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SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
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Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Thank you for inviting me to address the Council on recent developments in Rafah, where the situation is becoming increasingly desperate and dangerous for the already besieged population.

Regrettably we face yet another precipice of further catastrophe in Gaza amid stalled talks between the parties to secure the release of all hostages held in Gaza and a ceasefire to provide much needed relief to the civilian population. Just two weeks ago negotiations were ongoing in Cairo with the support of Egypt, Qatar and the United States, however, these talks ended on 9 May without agreement.

I urge the parties to redouble all efforts and return to the negotiating table immediately and in good faith. I reiterate the United Nations' full support to the tireless efforts by the mediators to achieve this goal and we stand ready to support implementation of such a deal. If talks do not resume, I fear for the worst for the beleaguered and terrified civilians in Rafah, for the hostages held in unimaginable conditions for more than 225 days, and for an overstretched humanitarian operation that remains on the brink inside the Strip.

Mr. President,

My colleague from OCHA will brief in greater details on the dire humanitarian situation in and around Rafah momentarily but allow me to highlight some critical observations from the ground.

Since the first week of May, the security situation in Rafah has rapidly worsened as the IDF operations and military maneuvers in and around the city have intensified.

On 5 May, Hamas launched mortars and rockets at IDF soldiers massed on the Israeli side of Karem Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing, killing four IDF soldiers and wounding ten. IDF tank shelling and a series of airstrikes in Rafah killed at least 19 Palestinians on the same day, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza. The following day, the IDF said that it would operate with "extreme force" against Hamas in eastern Rafah and ordered approximately 100,000 Palestinians to immediately evacuate to what it described as an "expanded humanitarian area in Al-Mawasi." Since operations began, more than 800,000 people have been displaced from Rafah to Mawasi, Khan Younis and Deir al Balah amid daily IDF airstrikes in Rafah, killing dozens of Palestinians. Hamas has continued to fire rockets indiscriminately from Gaza towards Israel.

These events have had a significant impact on humanitarian operations and access.

The so-called expanded humanitarian area in al-Mawasi lacks adequate shelter, food, water and sewage infrastructure and crossings for the entry of humanitarian goods have already been directly affected.

In the wake of the Hamas strike on 6 May, Israeli authorities closed Karem Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing for three days. The following day, the IDF said it had established “operational control of the Gazan side of the [Rafah] crossing,” and closed the crossing for the movement of goods and people. The Rafah crossing with Egypt remains closed.

In addition, active hostilities and IDF operations continue to render nowhere safe in Gaza, including for humanitarian workers. Just last week a staff member of the UN Department of Safety and Security from India died and another staff member was seriously injured when their UN vehicle was struck as they travelled to the European Hospital in Rafah Governorate. This brings to a total 193 UN staff who have been killed in Gaza since the start of hostilities. Humanitarian movements must be made safer.

Mr. President,

I am deeply concerned that the current trajectory – including the possibility of a larger-scale operation – will further undermine efforts to scale-up the entry of humanitarian goods and their safe distribution to desperate civilians.

The opening of the Zikim or Erez West crossing in Gaza’s north, including for the entry of humanitarian relief items arriving via Ashdod and from Jordan, is a welcome development, as is the entry for the first time of humanitarian supplies through Cyprus via the US-built floating pier on 18 May.

However, I reiterate, that more aid is needed to meet the enormous scale of the needs in Gaza and there is no substitute for the full and increased operation of existing land crossings.

The UN continue to engage with all concerned parties, including the Israeli authorities, to address these and other safety concerns, including an improved humanitarian notification system.

Mr. President,

The Secretary-General, alongside numerous international partners and concerned neighbors, including Egypt, have voiced serious objection to a military operation in the city of Rafah amid clear indications of its devastating consequences for the civilian population.

Saving lives and addressing the critical needs in Rafah and Gaza more broadly must remain our immediate priority and I reiterate the Secretary-General’s call for a humanitarian ceasefire.

At the same time, we must not lose sight of the risks that these immediate threats pose to prospects for a resolution of this conflict and for longer term peace and stability in the region.

I am very concerned that the failure to reach a ceasefire in Gaza and a large-scale military operation in Rafah exacerbates the risk of escalating regional tensions. Since the start of hostilities on 7 October, I have engaged continuously in the region, including in Lebanon, to avert a wider spillover and I – in support of the Secretary-General – will continue these efforts.

I also reiterate that there can be no long-term solution in Gaza that is not fundamentally political.

The new Palestinian Government, with eight ministers from Gaza, represents an important opportunity to support tangible steps towards unifying Gaza and the occupied West Bank politically, economically, administratively.

The international community should provide support to the new Government to address its fiscal challenges, strengthen its governance capacity and prepare it to reassume its responsibilities in Gaza and, ultimately, govern the whole of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. The Palestinian Authority must also be an integral part of planning for Gaza's recovery and reconstruction.

The devastation and misery of the past seven months have reinforced a simple truth. Palestinians and Israelis can no longer wait to establish a viable political horizon to end the conflict and establish a two-State solution. Day after day we are witnessing the deadly consequences of inaction. Now is the time to lay the foundations for a better future for Palestinians, Israelis and the broader region. The UN will continue to support all such efforts.

Thank you.