

# Biden announces US will build pier on Gaza shore for large-scale aid delivery

President lays out plans in State of the Union speech while senior US official says 'we are not waiting on the Israelis'



Internally displaced people line up to receive food aid provided by a Palestinian youth group in the Rafah refugee camp, southern Gaza, on Thursday. Photograph: Haitham Imad/EPA

US forces will build a temporary dock on the **Gaza** shoreline to allow delivery of humanitarian aid on a large scale, Joe Biden announced in his **State of the Union speech**, amid warnings of a widespread famine among the territory's 2.3 million Palestinians.

"Nearly two million more Palestinians under bombardment or displaced, homes destroyed, neighborhoods in rubble, cities in ruin, families without food, water, medicine. It's heartbreaking," Biden said on Thursday night, declaring that the US was leading humanitarian relief efforts.

"Tonight, I'm directing the US military to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the **Gaza** coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine and temporary shelters," the president said.

He promised **"no US boots will be on the ground"**, and said: "This temporary pier would enable a massive increase in the amount of humanitarian assistance getting into Gaza every day."

But Biden warned **Israel** that it "must also do its part."

"To the leadership of Israel I say this," he said. "Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip. Protecting and saving innocent lives has to be a priority."



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The White House made clear that the decision to open a sea route for aid into Gaza had come with frustration of what is seen in Washington as Israeli obstruction of road deliveries on a substantial scale.

"We are not waiting on the Israelis. This is a moment for American leadership," a senior official said.

The scheme will take several weeks to put into action, however, carrying the risk of supplying too little relief, too late. While aid experts welcomed it as a step in the right direction, they said it was a less effective way of getting aid into Gaza than the US using its leverage to make Benjamin Netanyahu's government open more land routes to more humanitarian assistance.

"This just shows the lengths to which President Biden is being forced to go to avoid actually putting meaningful pressure on Netanyahu," said Jeremy Konyndyk, a former senior aid official in the Biden administration, now president of the Refugees International aid advocacy organisation.

The temporary pier will be built by US military engineers operating from ships off the coast of the old Gaza City port in the Rimal district, aid sources said. US troops would not need to step ashore, but could build the floating dock from ships offshore, according to US officials.

The aid deliveries will be shipped from the port of Larnaca in Cyprus, which will become the main relief hub.

"Tonight, the president will announce in his **State of the Union address** that he has directed the US military to undertake an emergency mission to establish a port in Gaza, working in partnership with like-minded countries and humanitarian partners," the official said. "This port, the main feature of which is a temporary pier, will provide the capacity for hundreds of additional truckloads of assistance each day."

Biden's announcement on Thursday night is due to be followed by a joint statement by the countries and humanitarian organisations involved in the sea corridor. One of the nations involved is the United Arab Emirates, but it is unclear whether they would offer troops to secure the aid bridgehead.

Aid groups have said that efforts to deliver desperately needed supplies to the beleaguered territory have been hampered by difficulties coordinating with the Israeli military, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order.

Biden has been fiercely criticised within his own party for the failure to open up Gaza to humanitarian aid, with a famine looming and 30,000 Palestinians dead already since the start of war on 7 October.

The UN said in February that more than a quarter of Gaza's 2.3 million people were "estimated to be facing catastrophic levels of deprivation and starvation". It said without action widespread famine could be "almost inevitable".

Israeli officials will be able to conduct inspections of the aid shipments in Larnaca, administration officials said.

"We will coordinate with the Israelis on the security requirements on land and work with the UN and humanitarian NGOs on the distribution of assistance within Gaza," a senior official said. "Initial shipments will come via Cyprus enabled by the US military and a coalition of partners and allies. This new significant capability will take a number of weeks to plan and execute. The forces that will be required to complete this mission there are either already in the region or will begin to move there soon."

The White House said that the operation would not involve boots on the ground, as the port and its temporary pier could be built from off the coast.

"The concept that's been planned involves the presence of US military personnel on military vessels offshore but does not require US military personnel to go ashore to install the pier or causeway facility that will allow the transportation and humanitarian assistance ashore," a senior official said.

Israel "fully supports" creation of such a facility, an Israeli official told Reuters.

The independent US senator Bernie Sanders welcomed the proposal, but said the obstructionism of the Israeli government "led to this incredible situation, in which a US ally is using US weapons and equipment to block the delivery of US humanitarian aid".

He added: "And now American taxpayers have to pay even more to build a port to get aid into starving people, because Israel won't let it be driven safely and efficiently across the border."

Until now, the only land access routes for food aid into Gaza have been at the southern end of the strip, at Rafah and Kerem Shalom, but the flow of assistance has rarely been more than a trickle in relation to the vast needs of 2.3 million Palestinians. Fewer than 100 trucks a day are getting across.

Looting has become one of the problems hindering deliveries, but Israeli inspections have led to many truckloads of aid being rejected if they contained anything from a long list of prohibited goods. There has also been a lack of coordination, with aid convoys with official permission to go to northern Gaza being turned back by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints.

US officials believe Benjamin Netanyahu is balancing different wings of his coalition - in which extreme rightwingers oppose any aid deliveries - with a compromise that only lets in a token amount.

"The president has directed that we look at all options, that we not wait for the Israelis and we are pursuing every channel possible to get assistance into Gaza. So we will do it by air, by sea, by land - however we can get the maximum amount in," a senior US official said.

US military transport planes, acting jointly with the Jordanian air force on Thursday, made a third airdrop of food aid over Gaza in a week, bringing the total of US military-style relations dropped to nearly 113,000. However, each airdrop is typically equivalent to a handful of truckloads of food, and nowhere near enough to meet **the needs of a population on the brink of starvation**.

"In order to avert a famine, we need huge volumes of assistance. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of people. Airdrops are not an option for averting famine," said the deputy executive director of the World Food Programme, Carl Skau, who appealed for a sea corridor to be opened.

The White House said that Israel had also agreed to open a third road crossing into Gaza, giving more direct access to northern Gaza, where the threat of famine is the most imminent.

"Over recent days at our request, the government of Israel has prepared a new land crossing directly into northern Gaza. This third crossing will allow for aid to flow directly to the population in northern Gaza that is in dire need of assistance," an administration official said.

James McGoldrick, the interim UN humanitarian coordinator for the **Palestinian territories**, confirmed on Thursday that the Israeli army had "given the green light" for use of a military road leading from east to northern Gaza.

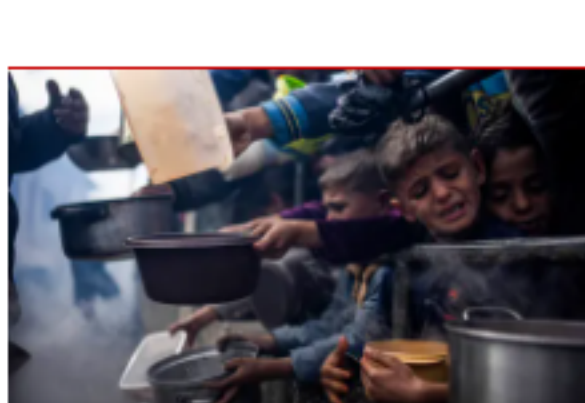
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