

Gaza: ICRC calls for protection of civilians and hopes for an agreement

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Geneva (ICRC) – The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned in February that a significant Israeli military operation in Rafah would pose a disastrous risk to the civilian population given the more than 1 million displaced Palestinians now living in the southern Gaza Strip.

As instructions to evacuate certain areas in Rafah were issued on Monday by Israel, the ICRC reiterates that all must be done to spare civilian lives, and to ensure they have access to the basic necessities for life, including food, water, and medical care. It is necessary to ensure that steps taken in recent weeks to increase the flow of aid into Gaza remain in place. The ICRC reiterates the need to protect the medical mission – inclusive of facilities, ambulances, doctors and nurses – and calls on all parties to the conflict to fully protect and respect this essential and life-saving service.

At the same time as evacuations and operations are being conducted, news reports indicate negotiations continue on a potential political agreement which could include a release of hostages, detainees, and a ceasefire. While the ICRC continues to demand the outright and unconditional release of the hostages, it also recognizes this is unlikely without an agreement. The ICRC hopes an agreement will be reached that reunites families and provides respite and aid to all people affected by the conflict. The ICRC stands ready to play its role as a neutral intermediary in fulfilling humanitarian aspects of an agreement.

If military operations continue, it is critical that the parties to the conflict account for the reality of large numbers of people moving across damaged roads and through areas possibly contaminated by unexploded weapons. Evacuations must be carried out in a way that ensures civilians arrive safely and have satisfactory conditions of hygiene, health, safety and nutrition; family members should not be separated. People must be able to return to their homes as soon as hostilities have stopped.

Most people did not arrive in Rafah directly, but have been displaced two, three, or four times before. Coupled with constant stress and fear, and considering injuries, age, and disabilities, many residents are in a weakened state and at elevated risk of dying from common infections or diseases.

Questions such as how to safely transport the disabled, the elderly, and the sick, and where such a large population can move and reside safely with basic needs met, remain unanswered. Not all people may be able to evacuate due to age, disability, or illness. Civilians who remain in the area –whether voluntarily or not – remain protected and must be spared the effects of hostilities.

These realities need to be kept in mind as the next steps in the conflict unfold. The evacuation instructions have already prompted deep anxiety and fear. Long lines of people are fleeing Rafah in cars, carts pulled by donkey and on foot, with people and vehicles loaded with personal items. The ICRC calls on all parties to the conflict to respect their legal obligations as stipulated by international humanitarian law to protect and preserve civilian life and civilian objects. ICRC teams are on the ground and are responding to humanitarian needs. In Rafah, the ICRC is helping people, including by providing meals, drinking water, tents, mattresses, and medical care. The ICRC is committed to remaining close to those in need throughout the conflict.

About the ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a neutral, impartial and independent organization with an exclusively humanitarian mandate that stems from the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often alongside its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners.

For more information, please contact:

press@icrc.org