

Secretary-General's statement to the press - on the Middle East

15/01/24

Good afternoon.

More than 100 days have passed since the horrific 7 October attacks by Hamas that claimed the lives of more than one thousand Israelis and others, and resulted in the brutal seizing of hostages.

Every day I think of the anguish of the families I met.

I once again demand the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. In the interim, they must be treated humanely and allowed to receive visits and assistance from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The accounts of sexual violence committed by Hamas and others on October 7th must be rigorously investigated and prosecuted.

Nothing can justify the deliberate killing, injuring and kidnapping of civilians – or the launching of rockets towards civilian targets.

At the same time, the onslaught on Gaza by Israeli forces over these 100 days has unleashed wholesale destruction and levels of civilian killings at a rate that is unprecedented during my years as Secretary-General.

The vast majority of those killed are women and children.

Nothing can justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is beyond words. Nowhere and no one is safe.

Traumatized people are being pushed into increasingly limited areas in the south that are becoming intolerably and dangerously congested.

While there have been some steps to increase the flow of humanitarian assistance into Gaza, life-saving relief is not getting to people who have endured months of relentless assault at anywhere near the scale needed.

The long shadow of starvation is stalking the people of Gaza – along with disease, malnutrition and other health threats.

I am deeply troubled by the clear violation of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing.

Last week, Under-Secretary-General Sigrid Kaag began her work as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza – in line with Security Council Resolution 2720.

I ask all states and parties to the conflict for their full cooperation, as she also works with members of the Security Council and regional actors to deliver on the mandate set in the resolution.

An effective aid operation in Gaza – or anywhere else -- requires certain basics.

It requires security.

It requires an environment where staff can work in safety.

It requires the necessary logistics and the resumption of commercial activity.

The obstacles to aid are clear – and they have been identified not only by the UN, but by officials from around the globe who have seen the situation for themselves.

First, the United Nations and our partners cannot effectively deliver humanitarian aid while Gaza is under such heavy, widespread and unrelenting bombardment.

This endangers the lives of those who receive aid – and those who deliver it.

The vast majority of our Palestinian staff in Gaza have been forced to flee their homes.

Since October 7th, 152 UN staff members have been killed in Gaza – the largest single loss of life in the history of our organization -- a heart-wrenching figure and a source of deep sorrow.

Still, aid workers, under enormous pressure and with no safety guarantees, are doing their best to deliver inside Gaza.

We continue to call for rapid, safe, unhindered, expanded and sustained humanitarian access into and across Gaza.

Second, the aid operation faces significant hurdles at the Gaza border.

Vital materials – including life-saving medical equipment and parts which are critical for the repair of water facilities and infrastructure – have been rejected with little or no explanation, disrupting the flow of critical supplies and the resumption of basic services.

And when one item is denied, the time-consuming approval process starts again from scratch for the entire cargo.

Third, the aid operation faces major impediments to distribution within Gaza.

This includes repeated denials of access to the north, where hundreds of thousands of people remain.

Since the start of the year, just 7 of 29 missions to deliver aid to the north have been able to proceed.

Large stretches of agreed routes cannot be used due to heavy fighting and debris, with unexploded ordnance also threatening convoys.

Humanitarian notification systems to maximize the safety of aid operations are not being respected.

In addition, frequent telecommunications blackouts means humanitarian workers cannot seek out the safest roads, coordinate aid distribution or track the movements of displaced people who need assistance.

We are seeking to ramp up the response – but we need basic conditions in place.

The parties must respect international humanitarian law – respect and protect civilians, and ensure their essential needs are met.

And there must be an immediate and massive increase in the commercial supply of essential goods.

The UN and humanitarian partners cannot alone provide basic necessities that should also be available in markets to the entire population.

Ladies and gentlemen of the media,

Meanwhile, the cauldron of tensions in the occupied West Bank is boiling over with heightened violence compounding an already dire fiscal crisis for the Palestinian Authority.

Tensions are also sky-high in the Red Sea and beyond – and may soon be impossible to contain.

I have serious concerns about daily exchanges of fire across the Blue Line.

This risks triggering a broader escalation between Israel and Lebanon and profoundly affecting regional stability.

Tens of thousands of people in northern Israel and southern Lebanon have been displaced by the fighting and humanitarian access in Lebanon continues to be constrained.

I am profoundly worried by what is unfolding.

It is my duty to convey this simple and direct message to all sides:

Stop playing with fire across the Blue Line, de-escalate, and bring hostilities to an end in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1701.

Ladies and gentlemen of the media,

I have outlined concerns about a wide range of issues: the unprecedented level of civilian casualties and catastrophic humanitarian conditions in Gaza; the fate of the hostages; the tensions that are spilling [over] across the region.

There is one solution to help address all these issues.

We need an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

To ensure sufficient aid gets to where it is needed.

To facilitate the release of the hostages.

To tamp down the flames of wider war because the longer the conflict in Gaza continues, the greater the risk of escalation and miscalculation.

We cannot see in Lebanon what we are seeing in Gaza.

And we cannot allow what has been happening in Gaza to continue.

Thank you.