

As malnutrition and starvation stalk Gaza, will Israelis heed a desperate plea to stop?

● Soaring prices and lack of fuel for cooking make food shortages even more acute



Barry O'Halloran

On Thursday, a far-right Israeli minister said the quiet part out loud. “The government is racing ahead for Gaza to be wiped out... Thank God, we are wiping out this evil,” said Amichai Eliyahu. He added Gaza will be cleared for Jewish settlement, as Israel was at war to kill “these monsters”.

The heritage minister’s ultranationalist party props up the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, who insisted that Eliyahu’s remarks did not represent his administration’s policy.

Even so, the situation in Gaza makes it hard not to conclude that his government has a de facto policy of starving Gazans into submission or forcing them to leave the enclave altogether. Such an exodus would help the messianic Zionists expand the current territory and achieve an Eretz Yisrael — a “Greater Israel”.

There is overwhelming evidence that malnutrition and starvation are stalking Gaza. And just as disturbing, the recently established US-Israeli backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) food distribution centres have become killing zones for hungry Gazans queueing for food.

Ireland’s Oxfam representative, Jacqui Corcoran, explained to me how food shortages are intimately linked to fuel shortages in a vicious circle that compounds the problem.

“The GHF is distributing food — but it’s stuff like flour and oil which has to be baked to make bread. And there’s a shortage of fuel for cooking and transport. And the electricity gets cut off regularly. Without electricity the desalination plants don’t work, and without fuel we can’t send water trucks to the areas that need water.”

In a blistering statement on the

Gazan food crisis, Bob Geldof, who has some Jewish ancestry and has spoken at Holocaust Memorial Day ceremonies, did not mince his words as he addressed Israelis directly.

“Have you become as those who once used their mad logic as an excuse to obliterate? They failed, thank God. And so will you, also thank God. So can you just stop? Really. Just stop. For all our sakes.”

In one of many tough questions, Geldof asked Israelis: “Your government and your army seem to be out of control. Why do you, the people of Israel, tolerate and permit this?”

It’s impossible to know how Israelis will respond to Geldof’s questions — or even if they know he asked them.

But for us to begin to comprehend this most heart-breaking episode in a horrific and tragic war, it is important to understand the political background that is shaping current events.

Hamas’s barbaric invasion of southern Israel on October 7, 2023, resulted in an overwhelming Israeli response. The stated objectives of Israel’s invasion were twofold — to end Hamas rule in the territory, and free the Israeli hostages that Hamas had taken.

During the subsequent almost two years of war, those objectives seem to have undergone a radical transformation. What began as war aims designed to secure Israel’s future security have now metastasised into something entirely different: the reoccupation of Gaza.

In the process, Netanyahu has allowed Israel’s national security interests to become subordinated to the goals of the far-right religious parties on which his coalition government depends to remain in power.

The comments by Amichai Eliyahu drew condemnation by from opposition leader Yair Lapid, who said: “Israel will never convince the world of the righteousness of our war against terror so long as we are led by an extremist minority government with ministers

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Palestinians gather to receive food from a charity kitchen, amid a hunger crisis, in Gaza City
Picture: Amir Levy/Getty

who sanctify blood and death.”

Leader of the Israeli Labour Party Yair Golan said simply: “This is a government that has lost its sanity.”

For the past 18 months, there has been an endless argument between the UN, NGOs and the Israeli government over how many aid trucks are or are not entering Gaza. Amid the claims and counter-claims, it’s difficult for outsiders to grasp exactly what’s really going on.

There are hundreds of aid trucks stuck on the Israeli side of the Kerem Shalom border crossing, and more inside Gaza awaiting distribution. There are also many thousands of trucks loaded with aid sitting in Jordan and Egypt.

One thing we do know is that before the war began, around 400-500 trucks a day entered Gaza. Only a fraction of that number gets in now. Some days just a few dozen, other days might see

truck numbers in the low hundreds entering. Based on simple maths, that’s far too little to feed over two million people. This is the fundamental reason why children are dying of starvation in Gaza today.

Recognising the extent of the humanitarian disaster that was unfolding, three months ago the US and Israel set up a joint food distribution project, the GHF. It was an attempt to get food to Gazans in a manner that would not be exploited by Hamas. But the GHF sites have become a war zone in themselves, as up to 1,000 hungry Palestinians have died from gunshot wounds at or near these sites, according to the UN.

In a gripping eyewitness account a few days ago, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter described what happened as hundreds of civilians walked towards a GHF food distribution centre

in Khan Younis. “The moment that a few men managed to break through the site, all hell broke loose. Suddenly, everyone began sprinting towards the aid distribution site and grabbed the boxes of aid.”

He explained: “The moment people realise that order has broken down they move as quickly as they can to get any aid, because they don’t know if this site will be open tomorrow or the next day... It demonstrates the uncertainty that surrounds this whole plan... it’s creating this incredibly combustible situation.”

The following day up to 20 people were crushed to death in a stampede at the same GHF site.

Claims about starvation in Gaza have been a feature of the conflict almost from the beginning. A January 2024 headline in *The New Yorker* declared ‘Gaza is starving’.

In March the same year, a *Wash-*

ington Post headline claimed ‘Israel’s war on Hamas brings famine to Gaza’. There were definite food shortages, but claims of famine at that stage seemed overblown.

One of the most egregious claims, however, was a statement by UN emergency relief co-ordinator Tom Fletcher in May, claiming: “There are 14,000 babies who will die in the next 48 hours unless we can reach them.” This provoked outrage and made headlines across all media at the time. It caused a meltdown in the Dáil, with TDs endlessly repeating that “14,000 babies will die in 48 hours”.

And the outrage would have been justified had the claim been true — but it wasn’t. The actual report being misquoted by the UN representative referred to infants at risk of severe malnutrition over the course of an entire year, not 48 hours.

Despite such exaggerated and false claims, there is now incontrovertible evidence that malnutrition among children is becoming endemic, and the possibility of mass starvation a very real possibility. The most compelling evidence for an imminent famine is the price of that most essential of food staples — flour.

Before the war, a 25kg sack of flour cost under 50 shekels (€12). It has increased steadily throughout the war, so that by January 2024 it had risen to 300 shekels (€70) and to 500 shekels (€127) a year later. However, just last week, that same 25kg sack of flour cost 3,750 shekels (€950) — a staggering 80-fold increase.

As a consequence, in Gaza today “Give us this day our daily bread” is not simply a prayer, it is a resounding plea for the rest of humanity to intervene to avert a catastrophic famine.

This month is the 40th anniversary of Live Aid, a famine relief effort designed to deal with the consequences of a natural disaster. What is happening in Gaza today, however, is a man-made disaster.

As Geldof was the person who spearheaded famine relief effort in Ethiopia 40 years ago, I’ll leave the last word to him and his words to the government of Israel: “Whatever your war aim once was, and however justifiable you felt that to be, at what point did the aim become the deliberate starvation of a terrified, traumatised population?”