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# Hunger as a weapon of war

A dramatic famine is threatening the Gaza Strip as a result of Israel's blockade. Germany must do all it can to end the misery

It was the summer of 2023, when 'put an end to the kind of warfare that uses hunger as a weapon' was an urgent appeal from German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. It was addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the time. No comparable sentence has been heard from the foreign minister or any other member of the German government in the current conflict in Gaza, although the United Nations has been warning of a famine with catastrophic consequences since December last year. This crisis is not a tragic natural phenomenon, but man-made and deliberately brought about.

Right at the beginning of the complete Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, shortly after the terrorist attacks by Hamas on 7 October, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant announced: 'there will be no more electricity, no more food, no more fuel ... We are fighting against human animals and will behave accordingly.' This lockdown rapidly worsened the living conditions of the civilian population, which was now under massive bombardment. Hamas itself was prepared for this situation and had taken appropriate precautions. Although the nature of the collective punishment was clear from the outset, the German government has not yet clearly identified this and other violations of the international law of war.

## An obligation to comply with international humanitarian law

In 2018, the use of starvation as a weapon of war was outlawed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 2417. This resolution 'firmly condemned the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare prohibited by international humanitarian law'. The resolution also condemns the 'unlawful denial of humanitarian access' and the 'wilful obstruction of aid deliveries'. The structures necessary for the delivery of humanitarian aid and food production must be protected.

It also calls on states that have influence over the parties in armed conflicts to remind them of their obligation to comply with international humanitarian law and to contribute to the investigation and punishment of such violations. Finally, it is stated that the Security Council may also impose sanctions on 'persons or entities (...) that impede the provision of humanitarian assistance, access to humanitarian assistance or the distribution of humanitarian assistance'. Such measures would, of course, only be possible in the event of unanimity, which does not generally exist in the Security Council at present.

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The resolution also contains a reference to particularly vulnerable groups: refugees and internally displaced persons, the elderly, women and children — the very groups that are currently particularly affected by the famine in Gaza. Germany's feminist and 'value-oriented' foreign policy also wanted to place the rights of these groups at the centre of a human security approach. Now, it is in danger of ultimately losing credibility in the face of Germany's extensive inability to act.

After almost five months of war, Gaza is facing a man-made catastrophe, the extent of which international human rights and aid organisations have been warning about for weeks and months. Back in December, Human Rights Watch declared: 'the Israeli government is using the starvation of civilians as a weapon of war, which is a war crime.' Even in the years before 7 October, 80 per cent of the people in Gaza were dependent on humanitarian aid. Now, many are threatened with starvation.

## Increasing food insecurity

Resolution 2417 provides for a report to the Security Council if a 'conflict-related famine' threatens. This was also the case on 27 February, when UN representatives informed the Security Council about the current situation: the entire population is currently dependent on humanitarian aid for its survival, but this is hardly available. This is already the greatest food insecurity ever documented for a population group worldwide. A quarter of the population in Gaza – 576 000 people – are facing acute famine conditions.

According to the UN definition, famine is the worst of five levels of food insecurity: at least one in five households lacks drinking water and food, and is at risk of malnutrition and starvation. The widespread destruction

of civilian infrastructure, the lack of access to agricultural land, the obstruction and endangerment of international aid organisations and, last but not least, the attempt to delegitimise UNRWA, which is central to supplying Gaza, following accusations of acts of terrorism against some of its employees, all contribute to this situation. Only a few bakeries are currently able to cover a fraction of the demand in Gaza. The extent of the desperation was recently highlighted by an incident near Gaza City, when hundreds of people rushed towards an aid convoy despite Israeli army fire and many people were killed.

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When the German foreign minister travelled to the World Climate Conference in Dubai in December, she also visited a World Food Programme warehouse there and commented on the situation in the Gaza Strip: 'we are not only seeing suffering in a dramatic way, but hunger is also feeding further terrorism'. The security argument, which was probably aimed at the Israeli government, seems bizarre in view of the current situation and the images of malnourished children from the isolated northern Gaza Strip.

There is no famine in Gaza caused by hurricanes, floods or droughts. No, it is the result of an Israeli policy of targeted closure. Despite urgent warnings from international aid organisations, the number of lorries bringing aid to Gaza has fallen drastically since February. One of the reasons for this is that the Israeli occupation authorities (COGAT) are also controlling aid convoys at the Egyptian Rafah border crossing and massively delaying them by arbitrarily restricting imports. In addition, the few aid deliveries via Israeli border crossings are repeatedly held up and obstructed by the actions of right-wing extremist Israelis.

Instead of pushing for border openings, the US has launched airdrops of aid supplies, although experts unanimously agree that these are ineffective and not nearly enough to feed the starving population. Former US diplomat Josh Paul describes them as 'complex, expensive and dangerous operations' that can only be seen as a last resort — such as when Serbian General Ratko Mladić prevented humanitarian aid from reaching Sarajevo and Srebrenica. Yet, this is not one of the US's worst enemies, but one of its closest allies: 'the fact that he (meaning President Biden) finds it easier to deploy the US military than to stand up to Netanyahu shows the utterly cowardly nature of this administration's relationship with Israel', says Paul.

However, not only the US but also Germany have many opportunities to facilitate humanitarian pauses and humanitarian supplies with the appropriate pressure. The two countries are Israel's most important trading partners and key military allies. As such, they should identify the cause of this crisis and exert pressure on the Israeli government to push for an immediate end to the blockade. This would also apply if an agreement on a humanitarian pause or a more comprehensive ceasefire were finally reached.

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The massive import of relief supplies and the supply of everyday goods will be necessary at a high level for a long time to come to mitigate the consequences of the months-long lockdown. Above all, fuel, medicines and medical equipment must also be delivered to enable tens of thousands of people, some of them seriously injured, to be cared for. It would be best if these goods could also be transported by sea, which is currently blocked due to the Israeli blockade. The EU could play an important role in the necessary security checks. If such efforts to end the blockade fail to materialise, recent announcements by the German government regarding an increase in humanitarian aid will come to nothing.

In the genocide proceedings initiated by South Africa before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Germany has refused to accept any accusations and has even submitted a corresponding submission in Israel's defence. In a preliminary ruling in January, the ICJ unequivocally called on the Israeli state to take 'immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance'. The German government must demand compliance with this decision as well as the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2714.

A shocking five per cent of the population of the Gaza Strip has already been killed or in some cases seriously injured, the majority of them civilians. If Israel's use of starvation as a weapon of war is not stopped, the number of victims will continue to rise rapidly. This would not only be a catastrophe for Gaza, but also for humanity. And it would be a disgrace for German foreign and development policy, which may find it difficult in the future to credibly stand up for the protection of civilians and the preservation of international norms in other conflicts.



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