

Gaza: Thousands of Dead Bodies Still Missing Under the Rubble, with No International Action

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More than 10,000 Palestinian men and women are missing under the rubble in the Gaza Strip, with no way to recover them or properly bury their remains, in a blatant violation of international law amid total international inaction to assist in their retrieval.

Recovering the bodies of the victims of Israel's nearly ten months of deadly and destructive military attacks on civilians will be extremely difficult, given the lack of heavy machinery and equipment for civil defense crews and the difficulty of their work. Furthermore, the Israeli army has deliberately and methodically targeted and destroyed this machinery and equipment, while preventing any replacement equipment entry to the Gaza Strip.

In addition to intentionally using weapons with enormous destructive power that leave tons of rubble that impede the removal and recovery of bodies from underneath, Israel has a pattern of systematic operations to prevent and obstruct the recovery of victims and missing persons from under the rubble, as documented by Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor. These operations include targeting civil defense crews, rescue teams, and families trying to recover the bodies of victims, as well as preventing the entry of fuel necessary to operate what remains of the heavy machinery and preventing the entry of equipment.

Mrs. Maryam Imad, 19, informed the Euro-Med Monitor team that on 7 December 2023, two of her family's homes in Khan Yunis, south of the Gaza Strip, were bombed by Israeli warplanes. Among the 36 people who were inside were her parents, two of her brothers, one of whom was a child, and her grandfather, her uncles, their wives, and their children.

She added:

"After more than 42 days without hearing anything, we eventually discovered that the

Israeli bombing had killed every single person who was buried beneath the debris. In early April of last year, I, the sole survivor of my family, tried with my two uncles to retrieve the bodies, but we were unable to extricate any of them.

“Then the Civil Defense arrived the following day and managed to retrieve a few bodies, while the remainder were buried beneath the debris. We have not been able to bury them yet because we do not have the necessary equipment, and we still demand their recovery even though I realize they have decomposed over the course of several months. We want to bury their remains properly,” she said.

According to Wissam Al-Sakani’s report to the Euro-Med Monitor team, on 22 November 2023 Israeli warplanes bombed his family’s home, which consisted of five flats in the northern Gaza Strip’s Beit Lahia area. The incident resulted in the deaths of approximately 45 people, including two of his children.

Al-Sakani said that despite weeks of efforts to extricate the victims, fifteen of them remain beneath the debris, and their recuperation is being hampered by the massive amount of debris, the lack of equipment, and the frequent bombing of the area.

Ahmed Al-Bahnasawy informed the Euro-Med Monitor team that on 31 October 2023, Israeli warplanes bombed his home within a fire belt that targeted a residential square in Haret Al-Sanaida in Jabalia Camp, the northern Gaza Strip, which is home to about 40 houses.

About 400 people, including all 18 of Al-Bahnasawy’s family members, perished in the massive Israeli attack, he explained. Over the course of several weeks, dozens of bodies were excavated, but due to a lack of equipment and the extent of the destruction, about 50 people were left under the rubble and could not be retrieved.

Most of the victims’ bodies were found in simple one- or two-story buildings or on the streets. However, recovering dead bodies from the bottom of multi-story buildings is very difficult because civil defense and rescue teams have to rely on outdated tools, manual hammers, and antiquated technology to search for victims under tens of thousands of tons of rubble, which makes their job less efficient.

International pressure must be brought to compel Israel to fulfill its legal obligations and bring in trucks, special equipment, and sufficient fuel, given the urgent need to clear the debris, locate bodies, and recover them with special procedures to identify and bury them in marked graves, and ensure the victims’ and their families’ rights to a respectful and appropriate burial in accordance with their religious rituals.

Since most of the victims’ bodies have already decomposed, the Israeli policy of obstructing and impeding their recovery plays a significant role in the spread of fatal illnesses and epidemics in the Gaza Strip. This increases the risks to civilian public health, which is already in decline as a result of Israel endangering the health and well-being of over two million Palestinians, nearly half of whom are children, by destroying vital civilian infrastructure, cutting off fuel supplies needed to treat wastewater, making it impossible to dispose of waste, and forcing people to drink contaminated water.

It is a flagrant and compound breach of international humanitarian law and international human rights law to prevent and obstruct the recovery of victims’ bodies from under the rubble, in violation of the rights to investigations, redress, and reparations, as well as

the final right of all people to be treated with dignity and respect when their bodies are buried. In addition, the fact that thousands of Palestinians are still missing is a further crime against their families, who endure terrible psychological injury. These violations are all part of Israel's crime of genocide against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, which will have a significant negative impact on thousands of Palestinian families in the region, causing them great spiritual and psychological harm.

As these violations involve the willful concealment of evidence linked to the crime of genocide committed by Israel in the Gaza Strip, preventing the recovery of bodies also violates rulings made by the International Court of Justice regarding the need to stop genocide in the Gaza Strip and protect civilians.

The fact that so many victims remain buried beneath the debris and that attempts to exhume bodies have been unsuccessful for several months demonstrate Israel's willful use of different kinds of bombs, ammunition, and massive disproportionate force against Palestinian civilians and their property in defiance of international humanitarian law, such as the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, which aims to safeguard civilians during times of war.

Palestinian bodies must be recovered immediately after death, as the current state of these decaying corpses poses a threat to public safety. The spread of epidemics, which has already begun and has been observed for several months now, will have further detrimental effects on the environment and public as evidenced by frequently-reported infections and infectious disease-related deaths. These conditions will also seriously jeopardize the Strip's long-term environmental health and cause environmental destruction to the point of ecocide, rendering the Gaza Strip unfit for human habitation.

Israel is required by international law to abide by certain rules, including the requirement to protect and respect dead people's bodies during armed conflicts and take all reasonable steps to ensure that the dead are treated with dignity and to prevent the mutilation of bodies. The international community must work together to ensure that Israel immediately stops its military attacks against civilians in the Gaza Strip, and is held responsible for all its crimes.

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