

The Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council on the Middle East

18 Apr 2024

New York, 18 April 2024

[as delivered]

Mr. President, Excellencies,

The Middle East is on a precipice.

Recent days have seen a perilous escalation – in words and deeds.

One miscalculation, one miscommunication, one mistake, could lead to the unthinkable – a full-scale regional conflict that would be devastating for all involved – and for the rest of the world.

This moment of maximum peril must be a time for maximum restraint.

I reiterate my strong condemnation of the serious escalation represented by the large-scale attack launched by the Islamic Republic of Iran on Israel on 13 April. The use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations, is prohibited by the Charter.

And – as I stated earlier this month when I condemned the attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus – the principle of inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises and personnel must be respected in all cases, in accordance with international law.

It is high time to end the bloody cycle of retaliation.

It is high time to stop.

The international community must work together to prevent any actions that could push the entire Middle East over the edge, with a devastating impact on civilians.

Let me be clear: the risks are spiraling on many fronts.

We have a shared responsibility to address those risks and pull the region back from the precipice.

The way to do so is by advancing comprehensive diplomatic action for de-escalation in the Middle East.

Mr. President,

It starts with Gaza.

Ending the hostilities in Gaza would significantly defuse tensions across the region. I reiterate my calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the immediate release of all hostages held in Gaza.

The horrific terror attacks by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on 7 October, including mass killings, the use of sexual violence, torture, and the taking of hostages, were an intolerable denial of the most basic values of humanity, and a breach of the most fundamental rules of international law.

In Gaza, six and a half months of Israeli military operations have created a humanitarian hellscape. Tens of thousands of people have been killed. Two million Palestinians have endured death, destruction, and the denial of lifesaving humanitarian aid; they are now staring down on starvation. An Israeli operation in Rafah would compound this humanitarian catastrophe.

The casualty figures are overwhelming and unprecedented in speed and scale during my time as Secretary-General. According to UNICEF, more than 13,900 Palestinian children have reportedly been killed in intense, often indiscriminate attacks.

All this has happened with severe limitations imposed by the Israeli authorities on the delivery of humanitarian aid to people in Gaza, who are facing widespread starvation.

Israel recently made a number of commitments to improve aid delivery – and there have been some examples of limited progress.

Three WFP convoys with a total of 25 trucks were authorized to use the Erez Crossing in northern Gaza on 14, 15 and 16 April, to deliver food parcels and wheat flour.

The operating hours of Kerem Shalom and Nitsana crossings have been expanded from the Israeli side. But security concerns mean the hours could not be expanded to the same extent on the Gaza side.

Some bakeries have resumed operations in northern and central Gaza – the first to reopen in months.

But apparent progress in one area is often cancelled out by delays and restrictions elsewhere.

For example, although the Israeli authorities have cleared more aid convoys, those clearances are often granted when it is too late in the day to make deliveries and return safely. One can say that our personnel cannot operate in darkness in a war zone littered with unexploded ordnance.

So the impact is limited, and sometimes nil. The clearances increase, but there are continued obstacles to aid for people who are in desperate need.

During the week of 6-12 April, Israel denied more than 40 percent of UN requests that required passing through Israeli checkpoints.

We urgently need meaningful, measurable progress, including, for example, the unrestricted delivery of aid via Ashdod port and the restarting of the Nahal Oz water line.

To avert imminent famine, and further preventable deaths from disease, we need a quantum leap in humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza. Food is essential; so are clean water, sanitation, and healthcare.

This means addressing the challenges impeding delivery on the ground.

Humanitarian agencies, led by UNRWA which is the backbone of our operations, must be able to move food and other supplies safely and via all possible routes and crossings, into and throughout every part of Gaza.

That requires improved delivery systems around all supply routes and entry points.

Humanitarians also need security. Nearly 250 aid workers, including more than 180 of our own staff, have been killed in Gaza; I repeat my call for thorough investigations into these tragic deaths.

Just last week, a UNICEF vehicle travelling with a convoy was caught in crossfire.

Delivering aid at scale requires Israel's full and active facilitation of humanitarian operations, including through a functioning humanitarian notification system – and improved and direct communications between humanitarians and military decisionmakers on the ground.

This is essential and must be implemented immediately.

For the moment, our aid operations face enormous difficulties and are barely functional. They cannot operate in an organized, systematic way; they can only seize opportunities to deliver aid whenever and wherever possible.

And humanitarians alone cannot address the enormity of the needs in Gaza. The private sector is critical. Increasing commercial traffic is essential.

What is needed is clear: an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza; the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages; and the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid.

The international community has a shared responsibility to do everything possible to make this happen.

Mr. President,

A comprehensive de-escalation approach must also reverse the explosive situation in the occupied West Bank.

More than 450 Palestinians, including 112 children, have been killed in the occupied West Bank since 7 October – the majority by Israeli forces in the course of their operations, and in exchanges between Israeli forces and armed Palestinians.

Others were killed by armed Israeli settlers, sometimes in the presence of Israeli security forces who reportedly stood by and did nothing to prevent these killings.

Last year saw the highest number of such attacks, and incidents of violence and intimidation against Palestinian communities, since the United Nations began recording them in 2006.

Seventeen Israelis, including one child, have also been killed in the occupied West Bank and Israel since 7 October.

In addition to this number, the reported killing of a 14-year-old Israeli boy over the weekend set off another wave of armed settler attacks against at least 37 Palestinian villages in the occupied West Bank. Four Palestinians were killed, including a 17-year-old boy.

I condemn all violence against civilians.

I urge Israel to take immediate steps to end the unprecedented levels of settler violence, and to hold accountable those who have perpetrated such attacks.

And I call on Israel, as the occupying Power, to protect the Palestinian population of the occupied West Bank against attacks, violence and intimidation.

The backdrop to this appalling surge in violence is the continued expansion of Israeli settlements – in themselves a violation of international law – and repeated large-scale Israeli operations in Palestinian areas.

Declarations that areas now constitute Israeli State land, together with legal decisions that strengthen settlements and potentially increase demolitions and evictions, risk undermining the contiguity of a future Palestinian state and deny hope to a generation of Palestinians.

Israel and the international community must support and work with the new Palestinian Government to address its fiscal challenges, strengthening its governance capacity, and prepare it to reassume its responsibilities in Gaza in the future.

I urge all actors to recognize the critical role the Palestinian Authority should play in Gaza and work toward enabling its return [at] the appropriate time.

Mr. President,

The ultimate goal remains a two-state solution – Israel and Palestine living side-by-side in peace and security, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states, on the basis of UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

This means an end to the occupation and the establishment of a fully independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State, with Gaza as an integral part.

The international community has a responsibility and a moral obligation to help make this happen.

Mr. President,

Regional de-escalation efforts must also address the extremely fraught situation in Lebanon, particularly along the Blue Line.

Exchanges of fire between Israeli forces and Hizbullah are exacting a mounting toll on civilian communities in Israel and Lebanon. Dozens of civilians have been killed and tens of thousands displaced on both sides of the Blue Line.

These exchanges could take on a momentum of their own. Strikes deep into the territories of Lebanon and Israel could ignite an even more serious confrontation – as we have seen in the past.

I call on all parties to exercise maximum restraint and avoid further breaches of the cessation of hostilities under the framework of resolution 1701.

The United Nations stands ready to support the efforts of several countries to encourage de-escalation and to work towards a diplomatic solution.

Mr. President,

Regional de-escalation efforts must also ensure the safety of navigation on the Red Sea, respecting the rights and duties relating to maritime navigation in accordance with international law.

Houthi attacks on merchant and commercial shipping continue to disrupt global trade. They have been met with strikes by the United States and the United Kingdom.

Armed confrontations on this crucial waterway increase risks across the board: risks to supply chains; risks of an environmental disaster from a damaged cargo ship or oil tanker; risks of a serious escalation and a confrontation between major powers, with appalling political, security, economic and humanitarian repercussions.

All attacks on merchant and commercial shipping on the Red Sea must end immediately.

The international community must act together to prevent escalation in the Red Sea that would exacerbate tensions and undermine regional peace and security and international trade.

The people of Yemen must be supported towards a political process for a sustainable and just peace.

Mr. President,

The Middle East is on a knife-edge.

Recent escalations make it even more important to support good-faith efforts to find lasting peace between Israel and a fully independent, viable and sovereign Palestinian state.

Failure to make progress towards a two-State solution will only increase volatility and risk for hundreds of millions of people across the region, who will continue to live under the constant threat of violence.

I urge every Government involved to use its influence and leverage to promote trust-building, mutual security, and regional peace.

We have a shared moral obligation to advance a comprehensive Middle East de-escalation effort, in order to reduce risks, increase stability, and pave the way towards peace and prosperity for the countries and people of the region and beyond.

Thank you.