

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 29, 2024

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

We write with the highest degree of concern and urgency regarding the growing crisis in Palestine, Israel, and the surrounding region. We are particularly alarmed by the developments in the city of Rafah on the southern border of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military itself identified Rafah as a “safe zone” and is now indiscriminately bombing and threatening to invade.¹

As the month of Ramadan approaches and reports of children dying from starvation increase, we are urging you to decisively oppose any invasion or bombardment of Rafah and facilitate an immediate, lasting ceasefire. We must use all the leverage our country has to save lives.

The Israeli military has already killed over 30,035 Palestinians and injured more than 70,457.² Seventy percent of those killed are women and children.³ More than 80% of Palestinians in Gaza have been driven from their homes and at least a quarter of the population is slowly starving to death.⁴ A new report by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) found that the situation in Gaza is “particularly extreme” and 90% of children under two years old and 95% of pregnant and breastfeeding women face severe food poverty.⁵

¹ Brad Dress, “Israel’s military threatens to advance into last Gaza ‘safe zone,’” *The Hill* (Feb. 2, 2024), available at <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4444703-israels-military-threatens-to-advance-into-last-gaza-safe-zone>

² Al Jazeera, “Israel-Gaza war in maps and charts: Live tracker,” available at

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>

³ Edith Lederer, “Women and children are the main victims of the Israel-Hamas war with 16,000 killed, UN says,” *Associated Press* (Jan. 19, 2024), available at

<https://apnews.com/article/women-children-gaza-war-victims-un-inequality-f0f89a724543b99c2c22439e7af09405>

⁴ Najib Jobain, Jack Jeffery and Colleen Barry, “The UN says more than 1 in 4 people in Gaza are starving because of war,” *Associated Press* (Dec. 21, 2023), available at

<https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-12-21-2023-7d9718b32bf0d308c44c7c9e3c4e0deb>

⁵ UNICEF, “Children’s lives threatened by rising malnutrition in the Gaza Strip,” (Feb. 19, 2024), available at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/childrens-lives-threatened-rising-malnutrition-gaza-strip>

Right now, the most extreme government in Israel’s history still has no plan for peace. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to undermine the current ceasefire talks, undertaking numerous escalatory steps—including attacking Rafah, deepening its attacks into Lebanon, and announcing its intention to impose severe restrictions on access to Al Aqsa mosque during the holy month of Ramadan.⁶ All of these steps appear to be designed to make a mutually agreed ceasefire less likely and run directly counter to our shared goal of seeing an end to the bloodshed and all hostages returned to their families. In fact, families of Israeli hostages have held sustained protests against Benjamin Netanyahu’s government and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) demanding a ceasefire.⁷

For months, the Israeli government told Palestinians to evacuate to the south and that it would be a “safe zone.”⁸ And now, over one million people are trapped in Rafah as the Israeli military prepares to invade despite internationally supported diplomatic options that could end the violence today and free the hostages and all others arbitrarily detained. There is already an acute shortage of food, medicine, and other basic needs; disease, famine, and malnutrition are widespread and many lives hang in the balance. Trucks filled with supplies are already not able to deliver aid because Israeli officials and settlers have stopped them from entering, in violation of Section 620I of the Foreign Assistance Act and your recent National Security Memorandum/NSM-20.⁹ Countless lives will be lost if the Israeli military invades Rafah or even if the status quo continues. This must not be permitted to happen.

⁶ Amnesty International, “Israel/OPT: New evidence of unlawful Israeli attacks in Gaza causing mass civilian casualties amid real risk of genocide,” (Feb. 12, 2024), *available at* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/israel-opt-new-evidence-of-unlawful-israeli-attacks-in-gaza-causing-mass-civilian-casualties-amid-real-risk-of-genocide/>; Al Jazeera, “Israel strikes Lebanon’s south, raising risks of escalation,” (Feb. 29, 2024), *available at* <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/2/29/israel-strikes-lebanon-south-raising-risks-of-escalation>; Al Jazeera, “Israel to restrict access to Jerusalem’s Al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan,” (Feb. 19, 2024), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/19/israel-to-restrict-access-to-jerusalems-al-aqsa-mosque-during-ramadan>

⁷ Associated Press, “Families of Israeli hostages held in Gaza protest outside Israel’s military headquarters,” (Feb. 20, 2024), *available at* <https://apnews.com/video/israel-hamas-war-israel-protests-and-demonstrations-gaza-hostage-situations-19697591478c49c5a3037274ff010889>; Steve Hendrix and Heidi Levine, “Growing protests call on Netanyahu to bring Hamas hostages home,” *Washington Post* (Feb. 17, 2024), *available at* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/17/hostage-family-protest-israel-netanyahu/>

⁸ Anushka Patil and Thomas Fuller, “Displaced Gazans in the South Facing Dangers They Had Sought to Escape,” *New York Times* (Dec. 29, 2023), *available at* <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/29/world/middleeast/gaza-south-hospital.html>

⁹ Amnesty International, “Israel defying ICJ ruling to prevent genocide by failing to allow adequate humanitarian aid to reach Gaza,” (Feb. 26, 2024), *available at* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/israel-defying-icj-ruling-to-prevent-genocide-by-failing-to-allow-a-dequate-humanitarian-aid-to-reach-gaza/>; 22 U.S.C. § 2378-1 (prohibiting assistance to any country that “prohibits or otherwise restricts, directly or indirectly, the transport or delivery of United States humanitarian assistance”); The White House, “National Security Memorandum on Safeguards and Accountability With Respect to Transferred Defense Articles and Defense Services,” (Feb. 8, 2024), *available at* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2024/02/08/national-security-memorandum-on-safeguards-and-accountability-with-respect-to-transferred-defense-articles-and-defense-services/>

We have consistently advocated for our belief that there is no military solution to this conflict, and that the U.S. government is violating domestic and international law by providing security assistance to the Israeli government as it kills thousands of civilians. We are not alone.

We believe it is clear that Israel is violating the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) provisional orders, including by blocking aid to Gazan civilians,¹⁰ an act that is clearly creating famine conditions.¹¹ With the temporary pause a few months ago, we have already seen that moving towards a ceasefire led to the release of the majority of hostages.¹² A lasting ceasefire is the only path toward ending the violence against civilians and laying the foundation for a diplomatic process that secures peace and justice for every person—Israeli and Palestinian—in the region.

The United States government holds immense sway over the actions of the Israeli government, and we urge you to use the full diplomatic and political power of the U.S. government to decisively oppose any Israeli invasion or bombardment of Rafah. We ask you to utilize every avenue possible to achieve this end, including ending the use of the U.S.' veto in the UN Security Council to protect Netanyahu, a partial or full cessation of offensive support to Israel, and an end to any additional transfer of funds, weapons, military equipment, and any other material support. We must use our full power and leverage to secure the release of all the hostages and others arbitrarily detained, and support a drastic surge in humanitarian aid. This is only achievable with a lasting ceasefire.

There is nothing fringe or radical about supporting basic human rights. That's why the majority of Americans support a ceasefire. We still have an opportunity to save the lives left in Gaza.

To that end, as Congressional leaders of a ceasefire movement that includes over 77% of Democrats in this country,¹³ we urgently request a meeting with you before the State of the Union to discuss this vital and dire issue, Mr. President.

¹⁰ Wafaa Shurafa, Tia Goldenberg, and Kareem Chehayeb, "Human Rights Watch says Israel is violating order from top U.N. court by blocking aid to Gazans," *PBS* (Feb. 26, 2024), available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/human-rights-watch-says-israel-is-violating-order-from-top-u-n-court-by-blocking-aid-to-gazans>

¹¹ Michelle Nichols, "One quarter of Gaza's people one step away from famine, UN says," *Reuters* (Feb. 27, 2024), available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/one-quarter-gazas-people-one-step-away-famine-un-says-2024-02-27/>.

¹² Sammy Westfall and Helier Cheung, "Here are the hostages released by Hamas and those remaining in Gaza," *Washington Post* (Nov. 30, 2023), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/30/hamas-hostages-list-names-tracker-israel-gaza/>

¹³ Data for Progress, "Voters Support the U.S. Calling for Permanent Ceasefire in Gaza and Conditioning Military Aid to Israel," (Feb. 27, 2024), available at <https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2024/2/27/voters-support-the-us-calling-for-permanent-ceasefire-in-gaza-and-conditioning-military-aid-to-israel>

Sincerely,



CORI BUSH
Member of Congress



RASHIDA TLAIB
Member of Congress