Key Gaza famine report cited by UN, ICJ has systematic flaws, Israeli review finds

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A crucial study by a key international organization that found in March that a famine had begun in northern Gaza relied on small sample sizes and undisclosed data sources, rendering its conclusions and projections unreliable, an Israeli review has found.

The Health Ministry [review](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/transparency-and-methodology-issues-in-the-ipc-special-brief-of-18-march-2024#1) of the study — which has been cited by the UN, human rights organizations and even by the International Court of Justice in its genocide case against Israel — also found that there appeared to have been ‘a consistent effort to ignore… a significant decline in the war’s intensity and a significant increase in the humanitarian effort and the flow of aid’ when making its famine projections.

On March 18, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) organization issued a ‘[Special Brief](https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Gaza_Strip_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Feb_July2024_Special_Brief.pdf)‘ on the food insecurity situation in the Gaza Strip, finding that hundreds of thousands of people were already experiencing famine and that that figure would rise to over a million by July if there was no immediate cessation of hostilities.

The IPC — which is connected to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN — is seen as a neutral and highly credible organization for evaluating where famines might be occurring around the globe.

Its assessment in March that famine had already taken hold in parts of Gaza and was likely to spread was explicitly cited and accepted by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its [March 28 ruling](https://www.timesofisrael.com/icj-orders-israel-to-increase-humanitarian-aid-to-gaza-demands-report-in-30-days/) and was used as the basis for its specific order for Israel to increase the supply of humanitarian aid to Gaza. That order was recalled in the [ICJ’s ruling last week](https://www.timesofisrael.com/icj-orders-israel-to-halt-rafah-operations-that-risk-destruction-of-civilian-population/) when it issued new orders against Israel.

And International Criminal Court Prosecutor Karim Khan has [filed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/icc-prosecutor-seeks-arrest-warrants-for-netanyahu-gallant-and-3-hamas-leaders/) crimes against humanity charges against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant based on the allegation that Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war against the Gazan population, a claim which is also likely connected to the IPC finding.

However, the Health Ministry review, authored by public health officials in the ministry and published by the Foreign Ministry on Wednesday, found significant flaws in the methodology of the IPC Special Brief and notably found that it had deviated from IPC’s standards and principles as laid out by the organization itself.

According to the review, the IPC report, which covered the period from December 21, 2023, until March 10, 2024, failed to acknowledge the increase in the supply of humanitarian aid during that time; repeatedly cited unreliable and unrepresentative surveys of Gazans regarding their level of food security; and did not provide any statistics on the mortality rate from malnutrition, as would be expected to occur in a famine and as is IPC’s practice in evaluating famine.

It also allegedly used data on physical manifestations of malnutrition from undisclosed sources and gathered in an undisclosed manner, and ignored positive trends on the ground such as the withdrawal of Israeli forces and the intensity of combat operations when making its projection of worsening famine.

The Health Ministry review said that the next IPC report on Gaza, which is expected to be published in June, ‘should avoid repeating these failures and include an acknowledgment and a correction of mistakes made in the previous report.’

The IPC did not respond to a request for comment.

The IPC report published on March 18 stated that there were already 677,000 Gazans at the Phase 5 Catastrophe level of food insecurity, projecting that number to grow to 1,107,000 between March 16 and July 15.

But its report, and the projections off which it was based, did not acknowledge that the Kerem Shalom goods crossing was opened in December or the subsequent increase in the number of humanitarian aid trucks entering the territory per day. It also made no mention of the air drops of food to northern Gaza; the opening of goods crossings into northern Gaza, where food insecurity was allegedly most acute; or the opening of 20 bakeries throughout the Gaza Strip, providing over 2 million pita breads per day.

The projection for northern Gaza and Gaza City was also based on what turned out to have been a false assumption that from March to July, the ‘conflict and related casualties will likely continue at similar levels to January-February 2024.’

The projection was also founded on an assumption that northern Gaza would likely be ‘mostly inaccessible and intermittently hard-to-reach’ for humanitarian aid, despite the fact that Israel was already at the time of the report working on increasing humanitarian access to that region. Since that time, three goods crossings have been opened between Israel and northern Gaza, further increasing supply capacity.

It appears likely that the failure to take into account these developments helped contribute to the dire projections in the IPC’s March report.

Another key methodological concern with the IPC report pointed out by the Health Ministry review was the lack of transparency about the reliability of the surveys cited in the report.

The IPC’s analysis of the situation in northern Gaza relied heavily on a phone survey carried out by the World Food Program (WFP) conducted between December 2023 and February 2024, which included a very small sample of just 104 observations in that time frame for northern Gaza.

‘According to the survey, most households across the Gaza Strip have inadequate food consumption with almost 88 percent of households in the North reporting Poor Food consumption (indicative of IPC Phase 4 and 5, Emergency and Catastrophe),’ the IPC Special Brief said, despite the survey having such a small sample size.

Similarly, a finding that there was just half a liter of drinking water per person per day in the Deir al-Balah governorate was based on a telephone survey of a mere 34 households.

The IPC report also said that ‘widespread weight loss, diseases, and malnutrition prevail due to insufficient food supplies,’ but based that assertion on interviews conducted by the WFP ‘with eight key informants’ in January, although it did not say who those informants were.

Another key aspect of the Special Brief was an analysis of data on a key physical indicator of malnutrition, called Middle Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) screenings.

The IPC findings on the MUAC screenings were based on a ‘reanalysis conducted by the Global Smart Team’ from data collected from ‘various’ sources.

‘There is no reference to the ‘reanalysis’ which can be reviewed, nor is it clear whether the raw data also came from Hamas’s Ministry of Health or other sources,’ the Health Ministry review noted.

The IPC Special Brief also indicated uncertainty as to whether data from sampling in February was taken from children who were sick, which would be of critical importance since the findings of famine in northern Gaza were based on a deterioration in MUAC results over a January sample.

Another problem found by the Health Ministry review was that the IPC report stated that its ‘analysis could not benefit from representative evidence of non-trauma mortality as intended by IPC Protocols.’ But in its summary of the report it stated that there was ‘an upward trend in non-trauma mortality,’ which it said was expected to accelerate, ‘resulting in all famine thresholds likely to be passed imminently.’ Given the lack of non-trauma mortality data, the Health Ministry review said it ‘remains unknown’ what the finding of increasing numbers of such deaths was based on.

The Health Ministry review said in summary that a connecting thread between many of the shortcomings of the IPC’s March report appeared to be ‘a systematic and consistent effort to ignore’ the significant decline in the war’s intensity and a significant increase in the supply of humanitarian effort between the IPC’s December and March reports.

‘Any analysis or projection that ignores those trends is deeply misleading,’ the Health Ministry review said, adding that the absence of references to publicly available sources for key figures and studies cited in the Special Brief — which therefore cannot be independently assessed — was ‘inconsistent with the requirement for transparency and accessibility of data defined in the IPC manual.’

The Health Ministry review added that ‘the next IPC report on Gaza, which is expected to be published in early-mid June, should avoid repeating these failures and include an acknowledgment and a correction of mistakes made in the previous report.’