

Secretary-General's press encounter on Gaza

30 Apr 2024

As Passover ends, I once again express my solidarity with the victims of the unconscionable Hamas terror attacks of 7 October, with the hostages, and with their families and friends.

Passover reminds us that the persecution of the Jews is as old as history itself. We all have a duty to speak out against all forms of antisemitism, in communities, in the media, and online.

Nearly seven months after 7 October, the situation for people in Gaza is worsening by the day.

I have called consistently for a humanitarian ceasefire, the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, and a massive surge in humanitarian aid.

Unfortunately, that has not happened – yet.

But negotiations are once again underway.

For the sake of the people of Gaza, for the sake of the hostages and their families in Israel, and for the sake of the region and the wider world, I strongly encourage the government of Israel and the Hamas leadership to reach now an agreement.

Without that, I fear the war, with all its consequences both in Gaza and across the region, will worsen exponentially.

Recent weeks have seen airstrikes on the Rafah area.

A military assault on Rafah would be an unbearable escalation, killing thousands more civilians and forcing hundreds of thousands to flee.

It would have a devastating impact on Palestinians in Gaza, with serious repercussions on the occupied West Bank, and across the wider region.

All members of the Security Council, and many other governments, have clearly expressed their opposition to such an operation. I appeal for all those with influence over Israel to do everything in their power to prevent it.

More than 1.2 million people are now seeking shelter in Rafah governorate, most of them fleeing the Israeli bombardment that has reportedly killed over 34,000 people. They have very little to eat, hardly any access to medical care, little shelter, and nowhere safe to go.

In northern Gaza, the most vulnerable – from sick children to people with disabilities – are already dying of hunger and disease.

We must do everything possible to avert an entirely preventable, human-made famine.

We have seen incremental progress recently, but much more is urgently needed – including the promised opening of two crossing points between Israel and northern Gaza, so that aid can be brought into Gaza from Ashdod port and Jordan.

Under international humanitarian law, civilians must be protected – and they must be able to receive the essentials they need to survive, including food, shelter, and health care.

A major obstacle to distributing aid across Gaza is the lack of security for humanitarians and the people we serve. Humanitarian convoys, facilities and personnel, and the people in need, must not be targets.

We welcome aid delivery by air and sea, but there is no alternative to the massive use of land routes.

I again call on the Israeli authorities to allow and facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded access for humanitarian aid and humanitarian workers, including UNRWA, throughout Gaza.

Dear members of the media,

The health system in Gaza has been decimated by the war. Two-thirds of hospitals and health centres are out of action; many of those that remain are seriously damaged.

Some hospitals now resemble cemeteries.

I am deeply alarmed by reports that mass graves have been discovered in several locations in Gaza, including Al Shifa Medical Complex and Nasser Medical Complex.

In Nasser alone, over 390 bodies have reportedly been exhumed.

There are competing narratives around several of these mass graves, including serious allegations that some of those buried were unlawfully killed.

It is imperative that independent international investigators, with forensic expertise, are allowed immediate access to the sites of these mass graves, to establish the precise circumstances under which hundreds of Palestinians lost their lives and were buried, or reburied.

The families of the dead and missing have a right to know what happened. And the world has a right to accountability for any violations of international law that may have taken place.

Hospitals, health workers, patients and all civilians must be protected and the human rights of all must be respected.

Dear members of the media,

I would like to conclude with a few words about UNRWA.

We recognize the irreplaceable and indispensable work of UNRWA to support millions of people in Gaza, the occupied West Bank including East Jerusalem, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Following the report by Ms. Catherine Colonna on mechanisms and procedures to ensure UNRWA's adherence to the humanitarian principle of neutrality, an action plan is being put in place to implement the recommendations of the report.

I appeal to donors, host countries and staff to cooperate with this effort.

Most countries have suspended contributions to UNRWA but many of them have resumed them. We are optimistic that others will join. And some Member States are giving to UNRWA for the first time and the generosity of private donors around the world is also heartening and unprecedented. But we still have a funding gap.

I call on Member States, both traditional and new donors, to pledge funds generously to ensure the continuity of the agency's operations.

UNRWA's presence across the region is a source of hope and stability. Its education, healthcare and other services provide a sense of normality, safety and stability to desperate communities.

Dear members of the media,

This is the moment to reaffirm our hope for, and contributions to, a two-state solution -- the only sustainable path to peace and security for Israelis, Palestinians, and the wider region.

The United Nations is totally committed to supporting a pathway to peace, based on an end to the occupation and the establishment of a fully independent, democratic, viable, contiguous, and sovereign Palestinian State, with Gaza as an integral part.

Thank you.

Question: Thank you, Secretary-General, Michelle Nichols from Reuters. You've mentioned, you've called a lot on countries with influence over Israel to prevent a Rafah assault, to help increase aid access. What leverage do you think the United States should use now to do that?

Secretary-General: I think it is very important to put all possible pressure in order to avoid what would be an absolutely devastating tragedy.

Spokesperson: Ibtisam?

Question: Thank you, Ibtisam Azem, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed Newspaper. I have first a question regarding... today, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, issued a statement, and he said he was troubled by the series of heavy-handed steps taken to dismantle protest actions at universities and campuses in the United States. Do you have comments on that? And then the second part of the question is regarding settlements and settler violence. And what do you want... would like to see countries doing in order to stop the next explosion that is probably around the corner there? Thank you.

Secretary-General: Well, first of all, I think it is essential in all circumstances to guarantee the freedom of expression and the freedom of peaceful demonstration. And at the same time, it is obvious that hate speech is unacceptable. Based on my experience in government, I believe it is up to the university authorities to have the wisdom to properly manage situations like the ones we have witnessed.

The second question: Settlements are illegal in themselves. Settlements are an obstacle to peace. Settlements are an obstacle to the two-state solution. And not only settlements are illegal, but the violence of settlers has been one of the most serious aggravating factors of the very dramatic situation that we have now in the West Bank. And obviously, this should also be a matter that would deserve full accountability.

Thank you.