

The Gaza Conflict and the Crisis of Human Rights in International Politics

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Abstract

The Gaza conflict has emerged as one of the most serious humanitarian crises in contemporary international politics. Violence, prolonged blockage, and deadlock have created conditions in which the common people, especially the children, women, and the elderly, face extreme suffering. The large-scale violence that started in October 2023 led to unprecedented levels of loss of human lives, displacement of common people, destruction of infrastructure, and the collapse of basic services such as water supply, education, and health care.²

This research article focuses on how conflict in the Gaza region has resulted in large violations of humanitarian laws. This article also analyses the role of international actors such as the United Nations and major global powers such as the USA and the European Union. Despite the existence of humanitarian laws and institutions to protect human rights, political interests and power politics often fail to stop human rights violations. Accountability mechanisms are weak, and violence continues unabated. Human rights principles are poorly enforced in practice.

Keywords

Gaza Conflict, Humanitarian Crises, Humanitarian Laws, International Actors, Human Rights Principles

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Introduction

The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. It has a population of about 2.3 million people in a very small area of just 360 square kilometres. For decades, the people living over there have lived under conditions of extreme poverty, military violence, conflict, and restricted movement. About 70% of Gaza's population consists of refugees; these people were displaced during the early phases of the Israel-Palestine conflict.¹⁰

The war, which started on 7th October 2023, brought destruction to Gaza. Hamas attacked southern Israel. In this attack, over 1200 people died, and in reaction, Israel launched a large-scale military campaign consisting of air strikes, operations on the ground, and restrictions on the flow of goods and services into Gaza. The military action resulted in unimaginable deaths in Gaza. Hospitals were full, and millions of people were forced to displace.

According to an estimate by the United Nations, by mid-2024, more than 35000 Palestinians had been killed, and children and women comprise over 60% of the casualties.⁹ Many families have been displaced without access to basic amenities such as food, shelter, and medicine.

The Gaza issue highlights a major problem in international politics. On one hand, the global community has pledged to protect the rights of the people through the Geneva Conventions and various international human rights treaties. On the other hand, the repeated violations in Gaza show that these laws are inefficient and are selectively applied as per convenience. Power politics and strategic interests are given priority over humanitarian principles, and therefore, the international laws are not properly enforced. Whether to take action or not depends entirely on the situation. There is no fixed criterion.

The Gaza conflict is not just a humanitarian crisis but also a political failure. The article asks questions such as why large-scale human rights violations continue despite the existence of international laws and how global power politics affect humanitarian efforts.

Historical Background of the Gaza Conflict

The Gaza conflict is a result of decades of political disputes and fighting for territory in the Middle East region. The causes of the conflict go back to the early 20th century during the British colonial rule in Palestine. After the First World War, Britain took control of Palestine. During this period, tensions arose between the Jews and Arabs due to increasing Jewish immigration to this region. In 1947, the United Nations decided to partition Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab States. While this plan was accepted by Jewish leaders, Arab leaders opposed it.

They claimed that it was unjust and completely unacceptable to them. Once Israel was created in 1948, a war took place between Israel and the neighbouring Arab states. In this war, more than 7 lakh Palestinians were displaced. Gaza came under the control of Egypt, and thousands of refugees from Palestine settled there.

In 1967, during the Six-Day War, Israel captured Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.⁸ From then onwards, Gaza remained under the control of Israel. Israel controlled the borders, movement of people, and economic activity in the Gaza region. Tension always remained in that region, and that led to uprisings, first between 1987 and 1993, and the second between 2000 to 2005. In 2005, Israel decided to withdraw its soldiers from Gaza. However, it continued to control the airspace, coastline, and borders of Gaza. In 2006, Hamas won the elections in Gaza, and that led to increased tensions in the region, and by 2007, Israel and Egypt, both countries, imposed a blockade on Gaza. Due to this, the economy of Gaza collapsed, unemployment rose, and poverty spread. Since 2008, repeated military operations have taken place in Gaza. Every time, the violence resulted in the destruction of infrastructure and loss of human lives. Civilians and women have always been the target of human rights violations.

Human Rights Framework and International Law

Human rights and international humanitarian law are in existence to protect civilians during conflicts.⁵ However, the conflict in Gaza raises questions about whether these laws are properly implemented or even taken seriously by global actors and institutions or not. Human rights are the basic rights that every human being should have, regardless of his or her nationality, religion, or political affiliation.⁷ In situations of armed conflict, these rights are guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions of 1949.³ It urges all parties to avoid attacks on non-combatants. The principle of distinction is one of the most important principles of international law. Armed forces should target only military personnel and not civilians or their property. Another important principle is of proportionality, which forbids attacks if civilian harm would be excessive in comparison to the military advantage a party would gain. In the Gaza region, these principles were violated.⁴ Both sides, and especially Israel, have attacked densely populated regions, the hospitals and schools, and civilian homes. There has been a high number of deaths of ordinary innocent people and particularly of women and children. The blockade in the Gaza region, due to which there has been a restriction on food, fuel, medicine, and the movement of people, has been widely recognised as a form of collective punishment. International Law condemns collective punishment, which means that civilians should not be punished for something they are not involved in.¹ Every aspect of people's lives has been affected. Due to a lack of electricity and medical supplies, hospitals could not operate.¹³ There has been a scarcity of clean drinking water. Malnutrition has increased among the children.

Despite the existence of International Courts, Human Rights bodies, and monitoring mechanisms, accountability for human rights violations in Gaza remains improper and insufficient.⁶ Investigations are delayed and not properly conducted. Powerful states in the United Nations frequently use their veto power to protect their allies from sanctions. This gives a very bad message that international law applies only selectively, at the choice. The Gaza conflict shows a very harsh reality of international politics, where human rights are subordinated to the strategic interests of big powers. Due to this, international law becomes mere symbolic and a matter of joke.

Humanitarian Impact of the Gaza Conflict

The real cost of any conflict falls upon ordinary civilians. The human suffering in Gaza has reached a disastrous, catastrophic level. Since October 2023, when the war has started, thousands of Palestinians have lost their lives. A huge number of those killed are children and women. Women also face challenges such as a lack of maternal health care, unsafe childbirth conditions, and increased risk of gender-based violence. Without proper medical facilities, women giving birth to newborns face higher risks of complications, and, hence, infant mortality is high. Children grow up in an environment of violence. UNICEF has described the situation in Gaza as a ‘lost childhood crisis’ where children are denied even their basic rights.¹² According to data from the United Nations and humanitarian agencies, nearly 40 to 45% of the total deaths are of children. Entire families have been wiped out, and this trauma will last for generations. Bombardments and other operations by the military have led millions of people to leave their homes and settle in shelter homes. By 2024, more than 80% of Gaza’s population had been displaced. Buildings, the refugee campus, and homes have been destroyed. Many displaced families live in overcrowded shelters without sufficient sanitation, water, basic amenities, or even proper safety. Another challenge is that of food insecurity. Due to restrictions on imports and the destruction of agricultural land, a large number of people are dependent on humanitarian aid. Children are suffering from malnutrition, which affects their mental and physical growth. Families are surviving on one meal a day or less, and they have no clean drinking water. Moving beyond physical suffering, the psychological impact of the Gaza conflict is huge. The Gaza conflict is not only a present emergency, but it will surely have a long-term impact for several decades, just like the Hiroshima and Nagasaki tragedy of 1945. The conflict has also affected the economy of Gaza. Already, Gaza’s economy was too weak due to the blockade. Now, the destruction of basic infrastructure has totally collapsed the economy.

Role of International Actors and Global Politics

The Gaza conflict is not just a regional issue; it has a significant impact on international politics and the human rights system. We can see vast contradictions

between stated commitments to human rights and actual political behaviour by the international actors. United Nations Agencies such as the WHO, UNICEF, and UNRWA have played a big role in showing human rights violations and providing necessary support to Gaza. However, the role played by the United Nations has been limited and unsuccessful. Although the General Assembly has passed many resolutions calling for a ceasefire and humanitarian support, these resolutions have no meaning because they are non-binding. In the United Nations Security Council, resolutions have been dropped due to the Veto power of the permanent member states.¹¹

The United States has a close strategic alliance with Israel. While leaders from the USA express their concern for the loss of human lives, the country continuously provides military aid and diplomatic protection to Israel. It has used veto power in the Security Council to avoid ceasefire resolutions. This questions the credibility of the US. The European Union and other Western states have adopted a balanced approach. The European Union has increased humanitarian support for Gaza, but it has failed to put effective political pressure on Israel. Western efforts often seem to be symbolic rather than effective, showing that international law is applied selectively. Arab states have always expressed support for Palestine, but their approach looks uneven. Some countries have given financial aid and other aid to Palestine, while others have prioritised their economic interests and relations with Israel.

Gaza Conflict and the Crisis of Human Rights in International Politics

Despite institutions and global commitments to protect human rights, the situation in Gaza shows how ineffective these mechanisms can become when political and strategic interests override them. One of the biggest problems is the selective application of human rights norms. International law is often shown as universal and applying to all states and actors. However, in reality, the enforcement depends heavily on political interest. In the Gaza conflict, investigations are delayed, avoided, and resolutions are blocked. There are various international institutions, such as the International Criminal Court and human rights bodies, that provide justice to the people. Their effectiveness depends on the political cooperation. In the Gaza case, we can see that accountability mechanisms have remained only for formality. Reports are published, but no solid action can be seen on the ground to curtail human rights abuses in that region. There is a gap between theory and practice. Repeated violations of human rights without serious efforts to stop them ultimately weaken the system. When powerful actors face no accountability for their actions, other states may feel encouraged to ignore human rights obligations as well. This practice badly affects the entire global order built after the Second World War in the form of the United Nations, the Geneva Conventions, etc, to prevent further loss of human lives.

Comparative Perspective- Gaza and Other Humanitarian Crises

A comparative approach helps us see how different humanitarian crises are treated differently by actors in international politics. The Gaza conflict is one of the most severe humanitarian crises in contemporary times. Since October 2023, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been killed, and more than 80% of Gaza's population has been displaced. People are devoid of hospitals, water supply, electricity, and schools. Despite these conditions, international action has remained ineffective and limited in scope. Several cease-fire resolutions proposed at the United Nations Security Council were blocked, and no strong sanctions were imposed. In the case of Ukraine, the conflict that began in 2022 affected a large number of people. There have been significant civilian casualties and displacement, but the international community responded very quickly. Major global powers imposed economic sanctions on Russia. Ukraine received large-scale military and humanitarian aid. War crimes were actively examined by international bodies and the International Criminal Court. This case shows that when conflict involves geopolitical interests, humanitarian concerns are immediately expressed and actions are taken. In the case of Yemen, with a vast humanitarian crisis, international responses were slower, just like in Gaza. These comparisons show a harsh reality that human rights are not enforced equally everywhere. International action by institutions and actors depends on who is involved and where the conflict is happening, and how it affects the global powers. In the case of Gaza, political alliances and strategic interests have limited the willingness on the part of powerful states to take strict action, even though there has been a humanitarian issue. When similar violations receive different treatments from actors, the idea of universal human rights becomes meaningless. This comparative approach shows that the problem is not a lack of laws or institutions but a lack of political commitment to protect human dignity and life.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The Gaza conflict is one of the most tragic human rights crises of the contemporary world. It shows not only the suffering of millions of people but also the weaknesses of international politics in protecting human rights during wars. The article shows that the conflict is not sudden, but it is situated in a long history of displacement, violence, and blockade. Children and women bear the greatest burden of the conflict. The conflict has led to the violation of basic human rights, including the right to life, health, food, and shelter. International institutions have documented violations but failed to act responsibly. The political interests of powerful nation-states have shadowed sincere action to protect human rights. While human rights are widely accepted in theory, they are weakly enforced in reality. We need to place human rights at the

centre. Civilian protection should not be treated as a secondary concern. International humanitarian law must be applied equally everywhere, regardless of political interests. International institutions such as the United Nations should also be strengthened so that they are not paralyzed by the misuse of veto power by any of the P-5 members. To ensure long-term peace, accountability for human rights abuses is highly essential. Independent investigations must be conducted without any sort of hindrance. If international laws are violated, then sanctions or legal action must be taken regardless of the fact that who is involved there. A just international order is possible only if human lives are valued equally and international laws are enforced uniformly.

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