Gaza Facing Most "Minutely Engineered" Starvation Since WWII: Famine Expert Warns

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Alex de Waal is the executive director of the World Peace Foundation at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. He's considered one of the foremost experts on famine and starvation, having studied the Sudan at the Horn of Africa, his scholarly work and practice has also probed humanitarian crises and responses, human rights and conflict and peace building. His latest book is *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine*, and he joins us tonight to discuss the increasingly alarming, and I would almost call it unprecedented famine in Gaza. Thank you so much for joining us tonight. It's great to see you.

Alex de Waal (AW): It's good to be with you. I would like to say it's a pleasure, but the topic is so awful that it's really not a happy occasion.

GG: Yeah, I don't know if you heard, I think it was before you joined, but I was talking about how you on the one hand have to cover this, have to discuss it, and sometimes you feel like you just are running out of words to convey the horrors that are going on there and the moral responsibility of our governments, your government, my government, governments throughout the West for what's happening, not because of passivity, but because of active support. All right, so, you know, it's funny I had – not funny, but I guess notable – that last week I had on the UN rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories for the UN, Francesca Albanese, and she's been obviously very outspoken about the abuses of the Palestinians in Gaza because that's her job. And she routinely gets accused of obviously being antisemitic or obsessed with Israel, not paying attention to other abuses, when in reality her whole life before 2023 has been focused on abuses all over the globe that have nothing to do with Israel. And because you're here to talk about famine in Gaza and the way Israel is using it as a weapon of war, I'm sure the same criticism gets made of you. So could you talk about the other types of famines you've studied throughout your adult life that have nothing to do with Gaza and Palestine and Israel?

AW: So I've been working on this topic for just over 40 years. And the famines that have most preoccupied me in the last few years are: a terrible famine – which is actually not yet over – in Ethiopia, which was a siege famine inflicted on the people of Tigray in Northern Ethiopia by the government of Ethiopia. And until recently, I would have said that is the worst, the most egregious case of deliberate use of starvation. And then we have the ongoing famine in Sudan, which is actually the largest in terms of the numbers affected. It's more than 8 million people in what the UN would describe as an emergency, where they are really on the cusp of losing everything, of descending into the worst stages according to the UN's measurement of catastrophe and famine. And both of these are war famines, both of these are famines brought about by men, they are man-made famines and the gendered language is very deliberate because in modern history we are yet to see a woman-made famine. But what's really remarkable and unique about what we're seeing in Gaza today – it's not the largest in terms of the numbers, those in Ethiopia and Sudan and indeed in Yemen have been larger – but it's the most intense, the most severe and the most minutely engineered. There is no other case since World War II that I can think of where you have a people being subjected to this degree of starvation. And literally just a few miles away there are aid givers with the resources, with the expertise, with the plans, with everything worked out, which at the flick of a switch could actually deliver a very comprehensive package of aid. It wouldn't solve the problem, but it would be infinitely much better than what the people of Gaza are facing today. I haven't seen that in my career.

GG: So in looking at your work but also thinking about the famines I've heard about and have reported on in an ancillary way, I'm by no means an expert. There's different ways famines can happen. You can have natural disasters or droughts. You can have civil wars and societal collapse where society just stops functioning and distribution becomes impossible. It's sometimes, as you say, just a byproduct of war, not really intentional but from the nature of the destruction of war that can happen. And then there's famine as a weapon of war. Can you talk a little bit about – you mentioned since World War II, you haven't seen something quite so severe, not necessarily in terms of magnitude, but intentionality. What is the nature of famine as a deliberate weapon of war?

AW: So famine or starvation can be used for a number of different military and political objectives. And here it's important to note that the way the war crime of starvation is defined in international law is it's not just food, it's objects indispensable to survival. So you can be responsible for the war crime of starvation by depriving people of drinking water, of sanitation, of health care, of shelter, of fuel, maternal care for children. So it's everything that is necessary to survive. That is what is the definition of the war crime of starvation. And it can be used in order to try and compel an adversary to submit. It can be used as punishment against a group. It can be used in pursuit of ethnic cleansing or genocide. It can be used tactically in a specific locality or very strategically across a broad locality. And the very worst cases which date back to World War II and immediately afterwards are genocidal starvation. So the worst case on record was the Nazis. And we all know about the Holocaust and how appalling was the program of planned extermination of European Jews. What I think is less well-known is that starvation was a major component of that. And in fact, one of the reasons

why the Nazis turned to gas chambers and death squads was that starvation hunger just wasn't rapid enough to achieve their goals. The Hunger Plan, which actually encompassed not just the Jews, but up to 30 million people in Eastern Europe and what was then the Soviet Union, the plan was to exterminate these people through hunger. But the Allies also used it. In fact, the siege of Japan by the United States in 1945, when they mined the Japanese harbors and stopped food from coming in was candidly called Operation Starvation. And the British also used starvation routinely as a weapon of war. And fortunately we haven't seen even today, even with the worst that we see in Gaza today, we haven't seen that extreme of annihilatory intent, the intent to destroy the entire population through starvation. What we're seeing is absolutely appalling but it does for now at least fall short of that.

GG: Right, it falls short, but you have to go back to World War II to find something worse in terms of the intentional use of famine as a weapon, as I understand what you're saying. So let me, actually, you know what, I had another question to follow up. I wanted to ask you about World War II because it's oftentimes something that people who try and justify the atrocities of war will say, which is oh well, in World War II, we bombed Dresden and we firebombed cities in Japan and we had no regard for civilian life and then we starved them and we sieged them exactly as you said, as though whatever was done in World War II is sort of the model of what we want to replicate when we prosecute wars now. And at least my understanding of having grew up and understood the history of World War II is that the world kind of came together after and said, well, given what we're capable of technologically and what we unleash – it was a level of inhumanity and atrocity and destruction – that we want to make sure we never replicate again. And we created international bodies and entire conventions under the Hague Convention and international tribunals to ensure that those weren't repeated. And it seems now there's almost like this reverse ethos, which is, well, if we did that to the Japanese, or we did it to the Germans, or they did it to us, that's proof that it's permissible. Can you talk about that perspective that seems to be emerging?

AW: I think you've absolutely nailed it. I think that the generation, the men and women who came out of World War II and my parents, grandparents' generation were part of that. And one of my predecessors as executive director of the World Peace Foundation, Leland Goodrich, was part of the secretariat for the United Nations that was set up in San Francisco in 1945. And he was responsible for the drafting of the statute of the International Court of Justice, the World Court. And the whole preamble of the United Nations Charter is twice in our lifetimes we have seen the scourge of war and we don't want to see it again. And it was precisely because of the inhumanity of what had been suffered during the World War and the potentiality of that being repeated, that these laws were put in place. And the idea that one would set that aside and go back to the ethos that led to such unrivaled destruction, you know, killing, bombing of cities, as you say, death camps, extermination, mass hunger – as many people perished of hunger in World War II as they perished from violence. The idea that we would go back to that and somehow say it's acceptable because we did it then is quite astonishing. Surely we have learned from that and surely we should implement, we should put in place, those very same measures that were forged 80 years ago to prevent it from happening.

GG: You know I don't want to make this comparison because it sounds too glib but I want to kind of draw up a point which is that we all do have the experience of sometimes being hungry or we can't get food for whatever reason – most of us, especially in the West when we say that it means, you know, we skip breakfast and then we get involved in work and we haven't eaten all day, maybe there's a couple days, you go hiking or whatever, and people have that sensation of what that feels like. You know, you feel like your body is weakening, sometimes your breathing is affected, your brain doesn't quite work as well. And we're talking here about something, an infinitesimal fraction of what people suffer when we're talking about mass starvation and famine, and then death from starvation. I've always thought of death from starvation as one of the worst ways for a human being to die, if not the worst way. Can you describe why it's considered so uniquely horrific?

AW: So, yes, I would say to my grandparents who lived through much of the hunger of World War II, I would say, I'm hungry, and they would say, no, no, you have an appetite.

GG: Right.

AW: On my grandfather's side, the family is Dutch. There was a famine in the Netherlands in 1945. On my grandmother's side they are Austrian and they were forced to flee and also went through hunger. And this is something that stays with you, not just because of the physical pain, and let me speak a little bit about that, but also because of the sense of humiliation and degradation. So the physical aspect of hunger is very extreme. It takes about 60 to 80 days for a healthy adult to die subjected to complete starvation. The body wastes, it consumes itself and it's not only a physical symptom, it's also mental. People actually go crazy, they become obsessed with food. They begin to lose their sense of reason. And for children, it's much more rapid. Young children will starve much more quickly. And they will also succumb to infections. And one of the things that I think isn't widely understood is that in most of these situations of famine, only a small proportion of those who perish are actually diagnosed as dying of hunger itself, of malnutrition. The majority of children – what happens is, as they lose weight, they become more susceptible to infections, particularly diarrheal diseases. And it's these and the dehydration that goes with that combination of malnutrition and infection that causes most of the deaths. And so the great majority of those who die, who are children under five, most of those children are actually not diagnosed as dying of hunger itself. They're diagnosed as dying from other diseases.

But then there's the social aspect, too. And this is something that I think is not widely appreciated, which is that as people are forced more and more to seek food by any possible means – this is deeply humiliating. They are forced to beg, to steal, to hide food; a mother will be forced to feed this child and not that child; to turn away hungry nieces and nephews from the door, to scavenge around in garbage, to eat animal food, to break food taboos. And this is one of the deepest sort of humiliations, not only the suffering that people feel themselves, but the sense that they are actually betraying their closest families and friends. They are being cruel to others by not sharing the very, very little they have. And one of the

reasons why, for example, the great famine in Ireland from the 1840s was not publicly commemorated for almost 150 years. There was this sort of great silence that descended upon it. People would talk about it in abstract terms, but no one wanted to talk about those day-to-day humiliations and cruelties and traumas that the society went through. And I think one of the things that we see very, very graphically and horribly in Gaza today, and some of the quotes that you were giving from physicians, from parents in Gaza, brings out that degree of the sense that people are losing their humanity, they're being degraded, turned almost into animals. And this is as painful as any of the physical symptoms of starvation, which are, as you say, extraordinarily painful themselves.

GG: Yeah, and I think you're seeing some of that desperation, that animalistic instinct manifesting in the way the Israelis are dealing with it – by first supposedly shooting warning shots but then massacring crowds – as the only way to kind of control this desperation for the food from the starvation that they themselves have caused.

AW: If I could jump in on that.

GG: Yeah, for sure.

AW: So the United Nations, if you look at the humanitarian principles, they have the "dignity of the recipient" as one of the key points. So if you want to design a humanitarian program for anywhere in the world, a war or a conflict or an affected area, you try and do three things basically: Provide enough food to feed everybody. Provide extra particular services. So you provide specialized therapeutic food for young children who can't just eat pasta or flour, they need special foodstuffs. You provide water and sanitation and everything else that is necessary for living. Cooking fuel, for example. And then you do it in a way that supports the community, supports the family. So the UN had on the table a plan for doing all this. They had 400 distribution sites all across Gaza. They were hugely restricted in what they could do, but they were seeking to give all these forms of assistance. And they were seeking to do it in a way that met the Israeli demand that nothing should go to Hamas. So everything would be tracked. And I have to say that, you know, Israel always complains about Hamas stealing food. As of this time last year, they had not shared any reliable information about that with the United States. The US was not able to produce anything when questioned about it to support Israeli allegations. And some colleagues of mine at a group called Forensic Architecture in London tracked some of the food that was on trucks which had been videoed with armed men, and these videos were being circulated by Israel: here's Hamas stealing food. What was actually happening in at least one of these videos was that the community were putting armed men on those trucks to stop the aid being stolen and they could track the trucks, protected by these armed men from the community, to the warehouse and being distributed. But because of that video which was being distributed by the Israelis that access was closed down.

Now what we have instead is a different model. The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, so-called, instead of 400 places where this full spectrum of aid is distributed, there are four

locations. Three of them in the south, one in the center. And they're only open for perhaps 30 minutes, perhaps an hour, an hour and a half, every day with very, very short warning time. And they are located in no-go zones, free fire zones. But they're so far away from where people are living that people need to relocate to places to stay where when they get on the Facebook page that announces, yes, this feeding station is going to open in 45 minutes – they can't get there, they need to get there. So they are camping in the rubble in these military zones. And the only way to get there is past the military units of the IDF. And the IDF soldiers, I don't know if they shoot to kill or not, they say they don't, but they do say that their only way of communicating with these crowds of people is by gunfire. They try and, as it were, use gunfire like you would use a sheep dog to herd sheep. Shooting at them to try and get them to stay away from certain areas, to try to go to other areas. And dozens of people are being killed every day. Some people are also being killed, suffocated, in the crutch. And so people are faced with this terrible dilemma. Do we let our children starve? Do we risk our lives by being forced to go through this extraordinarily difficult and dangerous trek in order to get these rations which we don't even know whether we'll get them. This is not a humanitarian system. This is a system for deliberately controlling and humiliating and degrading the people of Gaza. That is the only conclusion that one can draw.

GG: Absolutely. You know, the last question, and it's a lot to take in, I'm sure for everybody, certainly for myself and probably not easy for you to describe, but there are obviously gradations when we talk about hunger, starvation, famine. There's long been – you know, I've been covering Israel and Gaza for a long time – and there are these phrases that the Israelis notoriously use. They call it "mowing the lawn" when they kind of want to go in and just kill some people to show dominance and force. And then they've always had this other phrase: "putting the Gazans on a diet" – where they control through the blockade what gets in and out of Gaza. And they just arbitrarily reduce the amount of food that gets in. What we're talking about here is something much, much different, but famine groups and experts have created I guess a system of gradation to understand the severity of the famine. I guess it goes from Stage One to Stage Five with Stage Five being the most severe. And I've seen some assessments suggesting that what's happening in Gaza is nearing Stage Five if not already within the range of it and that once you enter Stage Five it essentially becomes irreversible. Even if you were to surge food, for most people the damage would be permanent and long-term and irreversable. Can you talk about what that system is and where we are in it when it comes to Gaza?

AW: So the system is a mouthful. It's called the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System, or IPC for short. And it takes information about how much food there is and how much is being consumed by households. It takes information for child malnutrition, and it takes in information about the mortality of children under five. And as you say, it has this five-level scale of: One – normal, Stressed is Two, crisis is Three, emergency is Four, and then catastrophe or famine is Stage Five. And for the first nine months of this disaster, this war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, what we saw was that every time the humanitarian data indicated that it was about to cross the level five, the famine threshold, Israel would, as it were, turned on the aid tap under pressure from the Biden administration who didn't want to

see famine being determined there. And then the level of malnutrition would begin to come down. Now what we've seen in the last nine months is that the information really is no longer there. Israel has taken a different approach, which is that it knows that the Famine Review Committee of the IPC, who are these independent experts, they're extremely cautious. And if they don't have the full data, they won't say famine. And because they cannot get data, reliable data about child malnutrition, and especially reliable data about the numbers of children who have perished from hunger and disease, they won't declare a famine. And so Israel is sort of gaming this system. But the last assessment that was made after six weeks of the total siege, which was made in May, made it very clear that what would happen is within weeks Gaza would completely run out of food and we would see mass starvation, irreversible, really, starvation. And when people get to this stage, as you say, they need intensive medical care in order to recover. You can't just recover by giving them food. And what the aid that has been provided over the last six weeks has done is it hasn't been enough. It hasn't been the full spectrum of aid, especially aid for children. And it has been allocated, provided in this extraordinarily cruel way. So the descent into outright famine, mass starvation, has not been as sharp as it would have been if there'd been no food, but it is continuing. And it is really only a matter of days before we see the most appalling case, the most unspeakable evidence for mass starvations and all the depravities associated with that.

GG: All right, well, I wish we had had an opportunity to have you on under better circumstances, though I guess it's the nature of your work that this is the sort of thing that you focus on. But it's been very enlightening, very informative. I think that's important when things are getting thrown around to hear from somebody who actually has specialized knowledge in all of this. And I know it was illuminating for me, I'm sure for everybody else as well. And I really appreciate your taking the time to come on tonight and talk to us.

AW: Well, thank you for making the time for this. And let's really hope that for the people of Gaza that something is done to ameliorate that terrible suffering.

GG: Absolutely. All right. Have a good evening. Thanks so much.

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