



## Statement by the Protection Cluster for the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the Global Protection Cluster

### Protection Is Not Optional: The Crisis in Gaza Must Change

22 November 2023

The scale of suffering faced by the people of Gaza has been described as an unfolding catastrophe, a nightmare, a crisis of humanity.<sup>1</sup> Yet these words still do not capture in full the horrendous reality that has become daily life for 2.2 million Palestinians. The death toll is colossal and mounting, estimated to now exceed 11,078 people, including 4,506 children, in Gaza<sup>2</sup> and 1,200 people in Israel. The growing humanitarian crisis and protection calamity has reached a stage where the World Food Programme has warned that civilians across Gaza face the immediate possibility of starvation.<sup>3</sup> None of this is inevitable, none of this has to be. **Today's announcement of a humanitarian pause must be the first in a series of steps needed to end what the UN Secretary General has called the collective punishment of the Palestinian population in Gaza,<sup>4</sup> ensure the prioritization of civilian protection, and establish an enduring ceasefire.**

Widespread shelling and airstrikes are killing civilians as they hit refugee camps, schools where internally displaced people are sheltering, hospitals and residential buildings, a result of the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas. It is estimated that Israeli bombardment has led to the destruction of half of all civilian infrastructure in Gaza. Contamination from explosive ordnance is now widespread and at a scale not previously seen. Protection partners and other humanitarians, local, national and international organizations trained and mandated to respond and save lives amidst the most difficult circumstances, are unable to operate with any degree of safety. Even wars have laws and these laws are designed to protect civilians and minimize any harm to them. International humanitarian law protects civilians and civilian objects, especially medical care - which should not be sites of conflict and fighting - their civilian status must be preserved and protected. **The bombings must stop and a comprehensive ceasefire, including the release of all hostages, is needed now.**

An estimated 1.7 million people have been displaced in the past five weeks, packed into severely overcrowded UNRWA shelters, hospital carparks, wedding halls or community centers. People sleep on

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, statements by the UN Secretary General, including [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> The UN has so far not been able to produce independent, comprehensive, and verified casualty figures. The figures cited are from the Ministry of Health in Gaza until November 10. Following the collapse of services and communications in Northern Gaza on 10 November, the Ministry of Health has not updated the casualty figures. People killed in the past 12 days of the conflict and the many thousands unaccounted for and assumed to be killed and under rubble, have not been recorded in these figures.

<sup>3</sup> The UN World Food Programme, News Release, 16 November 2023, available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, statement by the UN Secretary General during Security Council meeting, 24 October 2023, available [here](#).

crowded floors inside when it is possible, outside when it is not, all without basic sanitation or safety. Protection Cluster partners continue to receive calls, including from those with disabilities and older persons, who remain in their homes, unable to leave. Nowhere is safe in Gaza. Civilians have been killed while seeking safety at shelters, while fleeing their neighbourhoods, while seeking emergency medical care at hospitals. As emphasized by humanitarian chiefs,<sup>5</sup> proposals to unilaterally declare “safe-zones” in Gaza risks creating further harm for civilians, including large-scale loss of life, and must be rejected. Mass and repeated forced displacement combined with evacuation orders to other parts of Gaza that are overcrowded, without adequate shelter and access to the basics for survival -- and that continue to be bombed -- do not protect people. Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian armed groups must ensure **protection of civilians throughout Gaza, wherever they are, now.**

Amidst the horror and devastation, only a small trickle of aid has been let in, following weeks of complete siege. A four day pause in fighting, while welcome, will not be adequate to ensure life-saving assistance can reach the most vulnerable people. The Protection Cluster has grave concerns about the almost total lack of access to humanitarian assistance for those who remain in northern areas of Gaza. The lack of fuel has also been driving further unnecessary suffering, hunger and disease and further limiting humanitarian response efforts. After denying entry of any fuel for more than five weeks, Israel’s recent announcement to permit limited fuel into Gaza every two days, will not come close to being sufficient for 2.2 million people in desperate need, and will meet only half the daily minimum requirements for UNRWA’s humanitarian operations. Fuel is needed for hospitals to provide lifesaving care, desalination plants for drinking water, bakeries for bread, trucks to deliver what limited aid is able to enter, and to power sewage treatment and communications networks across Gaza. **Life-saving fuel in adequate quantities and allowing humanitarian assistance at scale, on an ongoing basis is needed in Gaza and it is needed now.**

Protection partners, amidst their own personal losses, are trying to live up to the humanitarian imperative – to provide assistance and respond wherever it is needed. They are undertaking desperate efforts to help civilians seeking safety in informal shelters or trapped in their homes, to make cash transfers in hopes that vulnerable families can find small amounts of food to buy, or ensure unaccompanied and separated children are registered and family tracing is initiated, to the extent possible. Protection partners are ready to do whatever they can whenever possible, with an absolute priority for those cut-off in northern Gaza and the most vulnerable, including during any announced pause in fighting. The situation on the ground remains dire, the cumulative effect of the past five weeks have created conditions of immense suffering. Even with the reported pause, people will continue to suffer and the situation will deteriorate while humanitarian assistance is restricted and there is no safety, security, and freedom of movement. Reports of a planned military incursion by Israel into southern Gaza are deeply concerning. Such an operation would likely result in catastrophic harm to civilians and everything must be done to ensure a full ceasefire before that happens. Civilian casualties and such staggering destruction are preventable, and all parties to the conflict must ensure this – **protection throughout Gaza is not optional, lives depend on it.**

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<sup>5</sup> Statement by Principals of the IASC, 16 November 2023. Available [here](#).