



Palestinians search for food among burned debris May 27, 2024, in the aftermath of an Israeli airstrike on an area designated for displaced people in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. (OSV News/Reuters/Mohammed Salem)



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As tensions and the number of victims mount in southern Gaza Strip, Catholic Relief Services said it has not been able to get humanitarian aid through to the southern Gaza Strip since May 6 and it no longer has any supplies left in its warehouses in that area, said Jason Knapp, CRS country director for Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza.

Knapp also called for all crossings into Gaza to be opened for humanitarian aid.

CRS carries out the work of the U.S. bishops to assist the poor and vulnerable worldwide who live in extreme poverty, war zones or who have suffered natural disasters.

"Right now our distribution has been paused. We need to get things in from either Jordan or Egypt. In the last few days we have distributed everything we have access to, which is why it is becoming all the more urgent to make sure those crossings are functioning," said Knapp.

The agency's functioning capacity in Rafah in southern Gaza is still in place in partnership with local groups and other agencies such as the World Food Program through the logistics structure they set up in the beginning of the war with warehouses and trucking capacities, Knapp noted.

However, their ability to move things has been severely impacted by the Israeli incursion launched in early May that has caused nearly 1 million people to flee from Rafah. They now seek refuge in squalid tent camps and other war-ravaged areas.

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Palestinian health officials said at least 45 people, around half of them women and children, were killed in a strike on May 26 in Rafah's camp, a consequence of an Israeli strike nearby that caused fire in the densely populated camp.

[According to The Associated Press](#), the strike caused widespread outrage, including from some of Israel's closest allies. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said it was the result of a "tragic mishap."

The International Court of Justice May 24 called on Israel to halt its Rafah offensive, an order it has no power to enforce.

CRS moved its operations from Gaza City in the northern Gaza Strip at the start of the war, which broke out following an Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israeli communities.

The Hamas assault left 1,200 mostly civilians murdered and 254 people taken captive into Gaza, according to Israel, with 125 hostages still remaining in Gaza, including 39 bodies.

The subsequent Israeli military campaign into Gaza has killed more than 36,000 Palestinians, mostly children and women, according to the Hamas Gaza Ministry of Health, which does not differentiate between Hamas members and civilians.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has said that 1.7 million people in Gaza have been displaced since the start of the war in October.

Families that have been already displaced several times are on the move again due to military operations and Israeli evacuation orders. As of May 19, the estimated number of people displaced from Rafah is nearly 815,000 people since May 6, with a further 100,000 people displaced in northern Gaza, UNRWA said in its latest report published on May 24.





Palestinians travel in vehicles loaded with their belongings as they flee Rafah due to an Israeli military operation in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, May 28, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Hatem Khaled)

For many families this most recent displacement is the seventh or eighth time they have had to move since the start of the war, said Knapp. People are lacking not only in basic supplies such as food and shelter but also clean water, sanitation, health care and education, he said.

"It is the needs of the whole of the person and it is what has been challenging on a large scale in such a significant crisis for the past seven, eight months," he said.

U.N. humanitarian organizations also have repeated warnings that famine is still an imminent threat because of aid restrictions and lack of safe access.

Knapp said CRS has now had to shift its operations from Rafah to the middle area of the Gaza Strip and Khan Younis.

"We are not able to service Rafah. Our operational capacity is still in place but the big obstacle is the functioning of the crossings where a deep focus is needed for goods to be able to come to the north and south of Gaza," he said. "That is what we are advocating for, especially that the Kerem Shalom crossing be accessible from the Gaza side as soon as possible."

Since the start of the war CRS has been able to serve almost 800,000 people with aid including cash, food parcels, bedding supplies, tarps, tents and hygiene kits through its already established partnerships network, said Knapp, who was in Gaza almost at the beginning of May and expressed "deep concern" about the physical conditions and enormous human displacement he witnessed.

"It has been so challenging to get things in and to operate safely. We are not able to provide the same standards in Gaza as we are in other places," he said.

CRS head of Gaza Office Bassam Nasser said in a Whatsapp written exchange that looting of warehouses is rampant, and even if people have money, they are unable to access their cash from banks with only three ATMs in service in the southern Gaza Strip. Goods are only sold in stalls in the streets for cash and there is a critical shortage of feminine hygiene products, baby diapers, cooking gas, fuel and bottled water, said Nasser.

Nasser said critical needs vary for each family. As a pharmacist, his wife has been trying to maintain a supply of medicines for the chronically ill in Rafah, to where his family fled from their home in northern Gaza in the early days of the war.

Nasser's family was among the tens of thousands of people who had to once again escape from Rafah.

"The threats turned into artillery bombardment and air strikes in the neighborhood (where) we lived in," Nasser said. He said his family was "among the lucky families" who found an apartment shared with three other families with 20 people living in a 1,300-square-foot apartment of a family who was able to leave Gaza in the early days of the war. Each family pays \$500 rent without any services and must buy water from trucks and has electricity only if there are solar panels, he said.

"I am losing faith in global and universal values, and day after the other, (I turn) to think that the world is ruled by racists powers and elements. Personally, I never want to get to this conclusion as it will destroy what I live for," said Nasser.