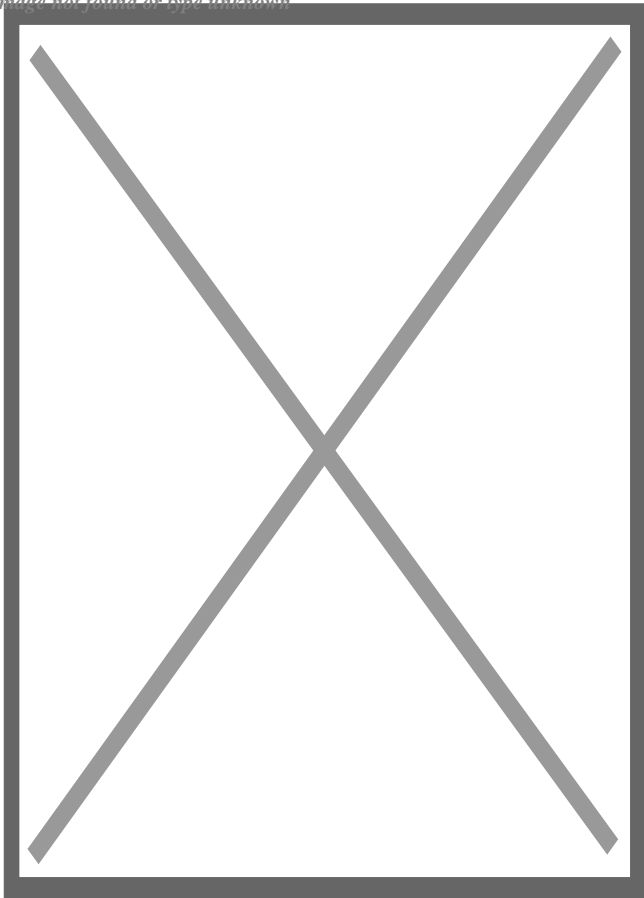


United Nations says acute malnutrition spreading fast among children in Gaza as Israel continues using hunger and starvation as weapons in its genocidal war

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United Nations, March 17 (RHC)-- The main United Nations aid agency operating in Gaza has said that acute malnutrition was accelerating in the north of the Palestinian enclave as Israel prepared to send a delegation to Qatar for new truce talks on a hostage deal with Hamas.

On Saturday, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) said one in three children under the age of two in northern Gaza are now acutely malnourished, putting more pressure on Israel over the looming famine.

"Children's malnutrition is spreading fast and reaching unprecedented levels in Gaza," UNRWA said in a social media post. On Friday, Israel said it would send a delegation to Qatar for more talks with mediators after Hamas presented a new proposal for a ceasefire with an exchange of hostages and prisoners.

A source familiar with the talks told the Reuters news agency that the delegation will be led by the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, David Barnea. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is seeking to convene the security cabinet to discuss the proposal before the talks start. Netanyahu's office has said the Hamas offer was still based on "unrealistic demands".

Repeated efforts failed to secure a ceasefire before the holy month of Ramadan, which started a week ago, with Israel saying it plans to launch a new offensive in Rafah in southern Gaza.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, starting a two-day visit to the region, voiced concerns about an assault on Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million residents are sheltering, saying there was a danger it would result "in many terrible civilian casualties".

On Friday, Netanyahu's office said he had approved an attack plan on Rafah and that the civilian population would be evacuated. It gave no timeframe, and there was no immediate evidence of extra preparations on the ground.

Israeli attacks on Gaza have killed at least 31,553 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to the Hamas-run health ministry in the strip. The assault has also devastated the enclave, forcing nearly all the inhabitants from their homes, leaving much of the territory in rubble and triggering a massive hunger crisis.

"Children's malnutrition is spreading fast and reaching unprecedented levels in Gaza," UNRWA said in a social media post. Hospitals in Gaza have reported some children dying of malnutrition and dehydration.

Western countries have called on Israel to do more to allow in aid, with the UN saying it faced "overwhelming obstacles" including crossing closures, onerous vetting, restrictions on movement and unrest inside Gaza.

A first delivery into Gaza by the World Central Kitchen, pioneering a new sea route via Cyprus, arrived on Friday and was off-loaded, the charity said.

Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides said a second cargo of food aid was ready to depart by sea from Cyprus on Saturday, while the United States and Jordan said they carried out an airdrop of humanitarian aid.

In a CNN interview, Queen Rania of Jordan called the airdrops "literally just drops in the ocean of unmet needs" and accused Israel of "cutting off everything that is required to sustain a human life: food, fuel, medicine, water."



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