

*USAID-funded report confirming
famine in Gaza retracted by
White House in support of
Israel's genocidal aggression*

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Washington, December 27 (RHC)-- U.S. President Joe Biden's administration is facing criticism after a U.S.-backed report on famine in the Gaza Strip was retracted this week, drawing accusations of political interference and pro-Israel bias.

The report by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), which provides information about global food insecurity, had warned that a "famine scenario" was unfolding in northern Gaza during Israel's war on the territory.

A note on the FEWS NET website, viewed by Al Jazeera on Thursday, said the group's "December 23 Alert is under further review and is expected to be re-released with updated data and analysis in January".

The Associated Press news agency, quoting unnamed American officials, said the U.S. asked for the report to be retracted. FEWS NET is funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

USAID did not immediately respond to Al Jazeera's request for comment on Thursday afternoon.

Israel's war in Gaza has killed more than 45,300 Palestinians since early October 2023 and plunged the coastal enclave into a dire humanitarian crisis as access to food, water, medicine and other supplies is severely curtailed.

An Israeli military offensive in the northern part of the territory has drawn particular concern in recent months with experts warning in November of a "strong likelihood" that famine was imminent in the area.

"Starvation, malnutrition, and excess mortality due to malnutrition and disease, are rapidly increasing" in northern Gaza, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification said in an alert on November 8th. "Famine thresholds may have already been crossed or else will be in the near future," it said.

The FEWS NET report dated December 23 noted that Israel has maintained a "near-total blockade of humanitarian and commercial food supplies to besieged areas" of northern Gaza for nearly 80 days. That includes the Jabalia, Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoon areas, where rights groups have estimated thousands of Palestinians are trapped.

"Based on the collapse of the food system and worsening access to water, sanitation, and health services in these areas ... it is highly likely that the food consumption and acute malnutrition thresholds for Famine (IPC Phase 5) have now been surpassed in North Gaza Governorate," the FEWS NET report had said.

The network added that without a change to Israeli policy on food supplies entering the area, it expected that two to 15 people would die per day from January to March at least, which would surpass the "famine threshold."

The report had spurred public criticism from the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Jack Lew, who in a statement on Tuesday said FEWS NET had relied on "outdated and inaccurate" data.

Lew disputed the number of civilians believed to be living in northern Gaza, saying the civilian population was "in the range of 7,000-15,000, not 65,000-75,000 which is the basis of this report." "At a time when inaccurate information is causing confusion and accusations, it is irresponsible to issue a report like this," he said.

But Palestinian rights advocates condemned the ambassador's remarks. Some accused Lew of appearing to welcome the forced displacement of Palestinians in Gaza.

"To reject a report on starvation in northern Gaza by appearing to boast about the fact that it has been successfully ethnically cleansed of its native population is just the latest example of Biden administration officials supporting, enabling and excusing Israel's clear and open campaign of genocide in Gaza," the Council on American-Islamic Relations said in a statement.

The group urged FEWS NET "not to submit to the bullying of genocide supporters." Huwaida Arraf, a prominent Palestinian American human rights lawyer, also criticised Lew for "relying on Israeli sources instead of your own experts." "Do you work for Israel or the American people, the overwhelming majority of whom disapprove of US support for this genocide?" she wrote on X.

Polls over the past year have shown a high percentage of Americans are opposed to Israel's offensive in Gaza and want an end to the war.

A March survey by Gallup found that 55 percent of people in the US disapproved of Israel's actions in Gaza while a more recent poll by the Pew Research Center, released in October, suggested about three in 10 Americans believed Israel's military offensive is "going too far."

While the Biden administration has said it is pushing for a ceasefire in Gaza, it has rebuffed calls to condition U.S. assistance to Israel as a way to bring the war to an end.

Washington gives its ally at least \$3.8 billion in military assistance annually, and researchers at Brown University recently estimated that the Biden administration provided an additional \$17.9 billion to Israel since the start of the Gaza war.

The US is required under its own laws to suspend military assistance to a country if that country restricts the delivery of American-backed humanitarian aid, but Biden's administration has so far refused to apply that rule to Israel.

"We, at this time, have not made an assessment that the Israelis are in violation of US law," Department of State spokesperson Vedant Patel told reporters in November despite the reports of "imminent" famine in northern Gaza.

[SOURCE: AL JALZAEERA and NEWS AGENCIES]

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