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Crush at Gaza Aid Centre Leaves 20 Dead Amid Rising Tensions

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At least 20 Palestinians lost their lives during a deadly stampede at a Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) aid site in Khan Younis on Wednesday, in an incident that has sparked fresh controversy over the role of militant groups and the safety of aid operations in the region.

According to the GHF, which is backed by Israel and supported through U.S.-based private logistics and security firms, the crowd surge was instigated by armed individuals linked to Hamas, the Islamist group governing Gaza. The organisation reported that 19 people were trampled and one individual was fatally stabbed during the chaos. GHF stated, “We have credible reason to believe that elements within the crowd armed and affiliated with Hamas deliberately fomented the unrest.”

Hamas quickly dismissed the accusation, calling it “false and misleading,” and instead blamed GHF security staff and Israeli forces for triggering panic by using pepper spray and allegedly firing at the crowd. The GHF strongly denied those claims, asserting that no live ammunition or tear gas was used, and that only minimal pepper spray was deployed to prevent further loss of life.

Eyewitness accounts from the scene describe a chaotic and horrifying situation. Mahmoud Fojo, 21, recounted to Reuters, “People kept gathering and pressuring each other... those who couldn’t stand fell under the people and were crushed.” He and others described being trapped between locked gates and fencing as panic spread and many tried to climb over barriers to escape.

The incident has reignited debate over the safety and management of aid operations in Gaza. The United Nations Human Rights Office recently reported over 875 deaths in recent weeks near food and aid distribution points, many near GHF locations, most attributed to gunfire reportedly from Israeli forces. While the Israeli military has acknowledged civilian harm, it claims operational changes have been made.

The GHF has come under scrutiny from international humanitarian groups and local Palestinian organisations. Amjad Al-Shawa, director of the Palestinian NGOs Network, criticised the foundation for what he described as “gross mismanagement,” claiming that thousands are being funnelled into narrow spaces with limited oversight, inadequate supplies, and poor organisation.

Meanwhile, Israel’s military announced the completion of a new road through southern Gaza aimed at cutting off key Hamas movements. Observers believe the move also adds pressure during ongoing ceasefire talks, brokered by Egypt and Qatar with backing from the United States. Those negotiations have reportedly stalled, with Hamas rejecting Israeli demands to maintain partial control over Gaza and insisting on dismantling the GHF in favour of a United Nations-led distribution mechanism.

The ongoing conflict, which erupted following the deadly October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israel, has devastated Gaza. Local health officials report over 58,000 Palestinian deaths from Israeli strikes, while nearly 1,650 Israelis and foreign nationals have been killed, including the 1,200 who died in the initial Hamas assault.

As ceasefire talks remain deadlocked and humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate, Wednesday's tragedy underscores the broader struggle to deliver aid safely and impartially in one of the world's most volatile regions.