

United Nations aid operations come to a halt in Gaza after Israeli evacuation orders

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Deir el-Balah, August 27 (RHC)-- The United Nations has been forced to halt its aid operations in Gaza due to Israel's new evacuation orders for Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, a senior UN official says.

Briefing journalists on Monday at UN headquarters in New York, the official said: "We're unable to deliver today with the conditions that we're in."

The official noted how the UN had relocated its main command operations for the Gaza Strip and most UN personnel to Deir el-Balah after Israel ordered the evacuation of Rafah in southern Gaza in May.

“Where do we move now?” the official asked, adding that UN staff had to be moved so quickly that equipment was left behind. “We’re not leaving [Gaza] because the people need us there. We’re trying to balance the need of the population with the need for safety and security of the UN personnel,” the official stressed.

Speaking after the official’s briefing, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric clarified that UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, is able to continue to operate because it is embedded within the population and the issue being described by the official is the transfer of aid across the Palestinian enclave.

“What we’re talking about is UNRWA being embedded in places,” Dujarric said. “So if they are there and they’re able to help, they will help and will distribute. [But] we [other UN agencies] are not able to move people from point A to point B. We’re not able to go find people.”

Reporting from UN headquarters, Al Jazeera’s Gabriel Elizondo said the situation has become very difficult for the UN with the repeated evacuation orders from the Israeli army in central Gaza upending UN humanitarian aid operations.

“The top official said they are pushing the limits of their own risk assessment. The official said they have 90 staff who have been moved to safety houses in al-Mawasi. ... Their 140 international staff are scrambling to find houses. ... Some are having to sleep in their cars,” Elizondo said.

“This [halt of aid] is temporary, ... but as of right now due to practical measures, they cannot do it,” Elizondo added.

The Israeli military on Sunday issued its latest evacuation orders for Deir el-Balah, which had previously been classified as a safe zone, and has confirmed that it is expanding a ground offensive on the outskirts of Deir el-Balah.

The evacuation orders send Palestinians from their homes and places of refuge with no knowledge of when, or if, they’ll be able to return.

The UN’s World Food Program (WFP) also said its food distribution centres and community kitchens in Gaza have been increasingly disrupted by expanding Israeli evacuation orders.

“WFP’s operations are severely hampered by intensifying conflict, the limited number of border crossings and damaged roads. In the last two months, amid continuing catastrophic hunger, WFP has had to reduce the contents of food parcels in Gaza as inflows of aid dipped and supplies dwindled,” the organisation said.

Sam Rose, a senior field director for UNRWA, said the organisation was still managing to deliver health and other services on Monday but noted that while UNRWA operated differently from the rest of the UN system, it still faces the same challenges.

“We are being squeezed into ever smaller areas of Gaza,” he told reporters on Monday.

“The humanitarian zone declared by Israel has shrunk. It’s now about 11 percent of the entire Gaza Strip. But this isn’t 11 percent of land that is fit for habitation, fit for services, fit for life.”

Reporting from Deir el-Balah, Al Jazeera’s Hind Khoudary said the evacuation orders have made living conditions miserable for all. “Everyone is in a state of panic and frustration. We are talking about more than a million people in the middle area and those who were squeezed into Deir el-Balah,” she said.

“The UN people are humanitarian workers, and there has been zero protection for them. That’s why they were unable to continue their operations,” she noted, adding that the UN suspending aid is going to deeply affect people in Gaza who need their help.

Human rights groups and international observers have slammed the evacuation orders and the mass suffering caused as a result.

Palestinians have often found themselves attacked by Israel en route to such “safe areas” as well as after they reach their destinations.

A Palestinian man said he did not know where he and his sick son would sleep in the coming days due to the evacuation orders.

“On the street! Imagine. I’m with my six kids on the streets,” Rasim al-Attab, who was sitting in the yard of the hospital with his son, told Al Jazeera. “We were displaced four times – from northern Gaza, from Khan Younis, from Deir el-Balah. Nobody’s taking care of us,” he said.

“People want to live a normal life. People are looking for money, and instead, they die on the streets.”

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