The Lethal Risk of Seeking Food in Gaza

Hundreds of Palestinians have been killed over the past month near aid hubs set up under a new Israel-backed system, according to Gaza health officials.

Relatives mourned a family member who was killed on Tuesday near an aid distribution point set up by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation.Credit...Eyad Baba/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By Rawan Sheikh Ahmad and Adam Rasgon

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A month after the launch of a new Israeli-backed aid system for Gaza, reaching the heavily guarded distribution hubs has become a life-risking endeavor for Palestinians, hampering efforts to get enough food to a hungry population.

Deadly violence has erupted frequently around the approaches to the aid sites, most of them in southern Gaza. The Gaza health ministry said on Wednesday that hundreds have been killed over the past month near the distribution points,

which are run by American security contractors and guarded by Israeli troops stationed nearby.

In a separate aid effort that has also become engulfed in chaos, the United Nations and other international organizations have been delivering a trickle of food handouts to northern Gaza. Desperate crowds have been ransacking the trucks carrying flour and other goods minutes after they enter the enclave, according to witnesses.

Jens Laerke, a spokesman for the U.N. agency for coordination of humanitarian affairs, described the new aid distribution hubs as “death traps" for Gazans.

“Gaza is the hungriest place on earth,” he said on Wednesday. “When we are able to bring anything in, it’s getting plundered immediately by the population. That’s the level of desperation.”

The new aid system, run by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, has just a few operational hubs, primarily in the south. It was put into place after Israel blocked aid deliveries to Gaza for nearly three months from March to May. Restrictions on the entry of aid were partially lifted on May 19.

It was part of an effort to try to replace an aid operation led by the United Nations with hundreds of distribution points. The United Nations and other international aid organizations have criticized the new system, saying the aid it delivers falls far short of needs and that it forces people to walk for miles in dangerous conditions for a chance to find food. They accuse Israel of turning aid into a weapon.

Witnesses on a number of occasions have reported that Israeli troops opened fire on the approaches to the new aid hubs. The Israeli military has said repeatedly that its forces have fired “warning shots” when people approached its forces in what it described as a threatening manner.

Israeli officials have said the G.H.F. sites were needed to allow for the delivery of aid without Hamas benefiting. They say that in the past, Hamas has taken control of much of the food and other aid reaching the territory, keeping some for its own people, selling some on the black market and restricting supplies for ordinary Gazans.

Palestinians gathered aid from the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation in Rafah on Wednesday.Credit...Abdel Kareem Hana/Associated Press

France on Tuesday condemned what it said was Israeli gunfire at civilians gathered around an aid distribution point in Gaza, saying it had left dozens of dead and wounded.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it had treated people who had been shot on Tuesday near a Gaza Humanitarian Foundation site in the southern city of Rafah. The Red Cross said that its field hospital in Rafah, which is near the aid hub, received 149 patients after that incident, including 16 who were declared dead on arrival and three others who died from their wounds. It was not possible to verify the figures independently.

The Israeli military said it was “not aware of the incident in question at the Rafah aid distribution site.”

The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation did not comment specifically on that incident, but has said that there have been false allegations of attacks near its aid distribution sites, and that the international media has been mistakenly linking its operations to violence near U.N. convoys.

“Ultimately the solution to ending the violence is more aid, which will create more certainty and less urgency,” it said in a statement. “There is not yet enough capacity or food to feed everyone in need in Gaza.”

The group appealed to the United Nations and others to work with them.

Since the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation started distributing aid in mid-May, the Red Cross said its field hospital in Rafah has activated “mass casualty procedures” 20 times.

“We condemn with maximum strength the fact that for one month now, people are being injured and killed every day while trying to get urgently needed food in a war zone,” Christian Cardon, the chief spokesman of the Red Cross, said on Thursday.

In a separate statement on Monday, the chief of the Israeli military’s southern command defended the importance of continuing the Gaza war, which was launched to crush Hamas after it led the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel.

“We cannot tolerate Hamas here,” said the commander, Maj. Gen. Yaniv Asor. “We will not end this war until the threat has been eliminated.”

In recent months, cease-fire talks between Israel and Hamas have repeatedly failed to produce a breakthrough.

A key sticking point is the permanence of a cease-fire. Hamas has insisted on a lasting end to the war in Gaza. But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has rejected that demand, saying Hamas’s military and governing capabilities must first be dismantled.

On Wednesday, Israeli officials signaled they wanted to change the procedures for trucks affiliated with the United Nations and other international organizations to enter northern Gaza. Mr. Netanyahu and Defense Minister Israel Katz said Hamas was taking control of the aid entering northern Gaza and was stealing it from civilians.

Carrying aid through Jabaliya in Gaza on Sunday.Credit...Omar Al-Qattaa/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The two Israeli leaders said they instructed the military to “present within 48 hours an action plan to prevent Hamas from taking control of the aid.”

The Israeli defense ministry body that oversees aid delivery to Gaza said that 71 trucks carrying food, flour, medicines and other supplies entered Gaza on Tuesday after steps had been taken to ensure that the aid does not fall into the hands of Hamas.

While hunger remains widespread in Gaza, there were signs that food was becoming somewhat more available after a month of aid flows.

The G.H.F. has said it has distributed more than 800,000 boxes of food aid since it started operations, including nearly 40,000 on Thursday.

World Central Kitchen, the charity set up by the celebrity chef José Andrés, said this week that it had resumed operations in Gaza after a seven-week pause.

The United Nations said that Gaza still faced catastrophic hunger and more than 20 months with insufficient supplies has added up to a cumulative deficit.

“Families in Gaza are risking their lives to access food, with nearly daily mass casualties reported as people attempt to reach supplies,” the U.N. humanitarian agency said in a report on Thursday. “Most families survive on just one

nutritiously poor meal per day, while adults routinely skip meals to prioritize children, the elderly, and the ill amid deepening hunger and desperation.”

Ahmad Samier Kafina, from Nuseirat in central Gaza, said he had risked going three times to an aid distribution point in central Gaza because his extended family relied on him to find food.

Mr. Kafina said that each time, he had left the place where the family was living around midnight and walked for 45 minutes toward the site, often in the company of neighbors and relatives because it felt safer in a group. Only once had he managed to secure even a small quantity of food, but he said that he faced gunfire.

“I saw death there,” he said.

He said he feared a stampede and had seen people in the crowds using sharp implements to steal food from those who had secured it. Despite the risks, he said, he had no choice.

“We have no other source of food.”

Matthew Mpoke Bigg contributed reporting.

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