Thursday, April 4, 2024 / Israel’s attack on World Central Kitchen

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <Adrift>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host, *Today, Explained*): Stephen Kalin has been reporting on aid in Gaza for the *Wall Street Journal*.

STEPHEN KALIN (foreign correspondent, Wall Street Journal): There's aid going in on the ground from Egypt, which is neighboring Gaza, but Cyprus back in November offered to help get aid into Gaza by sea in large part because the aid situation in Gaza was getting so desperate that aid groups started looking for alternatives to ground transportation. So they started doing airdrops and World Central Kitchen started pushing the idea of a sea route from Cyprus.

*<CLIP> BBC: They’re taking 200 tons of aid – flour, rice, pre-prepared meals …*

STEPHEN: I was in Cyprus right after they sent their first ship off. And they sent their second shipment this past weekend.

*<CLIP> BBC: It normally takes about 15 hours to get from Larnaca to Gaza. But in fact it’ll take about 50 hours …*

SEAN: That shipment was picked up by World Central Kitchen aid workers in Gaza. The same ones who were later killed by Israeli forces. What this mess means for Gaza, coming up on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: We asked Stephen Kalin to tell us how Israel ended up killing seven aid workers this week.

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STEPHEN: A lot of the details are still, kind of vague and not quite confirmed. But what we do know at this point is that the second sea shipment had arrived sometime around Monday afternoon, Monday evening at the beach in Gaza, where World Central Kitchen had arranged for the construction of sort of a makeshift jetty. Because the port in Gaza has been put out of commission by the war, so this is in northern Gaza and the whole area sort of cordoned off by the Israeli military to provide security for the aid workers to unload a few hundred tons of food. Um, what happened on Monday was that the unloading began, and one of the shipments was going from the beach down Deir Al-Balah, which is a town in the center of Gaza. [It] made a delivery to a warehouse there. And then there were three vehicles that were on their way back from the warehouse when they were struck in what appears to have been three successive strikes along the beach road.

*<CLIP> CBS REPORT: It appears their convoy was hit multiple times, including a direct strike to an armored car – even though it was clearly marked with the group’s name.*

STEPHEN: It seems like it was a drone strike. We're still waiting on confirmation of those details, but that's what the sort of investigation so far – and sort of open-source reporting appears to indicate. And very sadly, there were seven World Central Kitchen staff and contractors in those vehicles and they were all killed.

*<CLIP> WORLD CENTRAL KITCHEN FOUNDER JOSÉ ANDRÉS: The situation began being very obvious when we began seeing images of these bodies and these passports in the hospital that confirm: these were our people.*

STEPHEN: It was dark out. And so we're we're hearing from some Israeli former officials that there may have been some confusion. The Israeli military has called this a mistake without really saying much more, so we don't really know in what way it was a mistake, why, how.

*<CLIP> ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU: Unfortunately, in the last day, there was a tragic incident of an unintended strike of our forces on innocent people in the Gaza Strip. This happens in war, we’re checking this thoroughly… <fade down>*

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STEPHEN: What's I think more important than that, though, is that the World Central Kitchen had completed a process which the aid groups call “deconfliction,” which is basically a process by which aid groups tell the Israeli military the location of their vehicles, offices, warehouses, distribution centers, wherever they are and wherever they're going, the route that they're taking, the time that they plan to be there. And so they share all this sort of information in the interest of making sure that the military knows who they are, what they're doing, and that they shouldn't be targeted. As far as we can tell – I mean, World Central Kitchen is saying – this convoy was deconflicted. And the Israeli military isn't denying that. So the big question here is – if the Israeli military knew who was in these vehicles and expected them to be there, where they were, when they were there – why this happened. And unfortunately, it's not an isolated incident. This has happened repeatedly in Gaza over the past few months.

*<CLIP> WORLD CENTRAL KITCHEN LOUNDER JOSÉ ANDRÉS: Seven people dead. But they are seven on top of a list of more than another 190 humanitarian workers that they been killed over the last six months.*

STEPHEN: World Central Kitchen has called it a targeted strike indicating that they felt singled out.

*<CLIP> ANDRÉS: But what I know is that we were targeted. Deliberately. Nonstop. Until everybody was dead in this convoy. That, that, that cannot be. That cannot be the role of an army. That cannot be the role of an army that has hundreds of drones above Gaza in any single moment.*

STEPHEN: And from speaking to other aid groups over the past few months and Palestinians who live in Gaza, there is a sense that there is no safe place. There's no safe activity. There's no way to really protect yourself in Gaza right now. For those people in their perspective, everything is a target.

SEAN: Can you tell us a bit more about this group World Central Kitchen, for people who aren't familiar?

STEPHEN: Yeah, it's, it's a small NGO. It was set up in 2010 after the earthquake in Haiti by a chef named Jose Andres…

SCORING IN <We Will Cook You>  
  
STEPHEN: … who is Spanish American. He's got two Michelin stars, and he's a pretty famous celebrity chef: He's got cookbooks. He's on TV all the time. He was on the late night shows just a week or two ago to promote a new cookbook.

*<CLIP> ANDY COHEN: In honor of Top Chef being in Wisconsin, what US state do you think has the best food?   
ANDRÉS: Without a doubt, the first – 51st state. This is Washington, DC. We deserve to become a state. We pay taxes and we have no representation. <fade down>*

STEPHEN: Some of his most famous restaurants are in Washington, D.C., actually, where he lives. And the NGO is based. And so he's got a lot of connections, celebrities and politicians. And he basically set this up, in response to, to that earthquake in Haiti:

*<CLIP> ANDRÉS: In Haiti is a moment that I said, you know, I’m not going to stand watching on TV thinking about what we can do. I’m gonna show up and I’m gonna start learning how cooks like me – if we come together, we volunteers – we gonna start feeding anybody.*

STEPHEN: Basically, what World Central Kitchen does is they go into emergency situations. They go and set up kitchens, they try to work with the community, they hire people and recruit volunteers from the community. And they make as much food [as possible] and distribute it to people who need it.

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STEPHEN: So when the war started in Gaza, actually World Central Kitchen went early on to Israel, to feed people – Israelis – who were displaced from their homes by the Hamas attack on October 7th. And then they also went into Gaza. They started small but have scaled up, and over the past six months, they've become one of the most important food providers in Gaza, which is … There's over a million people who are hungry in Gaza right now. So they provide currently around 300,000 meals a day. The World Food Program, which is part of the UN, provides 400,000 a day.   
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
STEPHEN: So they're [a] very significant part of the, the aid response in Gaza right now.

SEAN: But World Central Kitchen will no longer be operating in Gaza. Is that right?

STEPHEN: For the moment, that's – that’s right. So after the strike happened, they came out and said that they were freezing their operations in Gaza and also a number of other locations around the Middle East in response to this. They said that they didn't feel – you know, their staff didn’t feel comfortable. And they needed reassurances that they would be protected and not targeted. And there also seems to be a part of this – you know, they didn't say this, but it appears that – this situation is providing some leverage, because the humanitarian situation is so desperate that if, if World Central Kitchen stops providing aid and others follow suit – a few other groups have – it creates a real problem. And I think there's a push from the organization and from Jose Andrés personally on the Israeli government on the American government, to do more, to help civilians, to stop them from being killed, and to protect humanitarian workers who are just trying to feed people.

*<CLIP> ANDRÉS: At the time, this looks like this is not a war against terrorism anymore. Seems this is a war against humanity itself. You cannot be destroying every building. You cannot be destroying every hospital, every school. You cannot be targeting humanitarian. You cannot be targeting children. You cannot be fighting the basis of what humanity should be standing for.*

STEPHEN: And there really aren’t that many options left. I mean, World Central Kitchen was stepping up in the absence of others. And actually, Israel has been promoting them and other – other groups as a replacement to some UN organizations that Israel doesn't like.

SEAN: Hm.

STEPHEN: So it's sort of getting to the point where Israel doesn't want these UN agencies to operate. The other humanitarian groups don't feel comfortable operating. Israel has tried to provide food in Gaza, provide armed protection to convoys, and that has resulted in massacres of their own. There was a, an aid distribution in February that ended in a melee and shooting, when Israeli forces said they felt threatened by the crowds. Fired into the crowd, there was stampedes and trampling. Over a hundred people died. So, there's really no obviously good solution to this, except for the Israeli military to improve the coordination and make sure something like this doesn't happen again.

SCORING IN <Your Glass Eye>

STEPHEN: But there's a real trust deficit because this has happened so many times. And so we're really at potentially an inflection point here.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Stephen Kalin, at The Wall Street Journal. WSJ dot com. When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna hear just how desperate the food situation in Gaza is, and how we can fix it.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. Jeremy Konyndyk joins us. He’s the president of Refugees International. We asked him what his organization’s been doing about this war.

JEREMY KONYNDYK (president of Refugees International): So that has meant a lot of advocacy towards, particularly the US government around their policies on humanitarian access and civilian protection in Gaza. You know, most of Gaza at this point is displaced. So we’ve done a lot of field research in the region. And then a lot of policy work and advocacy work based here in DC as well.

SEAN: And what have you found in your research?

JEREMY: You know, a few big things. The narrative and the kind of story of this with respect to US policy has been a huge disconnect between means and ends. Three days after the October 7th attacks, the president called on Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli government to ensure that they would fight this war in line with international humanitarian law.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7v40bJGqfEo)*> President Joe Biden: Democracies like Israel and the United States are stronger and more secure when we act according to the rule of law.*

JEREMY: And what that means in practice is protecting civilians, allowing aid access, not hitting humanitarians, not blocking humanitarian aid, not applying collective punishment or besiegement tactics. All of those are elements of international humanitarian law. All of those are obviously things that the Israeli government has been violating very routinely for six months.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7v40bJGqfEo)*> President Joe Biden: We uphold the laws of war -- the law of war. It matters. There's a difference.*

JEREMY: And six months into this, the U.S. rhetoric has gotten sharper, but the fundamental policy has not changed.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEZr4wQD8Qk)*> Sec. Antony Blinken: I and many others, starting with President Biden, have worked to impress upon Israel the moral, the strategic, the legal imperative of doing everything possible to provide humanitarian assistance to people who need it.*

JEREMY: You know, they are calling for things that Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government are ignoring. But not making any, frankly, acknowledgment of that, and much less an adjustment to policy as a result. They are not putting the leverage they have into play.

SEAN: The United States is selling Israel missiles and fighter jets. What is it doing about this humanitarian crisis, about feeding Gazans?

JEREMY: So, you know, the U.S. has deployed a, what's called a DART team, a Disaster Assistance Response Team. That is a high quality gold standard response team. Those are the teams that I used to oversee when I was at USAID. I worked there for three and a half years under the Obama administration, running the humanitarian division of USAID. So they have that team in the region, operating with personnel in multiple countries. They are funding

different U.N. agencies. They are funding many NGOs. And they appointed last fall Ambassador David Satterfield as an envoy for humanitarian diplomacy with the Israelis and other countries in the region.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ag4Yu6kJp8)*> Ambassador David Satterfield: We're focused on several key issues. One is getting a continuous flow of humanitarian assistance into Gaza to meet the legitimate needs of its people, the second is to work to get our American nationals, their families, those who have worked with us in Gaza, safely out.*

JEREMY: You know, those are good things, but they're not sufficient. You know, the narrative I think the administration tells itself is, look, right after October 7th, Israel wasn't letting anything in. We implore that they let some things in and they started letting some aid in. We implored them then to open a crossing. They opened a crossing. A month later, we implored them to open another crossing. And eventually, after a lot of pressure, they opened another crossing. And so, you know, the administration tells a story of very small incremental steps. Those steps are not meaningless. But what that misses is the larger picture, which is none of those steps collectively are anywhere near sufficient to avert this catastrophic famine that is now growing in Gaza. And this is where I think there's just a huge disconnect within US policy. They know the famine is coming. There's no serious dispute from the administration. Barak Ravid, the amazing reporter from Axios, was tweeting today that Jake Sullivan had relayed to the Israeli government that a famine declaration is almost certainly coming. And I think that's right. The famine that that will declare is already underway because those famine declarations are retroactive. So the famine is there. The famine is happening. You don't get to a famine in a place like this if everything is going well. Famine is a political outcome. It's not, you know, it's not a natural outcome. And so it just speaks to the level of continued obstruction by the Israeli government and the fundamental failure by the U.S. government to actually effect a change in that trajectory.

SEAN: So how do we change it? World Central Kitchen is suspending its operations, which means Gazans are not going to get millions of meals that they would have otherwise had had it not been for this airstrike. How do we make sure that Gazans aren't dying of hunger on top of everything else they're dying of right now?

JEREMY: There's no way to achieve that without a ceasefire. Period. Full stop. You know, if you were to try and design in a lab a perfect environment for a famine, it would look a lot like Gaza today. There is a, an inability of aid to get in. There is a woefully insufficient amount of food. There is malnutrition that is skyrocketing. Because of that, aid groups cannot put into place the kind of malnutrition treatment centers that are required once kids reach an advanced state of severe malnutrition. And on the disease front, of course, the health system is completely shattered. So there's very little ability to implement the kind of medical and public health measures you need to prevent the spread and treat the spread of disease. And a lot of the diseases that tend to spread and tend to kill people in famine are waterborne diseases. And the whole water sector is shot. And the Israelis are blocking things like the importation of chlorine tabs, which are what humanitarians normally use if the water system is shot. So like if you have a water system that's broken down, you distribute chlorine tabs at a household level so a household can purify water in their home. Those are blocked from entering by the Israelis because they consider them a dual use item, which is just inexplicable to me. So none of the capabilities, none of the programs and tools that the humanitarian system has to fight famine can be rolled out in Gaza right now. And it's very hard to see how any of that will become feasible without a ceasefire.

SEAN: I mean, you're saying that none of this is solved without a ceasefire, but it seems like we can't even all agree whether we're at risk of famine here. Isn't that right? AIPAC and Israel are both saying that there *isn't* a risk of famine, that there isn't widespread starvation in Gaza?

JEREMY: I don't think that's taken very seriously outside of Israel and AIPAC, frankly. Certainly the administration is not taking that seriously. The way that famines are assessed and declared is built on a really rigorous process with a lot of data and evidence underneath it. If you think of something like the hurricane early warning system.

SCORING IN <ICE SKATING IN A HURRICANE - APM>

JEREMY: So the hurricane early warning system is a five phase scale. There's a ton of data and evidence that goes into that. You think of the projections that are made when there's a hurricane, and you can't predict the exact course of the hurricane with exact precision, but you can have a pretty good sense of trajectory and of the power of what you're facing. And it's good enough that we rely on it. Right? We rely on that system to tell us when it's time to clear the beaches in Florida or North Carolina or wherever that thing's going to hit. There is a similar degree of rigor and experience built into the famine early warning system. So similarly, it's a five phase scale. The sorts of things that it measures are different, but they're things like the availability of food, surveying households on the level of access to food that they have, monitoring the prices of food, monitoring malnutrition, monitoring death rates. The threshold for declaring a famine is based on three things. Is there at least one fifth of the population that is routinely struggling to access enough food? Gaza blew through that threshold months ago. The second threshold is a malnutrition threshold. Are at least 30% of kids under five acutely malnourished? And there are parts of Gaza that are already past that. And then the third is the death rate. And, you know, that is what we haven't yet seen. Obviously the death rates have been very high from the war and war trauma. You know, the secondary death rate from starvation and disease will follow. And we know, you know, we know from a lot of experience that when you have a population hitting these levels of food deprivation and these levels of malnutrition, it's only a matter of time before the mortality then begins to follow because that's just what happens. You can't starve out the population and expect people not to start dying.

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JEREMY: The defense or the kind of the pushback on that from the Israelis, I think it's not being taken seriously. And from what, again, Barack Ravid was reporting they tried pushing back on that with Jake Sullivan. It doesn't sound like he took the bait. But they're not pushing back on that with counter evidence. What they're pushing back on is a strategic communications campaign. They're putting pictures of, like, food in markets. And what that says to me, as someone has done this work for a long time, is they don't actually understand how famines work.

SEAN: Hm.

JEREMY: It is not unusual to see food in markets when you have a famine. Because a famine is not just a matter of is food available, but it's a matter of is food available at a price people can broadly afford? And that's another element of what we're seeing in Gaza, that the whole economy is completely destroyed. It's not functioning right now. People have exhausted their savings. They don't have income. And so, you know, you might have food in the market, but if no one can afford to buy it, they can't access it. And that's something we routinely see. I traveled in northern Nigeria and parts of Ethiopia during very, very severe food crises in those countries. And you'd often see food in the markets. The problem was people couldn't afford it.

SCORING IN <Density - APM>

SEAN: So in the absence of a ceasefire, what's going to happen in the coming weeks regarding hunger, starvation, famine and aid in Gaza?

JEREMY: Well, what's going to happen as night follows day is we're going to see a really significant wave of rising mortality related to the famine. You're starting to see the front edges of that. To extend the hurricane analogy, I think what we're seeing right now is sort of like the outer bands of a category five hurricane beginning to make landfall in Florida. You know, the eye hasn't made landfall yet, but the outer bands are starting. And when you see, as we're now seeing, pictures of, young children dying of very obvious starvation, in extreme, extreme states of malnutrition, that tells you that unless there is a major shift, a major surge in aid to correct that and to change that situation, to change the fundamentals there, that it's the front edge of the wave of what's going to be a very large number of deaths. And so far the kind of aid operation that could contain that is not possible in Gaza. And so until there is a cease fire to enable that, I don't see a way that this famine is contained.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Jeremy Konyndyk, president of Refugees International.

Amanda Lewellyn and Avishay Artsy produced the program today. We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact-checked by Laura Bullard and Victoria Chamberlin, and mixed by David Herman.

I’m Sean Rameswarm and this is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]