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As a collective voice of UK humanitarian, development, human rights and faith-based agencies working in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel, we welcome the opportunity to work with new Ministers to urgently reset UK Government policy towards Gaza and the West Bank.

Gaza faces an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe compounded by long standing blockade^[1] and several large-scale military actions since 2006. At least 37,598 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed and 86,032 wounded in the Government of Israel's ongoing military assault and siege following the horrific attacks committed by Palestinian armed groups in Israel on 7 October 2023.^[2] Up to 21,000 Palestinian children are estimated to be missing in the chaos of the war in Gaza, many trapped beneath rubble, detained, buried in unmarked graves, or lost from their families.^[3]

In December 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights warned of the "heightened risk of atrocity crimes" being committed in Gaza and called on all states to prevent such crimes from unfolding. In January 2024, the International Court of Justice found a plausible risk of genocide being perpetrated against Palestinians in Gaza. The UK has a moral and ethical responsibility to protect populations at risk of atrocity crimes, in addition to well-established legal obligations to prevent the commission of atrocity crimes, including the crime of genocide. It is shocking that by its failure to halt arms sales to Israel, the former Government has placed the UK at risk of complicity in serious violations of international law.

Since 7 October 2023, the international focus has been on Gaza, but the situation in the occupied West Bank has been rapidly deteriorating. More than 500 Palestinians have been killed, the highest number since the UN began keeping such records in 2005.^[4] Palestinians are subject to discriminatory movement restrictions and arbitrary detention, with reportedly over 6,000 people detained.^[5] Settler violence against Palestinians has also increased.^[6] As the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) remarked, "The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation."^[7] Ignoring the roots of violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory challenges future peace efforts.

It is imperative for the new UK Government to demonstrate international leadership to prevent atrocities and even greater mass loss of life. This requires a fundamental reset of policies pursued by the former Government. The UK must urgently take a new approach to diplomatic engagement, and withhold military assistance, such as arms sales, which have so far contradicted the UK's responsibility to protect civilians, prevent atrocities, and uphold international law.

The former Government's tendency to treat humanitarian aid as a sticking plaster to circumvent its international responsibilities must also end. Aid is not an alternative to accountability. They must go hand in hand. It is vital that the new Government take all lawful measures to ensure compliance with international law, address the occupation, prevent atrocity crimes and centre the protection of civilians. Effective diplomatic pressure must be applied to end the relentless bombardment and lift restrictions hindering the safe delivery of humanitarian aid. The new Government must show leadership to fully uphold international norms for a principled humanitarian response.

Resetting UK Government Policy

We welcome the new Government's commitment in its manifesto to upholding IHL and to a ceasefire in Gaza along with a rapid increase in aid and the safe release of all hostages. We now urge bold and decisive action, and have laid out specific immediate, short and long term actions needed from the new UK Government to repair the harm to Palestinians' rights, international law and the UK's international standing.

Immediate Actions

- Use diplomatic influence to secure an immediate and permanent ceasefire that enables unfettered entry and distribution of aid and the return of displaced people to their homes;
- Make a statement to Parliament signalling a fundamental policy shift regarding the UK's approach to international justice and consistently upholding IHL. This should include respect for the independence, mandates and decisions of the international courts, and obligations to prevent the commission of atrocity crimes under the Geneva Conventions, Genocide Convention and customary international law;
- Announce an immediate surge in operational support for principled humanitarian aid in Gaza, by reinstating funding and increasing support for UNRWA;
- Work to ensure the immediate unconditional release of Israeli hostages and Palestinians in arbitrary administrative detention;
- Halt arms transfers to the Government of Israel.

Short-Term Actions

- Use political leverage to compel the Government of Israel to immediately lift its long-term blockade and current siege of Gaza and ensure robust protection of and unfettered access for aid workers and life-saving aid across all areas, in line with its obligations under IHL;
- Reaffirm UK commitments to the protection of civilians, Women, Peace and Security; Children and Armed Conflict; and the prevention of mass atrocities as foundational to UK policy towards the Government of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory;
- Increase funding for an immediate and frontline humanitarian response;
- Publicly recognise and denounce the de facto annexation of large parts of the occupied West Bank - which is absolutely prohibited under international law and a serious violation of the fundamental right of self-determination of the Palestinian people - and announce a review of potential UK countermeasures

Mid-Term Actions

- Surge diplomatic engagement and multilateral cooperation to address allegations of severe and pervasive violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territory, including by supporting all relevant resolutions and initiatives at UN bodies.
- Launch a Palestinian-led Gaza Recovery Commission and flagship development initiative in partnership with other donor countries and affected Palestinian communities. This should use an early recovery model, uphold Palestinians' right to self-determination, and be funded separately from the humanitarian budget.

End notes

- [1] <https://www.oxfam.org/en/timeline-humanitarian-impact-gaza-blockade>
- [2] <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-181-gaza-strip>
- [3] <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/over-20000-children-estimated-to-be-lost-in-gaza>
- [4] <https://turkiye.un.org/en/270571-more-500-palestinians-killed-occupied-west-bank-un-rights-chief#:~:text=More%20than%20500%20Palestinians%20killed%20in%20occupied%20West%20Bank%3A%20UN%20rights%20chief,-04%20June%202024&text=since%207%20October-,Violence%20in%20the%20occupied%20West%20Bank%20linked%20to%20the%20war,Volker%20T%C3%BCrk%20said%20on%20Tuesday>
- [5] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2024-000174_EN.html
- [6] <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/dismantling-israels-illegal-occupation-sine-qua-non-palestinian-right-self>
- [7] <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2023-10-24/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-middle-east%C2%A0>