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UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Rafah

20 May 2024

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

Thank you for this opportunity to brief you on the humanitarian situation in Gaza, which has only grown more urgent amid ongoing Israeli ground operations in and around Rafah since 6 May.

To be frank, we are running out of words to describe what is happening in Gaza. We have described it as a catastrophe, a nightmare, as hell on earth. It is all of these, and worse.

And living conditions continue to deteriorate as a result of heavy fighting, particularly in Jabalaya and eastern Rafah, as well as Israeli bombardment from air, land and sea.

The number of casualties continues to increase by the day. According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, more than 35,000 people have now been killed in the violence, and more than 79,000 injured. Around 17,000 children are unaccompanied or remain separated from their families.

Let me note here also the Israeli military announcement last week that it had recovered the bodies of four Israeli hostages from Gaza. It is estimated that 128 Israeli and foreign nationals remain captive in Gaza, including fatalities whose bodies are withheld.

And as you know, the extreme levels of violence have not spared the UN and humanitarian community. The Special Coordinator [Tor Wennesland] has just updated on the death of our UN colleague on the 13th of May: Yet another UN staff member was killed and another seriously injured when their UN vehicle came under attack while en route to the European Gaza Hospital in Khan Younis. We lost a father, a husband and a dedicated colleague with a distinguished career. This brings the number of UN staff killed in Gaza since the escalation of hostilities, again as has been said, to 193 staff.

We find it impossible to accept that people endeavouring to save lives are instead losing their lives.

Particularly as 1.1 million people face catastrophic levels of hunger and Gaza remains on the brink of famine. As of 18 May, just 10 bakeries are operational out of a total of 16 being supported by our humanitarian partners. However, it is expected that these will run out of stock and fuel within days if no additional supplies are received. The other six bakeries, all of which are in southern Gaza, have been forced to cease operation due to either shortages of fuel or because of ongoing hostilities.

The health-care system in Gaza is also under impossible strain. In Rafah, 21 medical points, four primary health-care centres, and four hospitals are now inaccessible. In the North, two hospitals, five primary health-care centres, and 16 medical points are inaccessible. These facilities all provided critical medical services, including trauma care, non-communicable disease management, kidney dialysis, and maternal and child health care.

An estimated 14,000 critical patients currently require medical evacuation out of Gaza. Prior to the closure of the Rafah crossing, medical evacuations had reached approximately 50 patients per day. This means nearly 700 patients have not been evacuated since the closure of the Rafah crossing.

Mr. President,

Since October 2023, 75 per cent of the population in Gaza – 1.7 million people – has been forcibly displaced within Gaza, many of them up to four or five times, including as a result of repeated IDF-issued evacuation instructions.

Some reports have also suggested that many thousands of Gazans may have crossed into Egypt and more are trying.

And in the past two weeks, more than 800,000 people have been displaced from Rafah into other areas of Gaza, in search of safety.

As the conflict persists and lives are threatened, civilians must be allowed to seek protection.

I must also emphasize, unequivocally, that persons forcibly displaced within or from Gaza must be guaranteed the right to voluntarily return, as international law demands.

Mr. President, distinguished Members of the Security Council,

Today, the once over-crowded camps and emergency shelters in Rafah have now largely emptied, with the majority of the displaced seeking refuge in Khan Younis and Deir al Balah.

But the situation that people are finding on their arrival at new sites in these areas is horrendous. There is exceedingly limited existing infrastructure – they lack adequate latrines, water points, drainage and shelter.

Civilians' essential needs must be met. For evacuated civilians, this means ensuring, to the greatest practicable extent, proper shelter and satisfactory minimum conditions of hygiene, health, safety and nutrition, and that members of the same family are not separated.

These appalling conditions leave serious doubt as to compliance with these basic obligations.

Mr. President,

The Rafah ground incursion is magnifying the impediments to an already fragile and beleaguered aid operation, as again has been said.

As of 17 May, the Rafah crossing remains closed and inaccessible for humanitarian cargo, fuel and personnel movement. This has prevented the entry of 82,000 metric tonnes of supplies, including critical food items and medicines.

Around 654,000 litres of fuel have entered the strip since the Rafah operation began on the 6th of May. This means on average we are receiving just one quarter

of the fuel allocations that we had prior to 6th of May, further impacting the functioning of bakeries, hospitals, water wells and other critical infrastructure.

The crossing at Kerem Shalom – which has been the main entry point for critical aid – remains open in principle but extremely difficult for aid organizations to access from the Gaza side due to hostilities, challenging logistical conditions, and complex coordination procedures.

Among the northern land routes, Erez crossing – opened from 1st to 9th May – has been closed since. The newly-opened Erez West, known as As Aiafa or Zikim, is now being used for limited quantities of aid, but now areas in the vicinity of this crossing are also under evacuation orders.

We welcome the first aid shipment delivered on 17 May via the floating dock set up by the United States. The maritime corridor hosted by Cyprus in line with resolution 2720 (2023) and with support from other Member States is an important adjunct to a comprehensive humanitarian operation in Gaza. But as we have stressed, land routes remain the most viable and effective way to deliver the scale of aid needed.

Mr. President,

The United Nations and our partners are committed to staying and delivering in Gaza, wherever civilians are in need, and we are configuring our operations to recent population movements. The United Nations Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator [Sigrid Kaag] is in active engagement with [relevant] parties to accelerate the provision of humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza through all possible routes. However, due to the current closure of the Rafah crossing and limited access via Kerem Shalom and other crossings, right now we lack the supplies and fuel to provide any meaningful level of support.

I can take you and the Council Members through the list of things we need. You have heard them before:

One: The toll of death, injury, destruction in Gaza is utterly unconscionable. We demand that civilians, their housing, and the vital infrastructure they depend on be protected, as international humanitarian law requires. All feasible precautions *must* be taken to avoid and minimize civilian harm.

Two: We need the facilitation of rapid, unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief into and within Gaza – also as a matter of international humanitarian law. All available access points must be open and kept open for a sustained period to allow aid to enter at scale.

Three: We also need to be assured of the protection of humanitarian and UN staff, all of whom are working under extreme conditions in Gaza. This requires the parties to take constant care throughout military operations, which the agreed humanitarian notification system aims to maximize. It also requires enabling a stable communications network.

Four: We need adequate funding, particularly for UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which is the central pillar of our aid operation. As of 20 May, the 2024 Flash Appeal is only 25 per cent funded. We urge donors to step forward with the funding [we need]. We are grateful for the funding already received.

But in all honesty, Mr. President, Members of the Council,

At this stage, and as has been said, it is only a humanitarian ceasefire and a halt in the ground incursion in Rafah that will fully protect civilians, create the conditions for humanitarians to work to provide assistance at the scale required, and stem the endlessly deepening toll of this travesty in Gaza.

So, our principal call today is for all parties, as a matter of urgency, to make genuine progress towards ceasefire, for the release of all remaining hostages, and for the Security Council and all Member States to use their influence to bring this humanitarian catastrophe to an end. Thank you.