

Safety of Humanitarian Aid Workers in Gaza

Background

Humanitarian workers are protected under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including under Article 71 of the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which sets forth the obligation to respect and protect humanitarian relief personnel.¹ Despite these protections, attacks on humanitarian staff have surged globally. According to the Aid Worker Security Database, 379 aid workers were killed in 2024, making it the deadliest year on record for humanitarian personnel.² While humanitarian workers face increasing risks globally, the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) is unparalleled. In both 2023 and 2024, more aid workers were killed in Palestine than in the rest of the world combined.³

Eighteen months into the conflict, Gaza remains the most dangerous place in the world for humanitarian workers.⁴ As of 1 April 2025, UNRWA reports that at least 408 humanitarian personnel in Gaza have been killed by Israel since October 2023, including over 280 UNRWA staff.⁵ These attacks, which could amount to war crimes under international law, are having a chilling effect on efforts to provide lifesaving aid.

Targeting of humanitarian workers in transit

On 23 March 2025, fifteen emergency workers were killed by Israeli forces in Rafah while travelling in clearly marked ambulances.⁶ Their bodies were discovered over a week later in a mass grave, and several were found with their hands or legs tied.⁷ The UN has said the workers were killed “one by one.”⁸ Video footage contradicts the Israeli military’s claim that the convoy appeared suspicious, showing the ambulances visibly marked and fully lit.⁹ The incident occurred amid reports that Israel has dismantled its ‘deconfliction’ system – the mechanism through which humanitarian agencies share their coordinates with the Israeli military to avoid being targeted.¹⁰ Its removal has further eroded protections for humanitarian workers, prompting humanitarian organisations to scale back or suspend operations in Gaza.

On 1 April 2024, seven staff members of World Central Kitchen (WCK) were targeted and killed by Israeli precision drone strikes.¹¹ The route from a food warehouse in Deir al-Balah had been reportedly agreed upon with the Israeli military prior to movement, and all three vehicles were clearly marked, including on the roof. Jim Henderson, a British citizen from west Cornwall and constituent of Liberal Democrat MP Andrew George, was among the seven workers killed. In response, WCK suspended its food operations for several weeks, as did American Near East Refugee Aid, threatening the delivery of approximately 300,000 daily meals across Gaza daily.¹²

Targeting of compounds

Operational headquarters and living spaces for humanitarian workers are also targeted. On 19 March 2025, an Israeli tank shell hit a UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) compound in central Gaza. One Bulgarian staff member was killed and six others injured, including a UK national.¹³ The premises were well known by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and were

¹ International Committee of the Red Cross (1977), [Article 71 - Personnel participating in relief actions](#)

² Aid Worker Security Database (2024), [Major attacks on aid workers: summary statistics](#)

³ United Nations Security Council (2024), [Protection of civilians in armed conflict](#); Al Jazeera (2024), [Targeting humanitarian? More aid workers killed in 2024 than ever](#)

⁴ GOV.UK (2025), [Aid workers should not have to risk their lives to help those in need in Gaza: UK statement at the UN Security Council](#)

⁵ United Nations (2025), [Gaza aid worker killings: One humanitarian still missing in mass grave](#)

⁶ Sky News (2025), [IDF claims it mistakenly identified Gaza aid workers as threat - after video of deadly attack emerges](#)

⁷ The Guardian (2025), [Palestinian paramedics shot by Israeli forces had hands tied, witnesses say](#)

⁸ The Guardian (2025), [Humanitarian agencies reject IDF claim Gaza medic killings caused by ‘professional failures’](#)

⁹ BBC News (2025), [Survivor challenges Israeli account of attack on Gaza paramedics](#)

¹⁰ The Financial Times (2025), [Israel scraps system protecting aid workers in Gaza, agencies say](#)

¹¹ BBC News (2024), [World Central Kitchen halts operations in Gaza after strike kills staff](#)

¹² Human Rights Watch (2024), [Gaza: Israelis Attacking Known Aid Worker Locations](#)

¹³ United Nations (2025), [UN staff member killed in central Gaza blast, five others injured](#)

deconflicted, said UNOPS chief Jorge Moreira da Silva. The UNOPS subsequently reduced its presence in Gaza, citing 'intolerable risks.'¹⁴

'Double tap' strikes

Another threat to the safety of humanitarian workers is Israel's use of 'double tap' strikes, in which a site is bombed and then targeted again after first responders arrive. In June 2024, 25 people were killed and 50 injured in the bombing of a camp for displaced Palestinians in Rafah. The Associated Press reported that most fatalities occurred during the second strike, targeting those who arrived to assist victims of the initial bombing.¹⁵ These tactics have also been used by the Israeli military to target humanitarian workers in Lebanon.¹⁶ The use of double tap strikes is prohibiting under IHL and poses serious ethical and legal concerns.

Restrictions on access for humanitarian workers

In addition to being directly targeted, humanitarian workers face escalating restrictions on access to Gaza, preventing them from safely carrying out their work. In recent months, Israel has denied entry to international medical personnel under COGAT regulations and, in October 2024, moved to ban six international medical aid organisations from operating in the territory.¹⁷ Aid agencies have also reported increasing delays and denials at border crossings, forcing them to scale back or cancel planned deployments.¹⁸

Systematic dismantling of healthcare and aid infrastructure

Israel's targeting of humanitarian personnel forms part of a broader attempt to dismantle healthcare and aid infrastructure in Gaza. The fifteen emergency workers executed in Rafah on 23 March are among more than 1,200 medical workers who have been killed by Israeli forces since 7 October 2023.¹⁹ In January, Israeli strikes on Kamal Adwan Hospital – the last functioning hospital in the north of Gaza – were described by the World Health Organization (WHO) as part of a "systematic dismantling" of Gaza's health sector, with hospitals increasingly turned into "battlegrounds."²⁰

These attacks have been accompanied by administrative and legislative measures designed to suppress humanitarian operations in Gaza. In October 2024, Israel passed two laws banning the UN Refugee and Works Agency (UNRWA) from operating inside Israel and occupied Palestine, a move that is currently being examined by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as a potential violation of international law.²¹ On 2 March 2025, the Israeli government further escalated these measures by blocking the entry of all humanitarian supplies into Gaza, a move the UN says has "crippled" relief efforts.²²

Recommendations

The UK should call on all parties to uphold their obligations under IHL, condemn attacks on humanitarian and UN personnel, and demand full, independent investigations into all such incidents. Such condemnations and demands for investigations should not take the form of mere statements; rather, substantive political pressure should be employed. The UK must not undermine its own reputation by allowing political alliances to take precedence over compliance with IHL, especially in the case of systematic violations of IHL by Israel. The government must also press for unimpeded humanitarian access into Gaza and support accountability through international legal and economic mechanisms.

¹⁴ United Nations (2025), [Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary General](#)

¹⁵ Associated Press (2024), [Israeli strikes near Rafah kill at least 25, Gaza officials say | AP News](#)

¹⁶ +972 Magazine (2025), [Report details IDF 'double tap' bombings that hit first responders in Gaza](#)

¹⁷ International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (2024), [Six Medical Aid Organisations Banned by Israel from Entering Gaza](#)

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch (2024), [Gaza: Israel Flouts World Court Orders](#)

¹⁹ Middle East Eye (2025), [Why is the New England Journal of Medicine promoting 'health bridges' while Gaza's hospitals burn?](#)

²⁰ United Nations (2025), [Security Council Debates Israeli Attacks on Hospitals Allegedly Misused by Hamas, as UN Rights Chief Urges Independent Probes](#)

²¹ Middle East Eye (2025), [Unrwa ban: Why the World Court is hearing another case against Israel](#)

²² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2025), [Humanitarian Situation Update #275 | Gaza Strip | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Occupied Palestinian Territory](#)