UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

Call for Input – Human Rights & Starvation, with an Emphasis on Palestinian People’s Food Sovereignty

June 14, 2024

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Millions of people in Gaza suffer catastrophic mass starvation—even as food aid trucks idle and food aid rots at the militarized border crossings. Scores of children have died of lethal hunger and dehydration—and yet the major food security institutions and academic programs and news media barely mention the horror—or its perpetrators: the Israeli government, military forces, and settlers, alongside United States government and elite accomplices. How has the fastest and most ferocious deliberate famine in modern history happened, right before our eyes—and yet remained aggressively sidelined, minimized, and justified through racialized discourses of terrorism? Who and what are accountable? Academia’s heavy responsibility requires it serve as a site for post-mortem (and during mortem) reckoning.

Food studies scholars know that hunger famine erupts, not due to lack of food, but lack of access. Food insecurity grows in causal correlation to the inequities of wealth disparity, and throughout history, empires have deployed grain—and the deliberate blockage thereof—for geopolitical gain. Colonialism itself operated and profited as a systemic destroyer of food security and food sovereignty, from Las Américas to the African continent to south Asia, and beyond.

In the 20th century, liberal international institutions—from the UN Food & Agricultural Organization to transnational philanthro-capitalist foundations—arose allegedly to counter famine. Rife with the hypocrisies of the coloniality’s modernity, these institutions posited as ‘post-colonial’ though they carried on Eurocentric power dynamics and ethnonationalisms. Nevertheless, UN agencies expanded to include expertise and perspectives from around the world. Thousands of people with genuine intentions to feed the hungry joined the bureaucratic ranks.

Good will culminated in 2018, when the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2417 Condemning the Starving of Civilians as a Method of Warfare and the Unlawful Denial of Humanitarian Access to Civilian Populations. This landmark consensus seemed to herald a new chapter of collective moral commitment. Merely five years after the UN Resolution 2417, it falls as a farce. It began admirably, in Article #1, with a litany of specific methods of how food gets weaponized (targeting farms, fisheries, markets, water systems, mills, orchards, distribution sites, aid hubs); grotesquely, these have become a to-do list for Israelis forces on how to starve Palestine, as if Resolution 2417 were a war handbook and not a condemnation. As recently as August 2023, US representatives reiterated their purported commitment in a global gathering for Resolution 2417—even as they flaunted the promise weeks later.

As we speak, hunger has again been wielded as a weapon of mass destruction. Two million three hundred thousand humans, mostly children who have lived in a 25 X 3-7 mile outdoor cage-enclosure their whole lives, have been bombed relentlessly day and night for nearly nine months—including with white phosphorous chemical warfare. The Israeli government retaliated the Hamas attack with a ‘total siege,’ or total strangulation, depriving millions of Gazans of food, drinkable water, fuel to generate desalinization, electricity for hospitals, medicine, or sewage treatment. Immediately, international food aid agencies and scholars and everyone who has ever been to Gaza or cared for Palestinians knew it was a mass death sentence, with a terrorizing methodology. The physical and psychological torture of hunger and lethal thirst renders what is euphemistically called a ‘war’ to a grinding, desperate slaughter. Israeli officials ordered Gaza’s millions to leave their homes, lands, and lives, to flee to the southern half of their outdoor prison—even as Israeli forces further bombed their alleged escape routes, along with hospitals, schools, city centers, mosques, churches, and importantly, all major production, storage, and distribution points for food: crops, granaries, bakeries, poultry farms, cafeterias, kitchens, roads, and UN shelters. The ground invasion pulverized north and then south Gaza, terrorizing safe zones, hospitals (which had become de facto refugee shelters, feeding stations, and now mass morgues), educational and cultural centers, and even food aid locations—from the grisly ‘flour massacres’ to the deadly mal-deployment of food aid pallets crushing the starving Gazans underneath to the notorious sea drops of food aid, leading to the drowning of desperate malnourished Gazans below faring choppy waters. The hundreds of millions of US$ spent on the failed “food aid pier” off Gaza Strip proved another satirical fiasco.

To even begin reckoning with the entirely man-made crisis of this deliberate starvation, we in the United States/Turtle Island have much self-interrogation to do, and much explaining, to the survivors in Palestine, and, at this point, to the whole wide world, who are, in unprecedented global scope, all watching in well-founded horror. Israel’s flagrant impunity to Resolution 2417 begs many questions, about the role of the United States (one of the five countries deemed permanent members of the UN Security Council) in enabling Israel’s bald-faced breach of this international law, and as the months grind on. From here on out, scholars must ask and answer questions about the efficacy or even legitimacy of international law as such, in the face of such brazen hypocrisy and targeted silencing. Most faculty and staff in US-based universities fear professional retribution for incorporating Palestine or the current disaster in their syllabi or seminars. In this deafening silence, students have arisen to ask questions, join the global call for ceasefire, and call attention to the injustices underway. Though US universities have responded with aggressive repression of student support and solidarity for Palestine, the realm of academia *cannot not* address and help atone for this atrocity, if it aims to maintain its intellectual integrity and public good mission. All disciplines pertain, from social, political, and physical sciences to medical, legal to ethical studies, and beyond.

Ending the famine, providing emergency food and medical aid to Gaza is the first, stunningly overdue, step. As a generation of Palestinian children succumb to lethal mix of dehydration, diarrhea, and wasting, we must band forces to demand ceasefire and vast emergency food and medical aid—even if it is already too late for way too many. Concurrently, we must help Palestine recover food, water, and land sovereignty for its own survival and freedom, as well as for the foundation for any authentic peace in the region and beyond.

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