

What is the future of humanitarian action in Palestine?

Summary report

Expert meeting | 9 September | The Hague

Organised in collaboration with Dutch Relief Alliance

Summary

For close to three years, the Dutch Relief Alliance and its Palestinian partners have provided life-saving assistance in Gaza under conditions that have profoundly challenged the foundations of humanitarian action. The scale of Israel's violence against civilians and aid workers, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and restrictions on humanitarian access have created an operating environment in which principled humanitarian actors are systematically obstructed, delegitimised, and prevented from carrying out their work. These conditions raise urgent questions about the protection of civilians, the viability of humanitarian response, and the future of humanitarian action in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories.

In response to these challenges, this session focused on the question: What is the future of humanitarian action in Palestine? The session was co-organised by the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) and KUNO. Speakers addressed the current humanitarian and political situation in Palestine and reflected on the policy implications of three years of the DRA Joint Response in Gaza for future humanitarian efforts. The experiences of the Joint Response were shown in a powerful video that demonstrated the almost complete destruction of Gaza, with humanitarian workers nonetheless continuing the work.

In contributions that were equally confrontational and emotional, speakers from Palestine shared their experiences of working in Gaza under genocide. This included what it is like to work for child protection in a context where there is hardly any possibility to do so, to deliver psycho-social support to heavily traumatised children and a fierce call was made on states to end the impunity of Israel by imposing actual and effective measures to protect Palestinians. Another speaker added that Palestine cannot and should not be treated as a humanitarian issue, it being a political matter that requires political response. Also, the importance of principled action and the need for dialogue was expressed. A list of requests to the Dutch government was presented and is included in this report.

A note on the use of the term genocide: where this report states 'genocide', this is understood by DRA to follow the conclusions of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the International Court of Justice, as well as OHCHR, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.

The vulnerability of Palestinian civilians and humanitarian aid workers

Palestinians live with the reality that everyone can be targeted and lose their life at any time. The displacement of Palestinians is constant; most people have to gather all their stuff from scratch time and time again. This is not only the case in Gaza; more than 1,000 Palestinians have been injured in settler attacks in the West Bank this year, and thousands have been displaced. In addition to civilians, medical personnel and humanitarian aid workers continue to be targeted. Direct attacks have contributed to the displacement of staff and have obstructed Palestinians being delivered humanitarian assistance. Participants noted that humanitarian workers face a multitude of difficulties: deliberate attacks, having to grieve loved ones, and lack of access to sufficient food, supplies, and other essential resources. Beyond humanitarian action being targeted deliberately by Israel, it has also been weaponised. This happened by allowing Israel to determine what humanitarian supplies go into regions of Palestine and who can respond to civilians in need. The most extreme situation occurred when civilians were killed while queuing for food delivery by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. Places of caregiving were turned into sites of death. Another problem is the growth of new NGOs operating in Palestine, most of which are unknown. This causes a lack of visibility into who is entering Gaza and what is happening in the name of these NGOs, whose donors have to be questioned.

Access to health

Figures from international reports show high numbers of Palestinians with mental health issues caused by the genocide. This results in an urgent need for mental health and psychosocial support for children in Palestine. This matter is becoming increasingly complex; children are exposed to attacks, child labour, and exploitation. Children are showing different forms of coping mechanisms due to the decrease in mental health. Children's drawings give insight into how they are affected by the ongoing violence, by showing how they saw their lives before and after attacks. Also, a story was recounted of how a child refused to eat and refused to speak for weeks after having gone through an air attack on family and other civilians. The destruction of essential infrastructure, including hospitals, is a major health-related concern. Other critical services to maintain health are obstructed as well: food distribution systems and water supplies. In addition to the extensive damage to infrastructure, shortages of sanitation products, loss of income, and the scarcity and high cost of basic supplies were reported. These problems contribute to malnutrition and poor hygiene, which increase the risk of disease outbreaks and malnutrition, particularly among children and pregnant women.

Violations of International Humanitarian Law

The international community has failed Palestinians; Israel's actions have been continuously documented, warnings have been given repeatedly, yet the political and economic power that was available to stop it has not been applied. There was no shortage of evidence of breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL): numerous reports, briefings, legal analyses, and statements of concern. There are official findings from the UN, Palestinian organisations, and humanitarian agencies on starvation, displacement, attacks on aid workers and the destruction of hospitals, homes, water systems and agricultural land in real time. However, Israel is running smear campaigns against NGOs, which limits NGOs from being the credible witnesses that they should be for the Palestinian people. Israel continues not to face consequences for the violations of IHL, including the obstruction of humanitarian aid. Participants underlined the double standard this represents: Israel is given a different treatment than other violators. It raises the concern that if Israel is allowed to violate IHL in Palestine, this signals that this is allowed in other contexts too. This has already been demonstrated by attacks on Lebanon, Syria, in Sudan and elsewhere, where communities have also been demolished. A common narrative in Israel and the international community is that Israel is

threatened by the other countries in the region. Participants wondered when the international community will at last reframe this: it is actually Israel that is threatening the stability in the region. Speakers called on diplomats and officials in the West Bank to offer physical protective presence to threatened communities so that farmers can access their land safely, since the olive harvest is approaching, which is a lifeline.

Political response

Several countries recently announced a trade ban: a prohibition on the import of goods produced in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. Questions were raised about their practical impact on addressing the immediate needs of affected populations. However, a share of the participants considered this an important move, as it symbolises a concrete limitation for Israel. As a measure, it is too little, too late, but every actual political response is a much-needed step. Five requests were communicated to political and policy actors in the Netherlands:

- First, a monthly report on humanitarian outcomes in Gaza, not only the volumes that are entering. These reports should include accounts of safe water, food, shelter, functioning health services, medical evacuations and return, open crossings, humanitarian movement, access to land, safe return and new displacement. There should be an agreement in advance on what happens if those benchmarks are not met.
- Second, there should be an end to material support that contributes to Israel's genocide or unlawful occupation. This would mean stopping direct and indirect arms transfers at risk, supporting suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, imposing sanctions on responsible Israeli officials and entities, cooperating with the ICC and ICJ, and recognising Palestine as an expression of Palestinian self-determination. These cannot be a reward conditional on negotiations.
- Third, there should be a fully implemented settlement-trade prohibition and a review Dutch corporate, financial and procurement relationships to ensure none sustain settlements, annexation or displacement.
- Fourth, demand the reversal of Israel's registration measures, reinstate deregistered organisations, protect UNRWA and reject militarised or politically controlled aid. Palestinian organisations are also in need of direct and flexible funding. There is also a need for actual authority by Palestinians over humanitarian priorities, not simply more delivery risk.
- Fifth, ensure that recovery is Palestinian-led and connected to accountability and reparations. Gaza requires an estimated 71.4 billion dollars over the next decade. There must be no trusteeship, external veto, political or disarmament conditions, containment zones, or separation of Gaza from the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Palestinians should not be forced to borrow to rebuild what Israel destroyed.

Although major political steps need to be taken, the panel confirmed that the advocacy of civil society is having some effect. It may not have direct consequences for the day-to-day lives of the Palestinians yet, but people globally are resonating with the call for human rights and the mobilisation. The cause of Palestine has become much more known and supported globally.