

Gaza: Increased armed hostilities in Rafah pose disastrous risk to civilian lives and infrastructure

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Geneva (ICRC) — The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) cautions the parties to the conflict, and the international community, about the dire impact of increased and sustained armed hostilities in Rafah, in the south of the Gaza Strip. Official statements and reporting, as well as continuous military strikes, indicate that a new phase of the conflict is unfolding, and it is critical that civilian lives are protected. Even amidst the carnage and extreme polarization, the fundamental principle of humanity must be upheld.

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"In view of a military operation in densely populated Rafah, we renew our call on the parties to the conflict, and all who have influence on them, to spare and protect civilian lives and infrastructure," said Fabrizio Carboni, the ICRC's regional director for the Near and Middle East. "Under international humanitarian law, parties to the conflict must ensure the basic necessities of life are provided and the necessary safeguards to preserve life are undertaken for the civilian population. It is urgent to do more now. Countless lives are hanging in the balance."

Gaza has endured four months of high-intensity conflict. To escape the fighting, many people fled to Gaza's south, where more than 1.5 million people are living on less than 20 percent of Gaza's land (approximately 60 square kilometers). Today, Rafah is so overcrowded that displaced people desperately search for any free space to erect a rudimentary tent.

Most people did not arrive in Rafah directly, but have been displaced two, three, or four times. There is a lack of food, drinking water, sanitation, health care, and safety. Coupled with constant stress and fear, and taking into account injuries, age, and disabilities, many residents are in a weakened state and at elevated risk of dying from common infections or diseases.

This reality needs to be kept in mind as the next steps in the conflict are devised and deployed. International humanitarian law (IHL) prohibits certain actions, amongst them forced displacement, the use of human shields, and attacks that are indiscriminate or cause disproportionate civilian death, injury and destruction.

If war plans foresee the evacuation of the population in advance of such hostilities, it is critical that they account for the reality of massive numbers of people moving across bomb-damaged roads, past the rubble of destroyed buildings and through areas contaminated by unexploded weapons. Evacuations have to ensure that civilians arrive safely, and have satisfactory conditions of hygiene, health, safety and nutrition, and that members of the same family are not separated. They must be able to return to their homes as soon as hostilities have stopped. Questions such as how to safely transport the disabled, the elderly, and the sick, and where such a large population can move and reside safely with basic needs met, are critical to answer in advance. Moreover, IHL protects all civilians from the effects of hostilities, including those who may not be able to depart Rafah.

Israel, as the occupying power, must ensure that the basic needs of the civilian population are met. In addition, it is necessary -- and only more urgent considering the humanitarian emergency and the escalating hostilities -- that the trickle of aid being let into Gaza becomes a steady, robust stream: food, drinkable water, hygiene items, medicines, and materials to do basic sanitation and allow for adequate shelter. An ICRC medical team has been stationed at the European Gaza Hospital, carrying out more than a dozen urgent surgeries a day, since late October. ICRC teams are responding to humanitarian needs, but we fear that larger-scale operations would continue to be hampered by access and security issues, as well as weapon contamination which endangers civilians and humanitarians alike. Humanitarian

organizations need to have minimum guarantees to be able to safely transport the aid and rapidly reach people in need.

About the ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a neutral, impartial and independent organization with an exclusively humanitarian mandate that stems from the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often alongside its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners.

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