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Bombings in populated areas: a new extreme reached in Gaza

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EMERGENCY | PALESTINE | PUBLISHED ON MARCH 6TH 2024

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PALESTINE

The HI team in Gaza was finally able to access the emergency stock in Gaza City and donated over 200 items, including around 150 wheelchairs, along with walkers, crutches, medical mattresses, and wound dressing kits. | © HI

After five months of escalating violence in Gaza, we take stock of the situation and hear the heart-rending account of Jean-Pierre Delomier, HI's Deputy Director of International Operations, who recently returned from Rafah.

Since October 7 and the escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas, some 30,000 Palestinians have been killed – including at least 10,000 children – and 70,000 injured in the continuous bombing of Gaza by Israeli forces. This deadly offensive comes in the wake of a massive attack launched on Israel by Hamas, in which 1,200 Israelis were killed and 240 Israelis and foreign nationals were taken hostage.

The most intense use of explosive weapons in the most densely populated area

As in Mariupol (Ukraine), Aleppo (Syria), Grozny (Chechnya), cities and civilians in Gaza are devastated by systematic and massive bombardment.

An estimated 45,000 bombs were dropped during the first 89 days of conflict (Source: Gaza Media Office). It is 505 bombings a day, 21 bombings per hour.

People trapped and surrounded by bombing

Gaza is razed and emptied of its inhabitants by 5 months of relentless bombing. [85% of Gaza's population – 1.7 million people – have been forced to flee bombing and shelling.](#)

[1.5 million have taken shelter in Rafah, South Gaza](#), that has normally a population of 250,000 inhabitants. People, who have been displaced multiple times, are traumatized and exhausted. They have lost everything and have nowhere to go and are at threat of a new possible offensive.





"Palestinians have been forced to leave their homes, escaping from continuous bombing and shelling. They were forced to replace their loving homes that they have built with tents that leak rain and cannot be even warmed. The streets are littered with tents. Every sidewalk and street corner is occupied by shelters. Public spaces are also saturated, with each person settling wherever space is available. Almost no services are provided: no running water, waste accumulates in the streets due to erratic collection, collective accommodation centres overflow with displaced persons. There are only four ATMs where crowds wait from sunrise to sunset for them to be restocked. Among humanitarian workers, many are themselves displaced. Sometimes, along the overcrowded roads, makeshift vendors offer a few canned goods and vegetables. The population is hungry, thirsty, exhausted, and tense. Everyone travels on foot or on carts pulled by donkeys, as very few use motor vehicles because fuel is expensive and scarce. As soon as you are noticed, you are immediately asked for something to eat. Humanitarian aid arrives in dribs and drabs in this trap where men, women, and children no longer know where to go. They need the most essential things: food, water, and shelter."

HI's activities in the Gaza Strip: read "[Rehabilitation needs growing rapidly in Gaza](#)"

Half of the buildings no longer standing

Relentless bombing and shelling in populated areas have devastated civilian infrastructures and buildings. [Between 50% and 62% of all buildings in Gaza are likely destroyed or damaged](#) (30 January). [World Bank report finds 45% of residential buildings in Gaza ruined](#) beyond repair, leaving over 1 million homeless (24 January).

Gaza: piles of contaminated rubble

As an estimated 45,000 bombs were dropped during the first 89 days of conflict, according to Gaza Media Office, and based on an average failure rate of 14%, it is possible that as many as 6,300 bombs have failed to function as designed and remain unexploded.*

"It's impossible to know the full extent of the explosive remnant contamination in the Gaza Strip, as hostilities have been present in the region for decades, and explosive remnants of war (ERW) were already a significant problem before the escalation that followed October 7. But considering the intensity of the bombardments during these last few months, we can expect a significant increase in explosive contamination: the territory is decimated and unexploded ordnance significantly restricts freedom of movement, the delivery of aid, and will hamper reconstruction of vital critical infrastructure. This level of contamination, limited resources, the environment and fragile context will make living and working in Gaza extremely challenging and explosive remnants will undoubtedly cause further loss of life, limb and psychological trauma for many years to come," says Gary Toombs, HI Technical Director of Global Land Release and Explosive Ordnance Disposal Operations.

Complex injuries caused by explosive weapons

Injuries caused by explosive weapons are highly specific and challenging to heal, often resulting in significant pain. They frequently result in temporary or permanent disabilities. People are also terrified and traumatised.

Many in Gaza will need rehabilitation and mental health support on the long term.

"We see many people with very complex injuries such as fractures, peripheral nerve injuries, amputations of one or several limbs, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, and burns. Sometimes, injured civilians arrive at hospitals with a combination of multiple injuries that are extremely difficult or sometimes impossible to treat. The level of pain and suffering related to these injuries is difficult to measure and understand for people who are not experiencing it. The lack of medical care and lack of painkillers means that many people suffer needlessly and may develop impairments that could have been avoided. This by itself can be incredibly traumatic," says Federico Dessi, HI Middle East Director.

Over 200 humanitarian staff killed or injured

Critical incidents on humanitarians occur frequently: [since October 2023, 238 humanitarian staff were killed or injured](#) in the Palestinian Occupied Territory.

Hospitals in Gaza are directly affected by conflict activities; incidents hindering medical evacuations, impeding the delivery of essential supplies frequently occur. Humanitarians also encounter frequent denials and increasing impediments for mission, including attacks affecting aid convoys and health facilities.

As people require the most fundamental assistance, such as water, food, and shelter, given Gaza's imminent risk of famine, humanitarian organizations provide vital aid.

Humanitarian workers must be protected: Humanitarian aid is currently the main lifeline for 2.2 million people stuck under the bombs in Gaza for more than four months reaching a state of extreme exhaustion and destruction. Aid entering in Gaza is not meeting the needs due current hostilities, restrictions imposed on entry of goods inside the Gaza strip, limited number of border crossing points opened despite the clear call from many stakeholders (including the International Court of Justice) to ensure safe and unimpeded humanitarian access.

The pattern of harm from bombing and shelling in populated areas

The following pattern of harm is exacerbated in Gaza due to the extreme intensity of bombing and shelling since October 7 and the heavily density of the population:

- [Action On Armed Violence recorded 122% rise in civilian casualties worldwide. Israel's military operation in Gaza is a major cause](#)



- The destruction of systems of water and sanitation, housing, schools, hospitals, and other vital civilian infrastructure deprives populations of access to basic necessities and results in displacement and other long-term suffering.

Stop bombing civilians

Since the [Dublin Conference on 18 November 2022](#), against the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, 84 States committed to end bombing of civilians.

They committed to condemn "any attacks directed against civilians, [...], as well as indiscriminate shelling and the indiscriminate use of explosive weapons." They also committed to providing and facilitating assistance to conflict affected population, and facilitate rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to those in need in situations of armed conflict.

States must respect their commitments. Bombing civilians must stop and the delivery of humanitarian must be the priority.

* Estimate made by explosive ordnance specialists. Extract from HI report: "The Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas – Explosive Contamination and Impact in Gaza – February 2024". This figure does not include explosive ordnance from the ground fighting and only represents the impact of the first 89 days. This figure will have increased since then.

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