

Security Council briefing by Tom Fletcher, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, on the plight of children in the Gaza Strip

23 Jan 2025

Mr. Tom Fletcher, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

Briefing for the Security Council session: “On the plight of children in the Gaza Strip, given the gravity of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, which particularly hits the most vulnerable”

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[AS DELIVERED]

Mr. President and Members of the Security Council,

Today marks one of the rare times we are able to highlight positive developments, albeit amid catastrophic humanitarian needs in Gaza. The ceasefire has provided a vital reprieve from relentless hostilities for Palestinians.

It has at last allowed Israeli hostages and imprisoned Palestinians to be reunited with their families.

And it has enabled a massive surge in life-saving humanitarian aid into Gaza.

We can save more lives if all parties continue to honour the deal.

So I thank the mediators – Egypt, Qatar and the United States – for their tireless efforts to ensure this deal is upheld. I thank them for their help to mitigate operational obstacles as they arise.

Before I update the Council on what humanitarians have achieved during these first few days of the ceasefire, I must testify to what Palestinian children in Gaza have endured in the past 15 months.

Mr. President,

Children have been killed, starved and frozen to death.

They have been maimed, orphaned, separated from their family. Conservative estimates indicate that over 17,000 children are without their families in Gaza.

Some died before their first breath – perishing with their mothers in childbirth. An estimated 150,000 pregnant women and new mothers are in desperate need of health services.

Children have lost their schools and their education. Those with chronic illnesses have struggled to access the care they need, many unable to do so.

Many have faced sexual violence. Girls, who have endured the additional indignity of no menstrual care, have been left exposed and vulnerable.

One million children are in need of mental health and psychosocial support for depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts, according to UNICEF.

A generation has been traumatized.

Mr. President,

Against the backdrop of this horror, the UN and our partners are seizing every opportunity presented by the ceasefire to step up our response across the Strip.

Safe, unobstructed humanitarian access, alongside the absence of hostilities and the almost complete cessation of criminal looting over the past days, have significantly improved our ability to operate.

We have been able to increase the flow of incoming supplies and deliveries, scale up storage capacity and repair work, provide life-saving services, and carry out needs and damage assessments.

We are getting supplies to designated emergency shelters and distribution centres across the Gaza Strip.

We are delivering food parcels and flour and working to reopen bakeries.

We are distributing fuel to ensure that critical services – healthcare, water pumping – can run on back-up generators, in the absence of electricity.

Across the spectrum, humanitarian organizations and agencies have united to meet our humanitarian goals. At the centre of this, as always, is UNRWA.

But we cannot do this alone.

Surging high volumes of aid into Gaza requires a collective effort. All of Gaza – more than 2 million people – depends on our humanitarian support.

So it is critical that the pipelines of stocks are regularly replenished, including by Member States. Aid efforts must urgently be complemented by the private sector.

Mr. President,

While we spare no effort to scale up in Gaza, we must also keep attention on the West Bank.

As we briefed this Council, since October 2023, the West Bank has witnessed record-high levels of casualties, displacement and access restrictions.

These trends have intensified since the announcement of the ceasefire.

Israeli settlers have attacked Palestinian villages, setting homes and properties on fire. Increased movement restrictions are impeding Palestinians' ability to access basic services and livelihoods. Mass detentions are taking place across the West Bank.

Of particular concern is the situation in Jenin, where an Israeli military operation – helicopter gunfire and airstrikes alongside ground forces – has claimed lives and caused further destruction of basic infrastructure and displacement.

This follows the weeks-long operation by the Palestinian Authority, during which access restrictions and confrontations with armed Palestinians triggered displacement of some 2,000 families from the camp and claimed numerous lives.

Mr. President,

After months without hope, we must seize this present moment. So I leave you with three asks:

First, I urge this Council to ensure that the ceasefire is maintained.

Second, I urge this Council to ensure that international law is respected across the Occupied Palestinian Territory of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Civilians must be protected and their essential needs must be met.

All hostages must be released. Arbitrarily detained Palestinians must be freed. Detainees must be treated humanely and allowed visits by the ICRC.

Civilians must be allowed to return safely to their homes.

They must be able to access life-saving aid. This includes medical evacuations for the wounded and sick who need it. I urge Member States to take in those patients.

We need rapid, unimpeded and safe access for the humanitarian community to be sustained. We can deliver when we are given the chance to do so. UNRWA's role is fundamental and must remain the backbone of these efforts.

Restrictions on critical humanitarian items must be lifted, including items considered to be "dual use." There must be accountability for atrocities, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

And third and finally, Member States must ensure that our humanitarian operations are well-funded. Our 2025 Flash Appeal requires \$4.07 billion to meet the needs of 3 million people in Gaza and the West Bank, with nearly 90 per cent of funds for Gaza.

Funding this appeal is essential to meet massive needs, and to sustain the ceasefire.

Mr. President, the children of Gaza are not collateral damage. They are as deserving as children everywhere of security, education and hope. They tell us that the world was not there for them throughout this war. We must be there for them now.

Thank you.