

Israel using starvation as 'war weapon': HRW

70% of Gaza victims women, children

International Desk

The Palestinian Health Ministry says women and children comprise 70 percent of the nearly 19,500 people killed in the Gaza Strip during Israel's bloody aggression against the besieged territory.

In a statement on Sunday, the Ramallah-based ministry said the death toll covers a period of 70 days between October 7, 2023, and December 15, 2023, Press TV reported.

More than 300 health sector workers, 86 journalists, 135 employees of the UN agency for the Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), and approximately 35 civil defense workers are among the death toll, it added.

The ministry also said that over 51,100 Palestinians have been wounded in the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, with scores of other people unaccounted for.

It further noted that only eight out of 36 Gaza hospitals are partially functional, and that occupancy rates have soared to 206 percent in inpatient departments and 250 percent in intensive care units.

Meanwhile, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini raised the alarm at the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza.

"By any account, I haven't seen anything of this scale," he said in an interview with Al Jazeera on Sunday.



"Everything is absolutely unprecedented and staggering... In 40 days, more women and children were killed than the number of civilians in the Ukraine war."

The UN's undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs says he has seen no evidence that Israel's assault on southern Gaza is more precise than that carried out in the north.

"I've been disappointed... We were promised this. The Americans did a lot of diplomacy on this. The truth of the matter is

that we have not seen it at all in the south. On the contrary, we've seen it grow more," Martin Griffiths told the Financial Times.

HRW confirms Israel's starvation tactic

A new report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) says Israel has been using starvation as a weapon of war in Gaza.

Omar Shakir, the group's Israel and Palestine director, said there are at least five pieces of evidence that Israel is deliberately starving people in the densely popu-

lated territory.

"One is two-plus months of blocking entry of food and water. The second is the blocking of all but a trickle of humanitarian aid from entering Gaza. This has been documented for more than two months," he told Al Jazeera.

"Then, you add to it some of the additional evidence that we looked at. One is the apparent razing of agricultural lands, large percentages of the green agricultural lands turned brown and desolate."

"Fourth, the report looks

at the intentional destruction of objects necessary for survival — I am talking about the wheat mills, hospitals, water, and sanitation facilities," Shakir said.

"Then, you put together the last piece, which is the statements of the Israeli officials spelling out in clear terms that their strategy or policy is to starve civilians as a tool of leverage to achieve political outcomes," Putting it all together, Shakir added, there is "the clear conclusion that the Israeli government is using starvation as a tool, which

is an abhorrent war crime".

Qatar proposed new prisoner swap deal

Qatar has stepped forward with new proposals to reinstate a prisoner exchange deal between Israel and Hamas as a high-level Qatari delegation has been actively engaging in exploratory discussions with Israeli officials, according to a Palestinian source speaking to the Xinhua news agency. The unannounced meetings, which commenced on December 16 in Norway, are part of Qatar's concert-

ed efforts, in coordination with Egypt, to revive the swap deal between Israel and Hamas.

CIA Director Bill Burns was set to meet Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and the head of Israel's Mossad spy agency in Poland's capital, Warsaw, according to two US and Israeli officials quoted by the Axios news website.

The talks have primarily focused on the exchange of the remaining Israeli captives held by Hamas. In return, Hamas is demanding several days of humanitarian truce in Gaza, coupled with the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli captivity.

This renewed diplomatic push by Qatar comes after three Israeli captives were accidentally killed by the Israeli army in Gaza. This has exponentially increased the pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, especially in Tel Aviv.

The EU's top diplomat said Monday that Israel's military is showing "an appalling lack of distinction" in its targeting in Gaza, highlighting the deaths of Israeli captives, worshippers, and other Palestinian civilians. "This must stop. A humanitarian pause is urgently needed," European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell posted on social media.

Iran gas stations hit by cyberattack: Oil minister

Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji on Monday confirmed that a nationwide disruption to gas stations was caused by a cyberattack.

A hacking group that Iran accuses of having links to Israel claimed it carried out the attack that disrupted services at gas stations across the country on Monday.

Owji had earlier told Iranian national TV that services had been disrupted at about 70% of Iran's gas

stations and that outside interference was a possible cause. He later said 1,650 gas stations were operational. The ministry supervises 3,800 gas stations, Reuters wrote.

Iran's TV news said a group called Gonjeshke Darande or "Predatory Sparrow" had claimed it was behind the disruption. Israeli local media outlets also reported the claim.

Asked about the cyberattacks, Israeli government

spokesperson Tal Heinrich told a press briefing on Monday: "We have nothing to say about Iran's claims."

Iran's civil defence agency, which is responsible for cybersecurity, said it was still considering all possible causes for the disruptions as it investigated.

Iranian media added that the hacker group had in the past claimed cyberattacks against Iranian gas stations, rail networks, and steel factories.

Monday's disruption began early and was especially acute in Tehran, forcing many gas stations to operate manually, Iranian media reported.

Reza Navar, a spokesperson for Iran's gas stations association, told the Fars news agency that there was no fuel supply shortage but called on drivers not to go to gas stations.

"A software problem with the fuel system has been confirmed in some sta-

tions across the country, and experts are currently fixing the issue," Navar said.

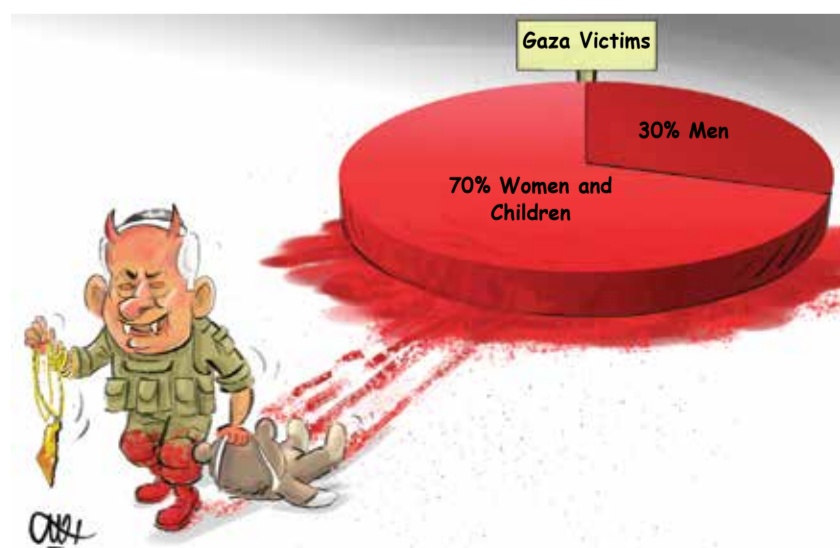
The Oil Ministry earlier told Iranian TV that the disruption was not linked to plans to increase the price of fuel.

National TV said gas stations were seeking to provide fuel manually adding that over 50% of the stations were providing services and trials to get more back online were underway.



People wait at a gas station in Tehran on December 18, 2023, as fuel distribution across 70 percent of Iran's gas stations was disrupted due to a possible sabotage. ATTA KENARE/AFP

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Protracted conflict exacerbating Israel's challenges

By Syed Ali Hassan
Iran Daily's correspondent in Pakistan

PERSPECTIVE

The Israeli military and government are under increasing internal pressure to swiftly achieve their self-imposed objective of eliminating Hamas. Despite sustaining significant losses on the battlefield, it remains uncertain whether the Israeli army has dealt a substantial blow to Hamas. As the conflict persists, Israel's social and political issues are escalating. Yedioth Ahronoth, in its December 9, 2023 publication,

cited official sources stating that over 5,000 Israeli soldiers have been injured since the onset of the Gaza war. Of these, 2,000 are officially recognized as disabled by the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Daily Yedioth Ahronoth reports approximately 60 new wounded soldiers registering daily in the Israeli army's rehabilitation department. This figure only includes security forces and army reservists, excluding the regular army, suggesting a potentially higher number than indicated by the Israeli government. The Israeli government has been reticent about the extent of military casualties during

the Gaza offensive. Allegations of a crackdown by Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government against independent Israeli press reporting war facts have also emerged. State media asserts that only 425 soldiers have been killed, with the government aiming to conceal the actual toll to prevent public opposition to the war.

During a meeting with citizens affected by the war, Prime Minister Netanyahu faced adverse reactions from those demanding an immediate halt to the conflict, leading to the suspension of further meetings with war-affected individuals. Israel is not only

contending with resistance in Gaza but also enduring severe attacks from Yemen and Hezbollah, resulting in significant financial losses and casualties. On Friday, a US Defense official reported that Yemen attacked a Liberian-registered cargo ship owned by an Israeli citizen in the Red Sea, causing a fire on the ship's deck. Yemen asserts that a drone successfully targeted a container ship destined for Israel, vowing to continue such actions until Israel ceases the alleged genocide in Gaza. The Yemeni army spokesperson identified the targeted ship as Maersk Gibraltar.