

UN Relief Chief briefing to the UN Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

12 Jan 2024

Mr. Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

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As prepared for delivery

Mr. President,

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

For nearly 100 days, what has been unfolding in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory is a war conducted with almost no regard for the impact on civilians.

In Gaza, the situation remains horrific as relentless Israeli military operations continue.

We can see this in the tens of thousands of people killed and injured, the vast majority women and children. According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, more than 23,000 people have now been killed and more than 58,000 injured since 7 October.

We can see it in the forced displacement of 1.9 million civilians, a staggering 85 per cent of the total population, traumatized and forced to flee again and again as the bombs and missiles rain down.

And we can see it in the appalling conditions on ground: shelters overflowing, and food and water running out, with the risk of famine growing by the day.

The health system is in a state of collapse. Women are unable to give birth safely. Children cannot get vaccinated. The sick and injured cannot get treatment. Infectious diseases are on the rise. And people have been seeking shelter and refuge in hospital yards.

Now winter has arrived in Gaza, bringing with it bitter cold, exacerbating the struggle to survive.

This makes it all the more deplorable that facilities critical to the survival of the civilian population have come under relentless attack.

134 UNRWA facilities have been hit and 148 UN personnel and NGO staff have been killed in Gaza. Humanitarian sites have been struck on numerous occasions, despite their identification and notification to the Israeli Defense Forces. In the last few days alone, two NGO premises have been hit.

Orders for evacuation are unrelenting. As ground operations move southwards, aerial bombardments have intensified in areas where civilians were told to relocate for their safety.

More and more people are being crammed into an ever-smaller sliver of land, only to find yet more violence and deprivation, inadequate shelter and a near absence of the most basic services.

Mr. President,

There is no safe place in Gaza. Dignified human life is a near impossibility.

Rafah, where the pre-crisis population was around just 280,000 people, is now home to 1 million displaced persons. And more continue to arrive every day.

Multiple families are crowded into single apartments with no running water or working toilets. Tents are pitched and improvised shelters are built wherever possible, including sidewalks, squares and in the middle of streets.

It is currently hard to imagine that people would or could move back northwards.

Our efforts to send humanitarian convoys to the North have been met with delays, denials, and the imposition of impossible conditions. The lack of respect for the humanitarian notification system puts every movement of aid workers in danger, as do the wholly insufficient quantities of armoured vehicles and the limited communications equipment that we have been allowed to bring in.

Colleagues who have managed to make it to the North in recent days describe scenes of utter horror: Corpses left lying in the road. People with evident signs of starvation stopping trucks in search of anything they can get to survive.

And even if people were able to return home, many no longer have homes to go to.

Mr. President,

Providing humanitarian assistance across Gaza is almost impossible.

Our access to Khan Younis and the Middle Area is largely absent.

In the South, an expansion of the offensive into Rafah would seriously challenge already overstretched humanitarian operations that require extraordinary measures just to deliver the most meager assistance.

And while we have seen some minor increase in the number of trucks entering via Rafah and Kerem Shalom, humanitarian supplies alone will not be able to sustain more than 2 million people. We cannot replace Gaza's commercial sector. Commercial goods must be let in, at scale.

A growing list of rejected items means we are unable to bring into Gaza supplies to rehabilitate life-sustaining infrastructure. The system for medical evacuation of patients to Egypt is also woefully inadequate in the face of the massive needs.

Mr. President,

In these circumstances, the spread of hostilities further southwards would significantly increase pressure for the mass displacement of people into neighbouring countries.

Some countries have already offered to host civilians who want to leave Gaza for their protection.

I want to emphasize that any persons displaced from Gaza must be allowed to return, as international law demands.

In this context, we are deeply alarmed by recent statements by Israeli ministers regarding plans to encourage the mass transfer of civilians from Gaza to third countries, currently being referred to as "voluntary relocation."

These statements raise grave concerns about the possible forcible mass transfer or deportation of the Palestinian population from the Gaza Strip, something that would be strictly prohibited under international law.

Any attempt to change the demographic composition of Gaza must be firmly rejected.

Mr. President,

While Gaza is the epicentre of this crisis, let us not forget the 1,200 people killed, thousands injured, and hundreds taken in the brutal attack by Hamas and other armed groups on Israel on 7 October, and the accounts of abhorrent sexual violence.

Rocket-fire continues into populated areas of Israel, causing more civilian casualties and trauma.

The families of the hostages have been waiting for the release of their loved ones for nearly 100 days, or at least for some information about their well-being. Unfortunately, since November no hostages have been released and no information has been shared with their families and loved ones.

More than 100,000 people have been displaced within Israel as a result of the 7 October attack by Hamas and other armed groups and due to ongoing rocket fire from armed groups in Gaza and Lebanon.

I remain extremely concerned by the risk of a further regional spread of this conflict. We are already seeing increasing tension and hostilities in the West Bank, where there have been continued Israeli raids against Palestinian towns and alarming increases in settler violence, resulting in death, displacement, and the demolition of homes.

And we are all aware of the increase in tensions and military activity in Lebanon, the Red Sea and Yemen. We cannot allow this to metastasize further – the consequences of a wider conflagration would be unimaginable.

Mr. President,

What we have seen since 7 October is a stain on our collective conscience. Unless we act, it will become an indelible mark on our humanity. People will continue to suffer and die from the rockets, the bombs, the missiles and the bullets; and in increasing numbers from starvation, disease and exposure.

We cannot let this happen.

I reiterate my call for far greater compliance with international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and the infrastructure they depend on; the provision of essentials for survival; the facilitation of humanitarian assistance at the scale required; and the humane treatment and immediate release of all hostages.

I reiterate my call for a ceasefire.

Most of all, I reiterate my call for this Council to take urgent action to bring this war to an end.

Thank you.