



Thousands of people and families in the Gaza Strip are gathering in front of Rafah crossing border, amid escalating hostilities. 16 October 2023. UNICEF

We need immediate, safe humanitarian access across all of Gaza, UN relief chief tells Security Council

18 Oct 2023

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mr. Martin Griffiths' briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question:

Thank you very much for inviting me, and what I was saying was what an honour it is for me to be on the same podium as [UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process] Tor [Wennesland].

And I associate myself profoundly with every single word that he has said, which is born out of years of relevant experience, including not just looking at the horrors of the last 11 days, but anxiously looking ahead at the horrors to come, so all credit to Special Coordinator Tor Wennesland.

But I also, of course, join him and all members of the Council in expressing my horror and despair at the explosion that he described watching, as so many of us did, at the Al Ahli Anglican Episcopal Hospital in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday evening.

My heartfelt condolences, of course, go out to the grieving families affected by this heart-wrenching tragedy, and I also extend my sincerest wishes for a swift and complete recovery to all those who have been injured.

According to the World Health Organization, the hospital in question was one of 20 in northern Gaza subject to the announcement by the Israeli authorities that civilians should leave for their safety. It's a terrible thought, to think of that the morning after.

However, evacuation for many had simply not been possible due to insecurity – as we have been discussing in this chamber this afternoon – the critical condition of many of the patients, and indeed, the lack of ambulances, staff and capacity in the rest of the health system, which as you know, Mr. President, is on its knees in Gaza.

When that hospital was hit, it was fully operational. And indeed, it had reached its maximum capacity. It was, therefore, overflowing with patients, including women and children. Dozens of health care providers and caregivers, demonstrating their extraordinary, frankly extraordinary, courage and commitment to remain sur place, remain there to do their duties and to remain steadfast by their patients' sides, and they were also in the building.

And the hospital was also hosting numerous internally displaced people who either had nowhere else to go or were sheltering there in the expectation, or at least perhaps the hope, that it would provide safety.

And they were wrong. So far, reports indicate hundreds of fatalities, hundreds of civilians and health care workers – and I associate myself with [Special Coordinator] Tor [Wennesland]'s call for a fact-based inquiry to find out how this happened.

Here, I want to say one thing of the highest importance to all of us in the humanitarian community and those of us – all of us, indeed – who are governed by the rules of war and international humanitarian law.

What happened on the 7th of October in the invasion into Israel and the taking of those hostages, still taken and hidden away in Gaza, was simply wrong, against the law, unconscionable, unacceptable. Their unconditional release is an essential component of any return to the kind of normalcy that [Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations] Lana [Nusseibeh] was describing to us earlier before this session started.

Since the 7th of October, 28 health workers in Gaza have reportedly been killed, 23 have been injured. There's no lack of courage. There's no lack of commitment in that population. There have been many reports of health facilities sustaining extensive damage – indeed, the hospital itself had already been struck, as you know, on the 14th of October.

Gaza's health services, as I've been hearing here in Cairo this last day or two, are being overwhelmed by the extreme challenge of meeting the healthcare needs of the rising number of wounded patients, all the while facing significant shortages of medical supplies, water and fuel.

And the destruction of that hospital yesterday heaped further pressure on this crumbling, this failing, this sad health care system. Not only were the victims rushed to Shifa Hospital, one of the many other hospitals in Gaza on the verge of collapse, but it also now deprives Gaza of a facility that cared for more than 45,000 patients a year before the current hostilities.

So I am compelled to reiterate – and this will not surprise anybody, as everyone else has done on many occasions in this Council – that under international humanitarian law, there are simple requirements. There are simple rules of war, which are applied to all of us, whatever the provocation, and God knows there has been provocation.

Parties to armed conflict must protect civilians and civilian objects, take constant care to spare them from any attack. We have discussed this in almost every other conflict in this chamber around the world – this one is no different.

International law affords specific protection to medical personnel and facilities to ensure the wounded and sick receive the medical care they need. It was no coincidence that one of the first humanitarian leaders on the scene after those events of the 7th of October was our dear friend and leader, Dr. Tedros [Adhanom Ghebreyesus], of WHO.

It's imperative that the wounded and the sick receive the medical care they need. It is imperative that the parties respect their obligations under international humanitarian law, and it is our collective responsibility – we are all involved in this, we are not observers, we are all involved – in using all our influence to ensure that this is the case.

This tragedy is characteristic of the crushing impact this conflict has had on civilians – and as [Special Coordinator] Tor [Wennesland] has been pointing out, and [Ambassador] Lana [Nusseibeh] earlier – the catastrophic consequences it will have if it continues to escalate as we fear.

In just 11 days since that storming of Israel by Palestinian armed groups on the 7th of October, the death toll, as has been mentioned, has already exceeded that of the 2014 hostilities, which lasted more than seven weeks. The pace of death, of suffering, of destruction, of breaches of international law cannot be exaggerated.

In Gaza, more than 3,000 people have been killed. More than 12,500 injured. Hundreds are unaccounted for under the rubble, and quite frankly, we do not know how many have moved from the north to the south to get out of harm's way.

The death toll also, we all know this well, includes humanitarians. I want to pay tribute to the 15 UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] staff, and Red Cross and Red Crescent personnel that I've been meeting these days, families of those who have fallen.

We estimate that maybe up to a million people have fled their homes to other parts of Gaza, but we don't really know. Many have done so, in response, indeed, to Israel's announcement that civilians should leave northern Gaza for safety.

But there is simply nowhere to go for civilians to escape the destruction and privation, both of which grow by the hour as missiles continue to fly and essential supplies, including fuel, food, medical items, water, run low.

Due to the scarcity of water, UNRWA in some locations – and I want to pay a special tribute to UNRWA for the way in which it's provided a buffer against suffering in these terrible times –

and then UNRWA in some locations is being forced to ration down to providing one litre of water per person per day. Bear in mind that the minimum by international standards should be 15 litres, and they're getting one – and they're the lucky ones.

People have been increasingly forced to consume from unsafe sources – we're hearing many, many more reports of that through UNRWA and other agencies – placing the population at risk, of course, of the outbreak of waterborne diseases.

And whether civilians move or stay – and that must be their decision, whether to move or stay, whether to move again or stay where they have moved to – whether they move or stay, they must be protected. They must not be attacked in places of civilian infrastructures. They must be protected in places of deconfliction, and they must have access to the essentials of humanitarian assistance to survive, which are available and in which we have all spent many, many detailed hours in detailed negotiations with the parties, and I'm grateful to them, to all of them, for the commitment that they have shown to these negotiations.

It means that the UN and the humanitarian partners – and I specifically refer to the great leadership shown, and I met their leaders today, of the Egyptian Red Crescent and the Palestinian Red Crescent – must be able to deliver relief to civilians in need throughout Gaza, without impediment, in places of their choice, in places where they consider themselves to be safe and where we can seek to ensure that safety.

We have humanitarian supplies; we have medical teams. UNRWA has a staff of 14,000 in Gaza still bravely working under these conditions. The other agencies do – the Red Crescents, of course, have many, many, many volunteers – and they are all ready to assist the people most in need.

I'm very grateful to many Member States for providing, very quickly, emergency funding available for the immediate relief in Gaza, including from the Central Emergency Response Fund that my Office runs, and the occupied [Palestinian] territory Humanitarian Fund. Thank you. Thank you to all of you who stepped up so quickly.

What we don't have, however, we have a lot, but what we don't have, and it's the killer, and what we desperately need, is immediate, safe humanitarian access across all of Gaza. And that is the burden of our discussions with key parties.

We urgently need a mechanism agreed by all relevant parties to allow for the regular provision of emergency needs throughout Gaza to get the level of distribution of assistance up to what it was before these terrible weeks – of 100 trucks a day providing assistance throughout Gaza to people in need. We need to get back to that level of ambition.

For that, we need additional funding. Agencies like UNRWA, the World Food Programme and, of course, for the Red Crescents in their leadership role, without new funding UNRWA – already painfully, woefully, lacking in funds – will not have the ability to continue to deliver core services.

Mr. President,

As [Special Coordinator] Tor [Wennesland] said, and I'm glad he did, and he made two, I think, very important points. Gaza is not the only location of concern in this deeply troubling conflict.

Since the start of the latest hostilities, the situation in the West Bank has also been deteriorating, as [Special Coordinator] Tor [Wennesland] said, and he should know. Last week was the deadliest week for Palestinians in the West Bank since the United Nations started reporting fatalities in 2005, while settler violence incidents also have gone up from an average of three incidents a day to eight. Suffering knows no borders. Widespread closures throughout the West Bank are impacting the ability of communities to access essential services.

And there is a real risk of the situation spiraling out of control.

What the people of Israel, Palestine, the region need – what we all need, what this Council's mandate is in existence to secure – is for sanity and humanity to prevail, drawing on the provisions of international humanitarian law, for urgent efforts, this was [Special Coordinator] Tor [Wennesland]'s second point, to arrest any further descent in this brutal calamity.

[Ambassador] Lana [Nusseibeh] said it very eloquently, the worry that I suppose many of us have: Where will this lead us? Where will this lead us when the fighting has taken place?

Of course, we implore the parties to respect international humanitarian law. And, by the way, I want to be very clear that a humanitarian ceasefire would go a long way to easing the epic human suffering.

Finally, Mr. President, and I know I have gone on too long,

I want to conclude by expressing my deepest admiration, gratitude and comity for the extraordinary people who are delivering life-saving and humanitarian services in Gaza, in the West Bank, as they do in so many other parts of the world, many of whom are displaced, many have lost loved ones. Many of our staff, in all our agencies have had that kind of suffering.

The dedication and bravery of ambulance crews, health care professionals, people working in hospitals and clinics, actually is a reminder of the fundamentals of humanity which drive our efforts to resolve these differences, to resolve them through diplomacy, through dialogue, through kindness, through generosity, and through accountability.

I also want to express my profound personal gratitude – I have said it also already for [Special Coordinator] Tor [Wennesland], but also to my colleague and his colleague, our Deputy Special Coordinator, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, somebody with a title as long as mine, Lynn Hastings, and the humanitarians who are demonstrating unwavering commitment to providing essential assistance and relief.

Their collective efforts, their unstinting focus on key priorities, which are based on operational needs, exemplifies – not just the United Nations' enduring commitment to extending hope and support – but exemplifies the commitment of the humanitarian community and its supporters, all of whom are in this room, to do the job that they have decided and resolved to choose for their lives.

Mr. President, thank you very much.