

UNICEF State of Palestine

Gaza Strip: New Evacuation Orders Lead to Further Humanitarian Consequences on Children and Their Families

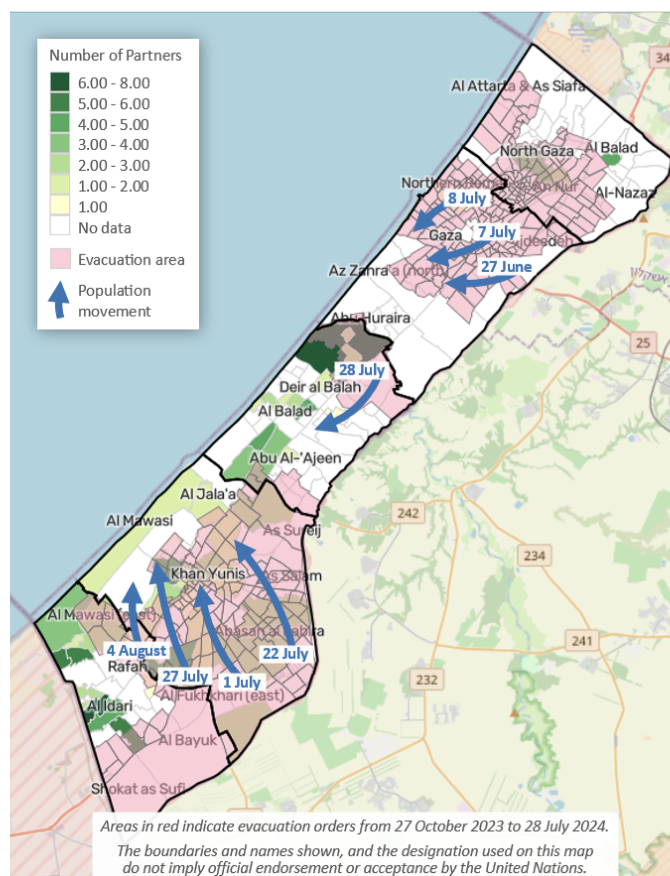
A Palestinian family with their children flees their home amid the increase of hostilities, in Rafah, south of the Gaza Strip. © UNICEF-SoP/2023

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Since the beginning of the escalation of hostilities in the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces have issued various instructions to civilians to evacuate certain areas ahead of planned military operations and active combat. This paper outlines the impact of recent evacuation orders on families and children.

On 27 June, the Israeli military ordered the residents of 28 residential blocs (~7.3 km²) east of Gaza City to immediately evacuate via Salah Ad Din Road to what they call a "humanitarian zone" in southern Gaza. This order, along with intense hostilities in Ash Shuja'iyyeh, displaced an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 people from areas east and northeast of Gaza City, forcing them to move westwards.

On 1 July, additional evacuation orders were issued for areas south of Wadi Gaza, affecting approximately 250,000 people in Khan Yunis, from the southernmost parts of Rafah to the eastern parts of Khan Yunis, as reported by UNRWA and the Site Management Working Group. The evacuation orders in Khan Yunis cover approximately 85 km², mirroring previous evacuations in the North, and making it the most significant order since the escalation of hostilities on 7 October 2023. This has also led to the evacuation of patients and medical personnel from the European Hospital, rendering it non-functional. By 4 July 2024, it was reported that some of those who had evacuated had returned to their original locations, due to a lack of space in other areas.



On 7 July, a third round of evacuation orders was issued by Israeli forces, targeting neighbourhoods in Gaza City, impacting around 72,000 people. Significant population movements occurred from these areas and nearby neighbourhoods to West Gaza, which had already received displaced people from Ash Shuja'iyyeh (the first evacuation order from 27 June). Following this, on 8 July, another evacuation order expanded the evacuation zone to include the Al-Rimal area, where the UNRWA Gaza Field Office (GFO) building is located. This evacuation order directly affects two food distribution points of WFP and UNRWA, as well as one distribution point for cooked meals, and four WFP-supported bakeries in the neighbourhood. All humanitarian organizations operating in the area, e.g. WFP and UNRWA, have evacuated and critical humanitarian supplies such as wheat and food parcels for these services have been redirected. At least three medical service points are located in the area. Al-Ahli Hospital, located close to the evacuation zones, has already referred 47 patients to the Indonesian Hospital and 15 to the Kamal Adwan Hospital. As of early 8 July, Al Ahli Hospital was not functional.

Further, the military operation launched on 8 July around the Al-Rimal area in Gaza City is causing populations who had relocated to the west of the city to inadvertently position themselves in active combat zones.

On 22 July, a new evacuation order was issued for people from nearly all eastern neighborhoods of the Khan Younis governorate to move westwards. Included in this evacuation order were some geographic blocks that are part of the humanitarian zone, which reaches along the coast from Al-Mawasi to the central town of Deir Balah. It is estimated that 150,000 people relocated from East Khan Younis to the Mawasi and downtown areas, of which 70 per cent are estimated to be evacuees from Khan Younis East and 30 per cent from Khan Younis downtown. A notable number arrived in the Mawasi area with nothing but the clothes they wore. Thereby, the following water facilities became inaccessible and inoperative: One main sewage pumping station serving 20,000 people, at least seven water wells and two water reservoirs serving 40,000 people, as well as five desalination units serving 12,000 people. Also, four sites providing nutrition services have been impacted, with two of them being operated by UNICEF and its partners. As a result, at least 2,280 children under 5 years old and at least 580 pregnant and lactating women no longer have access to the preventive nutrition services they were supposed to receive. The evacuation order does not include the Nasser hospital, as it is not within the area (geographic block 107) for which the evacuation order was issued.

On 27 July, a new evacuation order was issued covering the area of eight neighbourhoods in the south of the Khan Younis governorate, calling all remaining residents to evacuate to the humanitarian zone. The newly announced evacuation area includes a section of the earlier declared humanitarian zone, forcing those who searched for refuge therein to move north/west to remain in coverage of the humanitarian zone. One health facility was situated in the newly declared evacuation zone, and eight additional health facilities are located in close proximity in a range from 350 m to 1 km distance to the newly declared zone, affecting access and continued service delivery. In addition, on 28 July, urgent warnings were disseminated by Israeli forces to residents in the two neighbourhoods of Alburj and Alshahada, north Deir Balah governorate, to immediately leave these neighbourhoods as the Israeli forces announced they will operate extensively.

The various evacuation orders issued by the Israeli forces for people in Rafah and Khan Younis, coupled with intensified fighting since 6 May 2024, have forced more than 1 million people to flee from Rafah in the south towards the middle area of the Gaza Strip.

On 30 July, it was observed that displaced people were returning to the city of Khan Younis as active hostilities came to a halt in the area, and following reports of Israeli forces withdrawing. It is estimated that thousands of people have returned to the central and eastern neighbourhoods of Khan Younis city, as well as the adjacent area of Bani Suhaila. Previously, evacuation orders had been issued in the Khan Younis governorate on 1 July, 22 July and 27 July.

On 4 August, an additional evacuation order was issued for an area of eight neighbourhoods in the eastern part of Khan Yunis city, extending to the southern part of the Khan Yunis governorate and further to the northern part of the Rafah governorate. The area was previously subject to evacuation orders. It has affected reportedly around 40 shelter sites, to which displaced people previously moved to. Of these sites, some are administered shelters, while the majority are makeshift sites comprising of scattered makeshift shelters.

The population in Gaza City is now concentrated in Al-Nasr, Al-Shati, Al-Rimal Al-Shamali, Al-Sabra, Al-Jalaa, Al-Saftawi, and Al-Karama. The remaining populations are in the evacuation zones and in southwest Gaza City, with a significant accumulation of people in the Al-Sabra area, southwest of Gaza.

In total, approximately 303 km², or almost 83 per cent of the Gaza Strip, have been placed under evacuation orders cumulatively. This includes all areas north of Wadi Gaza, initially evacuated in late October, as well as specific areas south of Wadi Gaza requested to evacuate after 1 December.

Key Highlights and Human Impact

Civilians in the Gaza Strip are exhausted following ten months of escalation of hostilities with no respite. Most of the population has been displaced several times; there is no safe space in the Gaza Strip, and basic services are already limited and have suffered interruptions. People lack everything, making them even more vulnerable, in particular children. An environment of continuous hostilities has led to social and physical fatigue, and people struggle to move in difficult weather and aggravated humanitarian conditions.

- The recent evacuation orders have caused overcrowding in certain areas/neighbourhoods, reducing the available space for the residing population and providing only limited space for the newly arriving people affected by the recent orders. All shelters/sites are facing deteriorating living conditions due to limited access to water, food, and electricity, with only 1.5 m² of average space per person, far below the minimum standard of 3.5 m² per person. The tents where people are sheltering are in a bad state due to multiple displacements as well as harsh weather conditions.
- As of June 2024, and before the recent evacuation orders, more than 100,000 households are estimated to be in urgent need of shelter support.
- There is significant concern regarding Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services due to the risk of damage to the Mekorot water pipeline, which supplies 14,000 m³/day of drinking water to the Khan Younis governorate. Water sources within all evacuation zones

are no longer accessible and are considered non-operational. All water trucking services have ceased in the new evacuation zone, reducing access to water for the affected population.

- There is a risk of outbreak of waterborne diseases given the lack of access to adequate water, overcrowded conditions in shelters and increasing temperatures.
- Sanitation is an additional challenge, as the lack of fuel is increasingly hampering the operation of sanitation infrastructure. Sewage is overflowing and leaking near sleeping areas, solid waste is accumulating, and cleaning materials are not available.
- Over 90 schools operated by UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority, used as shelters, are within the evacuation zone, along with four medical facilities. These buildings are currently vacant, and their specific impact is not yet known. There is also a potential risk to the 23 Outpatient Therapeutic Programme (OTP) sites in Khan Younis from which people evacuated.
- Large forced population movements increase risks of child separation, and living conditions and pressure on families' basic needs during displacement, mean children and women are more vulnerable to violence and harmful coping mechanisms. The movement of people increases their exposure to explosive remnants of war (ERW), especially children. who may not recognize or be attracted to ERW items, or more likely to encounter them.
- Children are also at risk of direct conflict violence and grave violations during evacuation and in new areas their families move to after complying with evacuation orders. Ten months of conflict have shown that nowhere is safe and hostilities reach every part of the Gaza Strip, including areas which civilians are directed to by evacuation orders.

UNICEF Response to address the Additional Needs as Result of Population Movement following Evacuation Orders

UNICEF with partners is actively working on developing an integrated approach to provide life-saving interventions for both the newly displaced individuals and those already affected in the southern and northern regions. The strategy includes various modalities such as through implementing partners as well as through direct implementation with the support of program extenders across the Gaza Strip to enhance essential service provision at the sites, expanding UNICEF's presence in the North, and strengthening strategic partnerships and existing services for all programs.

- UNICEF is implementing an action plan jointly with the Site Management and Shelter Cluster to expand the capacity of the Naser hospital to accommodate additional patients evacuated from other health facilities and additional casualties. UNICEF is also expediting the procurement and delivery of paediatric drugs for distribution at neonatal and paediatrics departments to address the increasing child health needs, in priority to facilities with increased admissions. With 80 per cent of the bed capacity destroyed, congestion in the remaining health facilities were reported.
- Basic primary healthcare is being expanded through a new partnership. Outreach teams will be deployed to provide basic primary healthcare services at the community level and within shelters, including postnatal home visits.
- UNICEF's WASH team, in collaboration with partners, is establishing water points and sanitary facilities in areas where more people were displaced. In the coming weeks, 500 latrines will be built in Khan Younis and Deir Balah. In addition, UNICEF checks whether

an additional 2,500 latrines can be built. Also, water production and distribution through the piped networks, and water trucking is seen as a priority.

- 70 per cent of the rehabilitation of the sewage system in Khan Younis is completed, benefiting more than 200,000 inhabitants.
- Water trucking in Al-Mawasi Khan Younis, which receives most of the population, has increased.
- In the Northern area of the Gaza Strip, UNICEF has been providing NFIs regularly, including jerry cans, buckets, and hygiene kits, delivering more than 10,000 plastic buckets, 7,000 jerry cans, and 2,100 hygiene kits.
- Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and case management, identification and referral of vulnerable children including unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), as well as explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) continue in areas where displaced communities have moved and focus on areas where no other Child Protection or MHPSS services are provided.

Challenges and Advocacy Points for Scaling Up the Response

- Access to the Gaza Strip is highly restricted and requires extensive coordination. Inside the Strip, evacuation orders, population movements, ongoing fighting, and the breakdown of law and order severely hinder reaching the most in need people and the delivery of critical humanitarian interventions.
- The need to establish more reliable humanitarian routes for the sustainable entry and delivery of sufficient life-saving supplies into the Gaza Strip is critical. This requires engagement with parties to the conflict, community leaders, and influencers, including facilitate dialogues with them to gain local support for safe passage and distribution of supplies.
- Fuel is an urgent necessity for all services, including WASH, hospitals, and other essential humanitarian services. Sustaining the supply line of fuel is crucial.
- In order to strengthen basic services, all implementation modalities need to be supported, including direct support to front-line workers (health and education professionals, social workers, and others). This is the only way to scale up the much-needed services.

Why are Gaza Evacuation Orders So Alarming?

The evacuation orders in the Gaza Strip raises significant concerns. While parties to a conflict are required to take all feasible precautions to avoid or minimize harm to civilians during hostilities, including issuing adequate warnings to civilians – advising or obliging civilians to flee when there is no safe place to go, no safe way to get there, and inadequate arrangements for their basic needs does not suffice.

Regarding those civilians who are unable or unwilling to move after evacuation orders, they retain the protections of international humanitarian law. Parties to the conflict are not released from their obligations to refrain from attacking civilians or civilian infrastructure and to minimize harm to them, regardless of the difficult choices families in the Gaza strip face. Threats of violence or attacks intended primarily to spread fear among civilians are prohibited.