

Aid to Gaza resumes, including from faith-based agencies

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(RNS)—With President Donald Trump announcing “the war is over” on Oct. 13—and Israel and Hamas trading hostages for Palestinian prisoners—aid from the United Nations and faith-based agencies began to flow into the Gaza Strip, with hopes of stemming a humanitarian disaster.

Trump’s 20-point Gaza ceasefire plan names the United Nations, the Red Crescent and other international institutions as the entities responsible to deliver aid to Palestinians who are in the grips of a profound humanitarian crisis.

It does not cite the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, a private entity created by the United States and Israel to circumvent the United Nations, which the latter alleged was allowing Hamas to steal aid.

Over the past 36 hours, the United Nations, which has seen its agencies hampered or outright banned by Israel during the two-year war, resumed its work in Gaza.

The United Nation’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that “for the first time since March, cooking gas entered the Strip,” and frozen meat, fresh fruit, flour and medicines also crossed into Gaza throughout the day on Monday.

Israel broke an earlier ceasefire agreement in mid-March, leading to an 11-week halt of all humanitarian relief entering Gaza. Since then the Israeli government has been allowing a small amount of aid into Gaza but has been unable to stamp out spreading starvation.

U.N. has 60-day plan for humanitarian relief

Tom Fletcher, undersecretary-general for the U.N. humanitarian affairs office, briefed the media late last week on 60-day plans to immediately scale up distribution of food and medicine, repair water and sewage lines and provide thousands of tents, tarps and other supplies to the strip, which now lies in rubble.

“This is the plan. We can deliver it. We’ve done it before, and we will do it again,” Fletcher said.

Until last week, the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation was operating four militarized distribution sites.

But Sunday night, The Associated Press reported that three of its four distribution points, where more than 1,000 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces guarding from the perimeters, have been abandoned. Palestinians had torn down the structures, dragging off wood and metal fences.

The report cited an unnamed official suggesting that the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation no longer would be involved, but the group denied it was shutting down.

In an email to RNS, a spokesman said: “There will be tactical changes in GHF operations and temporary closures of some distribution sites may occur. There is no change to our long-term plan.”

But it wasn’t clear if the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation was prepared to continue to function without the Israeli military in the vicinity.

Nor was it clear why Palestinians would choose to receive aid from

militarized sites guarded by U.S. contractors, especially given the number of Palestinians killed approaching those sites, when they could revert to the U.N.'s civilian delivery system that included some 400 distribution locations before the war.

Samaritan's Purse in 'wait-and-see pattern'

Samaritan's Purse, which joined the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation—primarily to provide supplemental food packets and first aid at its distribution sites—suspended its flights from North Carolina to the region.

"We're in a wait-and-see holding pattern," said Ken Isaacs, vice president of programs and government relations for Samaritan's Purse.

"We want to help the people of Gaza in any and all ways that we can, and we're waiting to see what the finalized results of the peace agreement are so that we know where and how are the best ways to help."

The lifting of restrictions on aid was welcomed by a host of humanitarian groups, including Catholic Relief Services. Bill O'Keefe, executive vice president for mission, mobilization and advocacy at CRS, said the organization was "aggressively ramping up."

"We are anticipating deliveries of large supplies of shelter materials that we've had in Jordan and Egypt, and we've secured more warehouse space," O'Keefe said.

"We reopened our office in Gaza City and are really doing everything we possibly can to meet as many needs as we can as quickly as we can."

Catholic Relief Services has a staff of 65 in Gaza, all of them Gazan

residents, but its work has been slowed significantly by Israel's restrictions on aid. When Israel has allowed in aid, it has mostly privileged the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation.

O'Keefe said his staff has seen a big opening for aid and hopes the end of hostilities will allow even more.

"There are lots of questions in terms of how many access points will be opened," he said, adding, "We hope all of them."