workers.

States bear legal and moral responsibilities to protect civilians, prevent war crimes and uphold international law. We urge all States to consider that their inaction or continued support not only deepens the tragedy but also implicates them. We call upon them to do everything in their power to prevent further military offensives and forge a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire in Gaza.

**Signatories:**

Ana Alcalde	Acting Secretary General, <b>ActionAid International</b>
Dr Agnès Callamard	Secretary General, <b>Amnesty International</b>
Charlotte Slente	Secretary General, <b>Danish Refugee Council</b>
Manuel Patrouillard	CEO, <b>Handicap International-Humanity &amp; Inclusion</b>
Amitabh Behar	Executive Director, <b>Oxfam International</b>
Rob Williams	CEO, <b>War Child Alliance</b>
Faris Arouri	Director, <b>Association for International Development Agencies</b>