

**Full transcript of Secretary-General's remarks at press encounter with  
Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry of Egypt  
Cairo, Egypt  
24 March 2024**

Assalam alaikum,

My dear friend, Minister [Sameh] Shoukry, thank you very much for your warm welcome.

Egypt is a global pillar of peace – and today I had the opportunity to discuss a number of vital issues with both President Sisi and the Foreign Minister Shoukry.

This includes the dire conditions in Gaza, but also the volatile situation in the occupied West Bank, and issues affecting the broader Middle East, Sudan and beyond.

My visit is part of a Ramadan solidarity mission that I undertake every year to Muslim communities in distress.

And I want to tell you that yesterday, I had a moment of deep sadness.

During this Ramadan solidarity visit I fast, out of respect for the beliefs of the communities I am visiting. And we had an Iftar with Sudanese refugees here in Cairo to express my solidarity also with the Sudanese people.

And immense sadness came when we were having our Iftar close to the Nile, to know that many - probably the majority of the people in Gaza - were not able to have a proper Iftar.

Yesterday I travelled to the Rafah crossing to put a global spotlight on the plight of Palestinian children, women and men struggling to survive the nightmare in Gaza.

The whole world recognizes that it's past time to silence the guns and to ensure an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

I also had an unforgettable visit with injured Palestinians from Gaza at the Al Arish hospital who are recovering from wounds from the brutal war – and I thank Egypt's generosity here as well.

Let me be clear. Nothing justifies the abhorrent October 7 Hamas attacks and hostage-taking in Israel.

But nothing justifies the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

And I want to recognize the vital political and humanitarian role of Egypt.

Al Arish airport and the Rafah crossing are essential arteries for life-saving aid into Gaza.

But those arteries are clogged.

On one side of the border there are blocked humanitarian trucks as far as the eye can see.

On the other, we have a real-time humanitarian catastrophe stretching even further.

Looking at Gaza, it almost appears that the four horsemen of war, famine, conquest and death are galloping across it.

That is why the time for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire is now.

And in the Ramadan spirit of compassion, I also urge the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

The suffering must end.

Palestinians in Gaza desperately need what has been promised -- a flood of aid.

Not trickles. Not drops.

Some progress has been made, but much more needs to be done.

Making that happen takes very practical steps.

It requires Israel removing the remaining obstacles and chokepoints to relief.

It requires more crossings and access points. All alternative routes are – of course - welcome. But the only efficient and effective way to move heavy goods is by road.

It requires an exponential increase in commercial goods.

And, I repeat, it requires an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

The current horrors in Gaza serve no one – and are having an impact around the globe.

The daily assault on the human dignity of Palestinians is creating a crisis of credibility for the international community.

It is challenging the values we proclaim as universal.

It is challenging international law.

It is challenging core humanitarian principles.

It is challenging our basic humanity.

Ladies and gentlemen of the media,

We face trials and tests on many fronts.

Yesterday evening, as I mentioned, I had the honour of breaking the fast at an Iftar with refugees who fled from the conflict in Sudan.

I was deeply moved by their heartbreaking stories of unspeakable suffering and perilous journeys – and was also profoundly inspired by their enormous resilience.

It is outrageous to see the war raging during the holy month of Ramadan, despite global appeals for a ceasefire.

Since the war erupted in Sudan a year ago, Egypt has generously welcomed more than 500,000 Sudanese refugees, and I know that you have already five million other ones.

I thank Egypt for hosting these and so many other vulnerable migrants and refugees and urge the international community to step up its support for Egypt's efforts.

I also want to take this opportunity to urge all countries to ensure the integrity of the international refugee protection regime and the rights of all persons on the move.

Once again, dear Foreign Minister, I pay tribute to your country's leadership in these difficult times – and, through you, allow me to salute the people of Egypt for their generosity and commitment to the values of compassion, peace, and solidarity – the values of Ramadan.

Thank you.

Question [from Arabic]: Three months have passed since UNSC Resolution 2720 was passed, that states that Sigrid Kaag is assigned to work as a humanitarian coordinator and reconstruction. Until today she can't fulfill her assignment. Do you intend to brief the Security Council regarding that. Then what is your message regarding the starvation in Gaza, and what would you say about the allegations against UNRWA?

SG: We all know that we have geopolitical divisions that make it very difficult for the Security Council to approve meaningful resolutions. At the same time, we all know that the superpowers are at odds with each other. And when the superpowers are at odds with each other, there is a sense of impunity, there is lack of respect, and we see that even the resolutions of the Security Council tend not to be respected. And indeed, there is a lot to be done in relation to the unfettered access, unfettered access of humanitarian aid to Gaza to allow for the Security Council resolutions to be fully respected.

Your last question was sorry.

Question: Your message regarding UNRWA.

SG: So, I have to say that we are working hard, in order on one hand to guarantee that there is donor support to UNRWA, that is the backbone of humanitarian aid inside Gaza.

And at the same time, we were very clear, we have an inspection that is working in order to detect any areas of infiltration that might exist. We want UNRWA to be fully based on UN values agency, and we are working in a determined way for that.

And on the other hand, we have a review that is being conducted in order to improve the capacity of UNRWA to fully respect those values.

But I think it's important to say that UNRWA plays a vital role, and it's important to pay tribute to all the staff of UNRWA. 171 members of the staff of UNRWA were killed in Gaza. This should deserve the respect of everybody. And UNRWA should be recognized as an essential factor in humanitarian aid, not only in Gaza, but playing a vital role in Jordan, in Syria, in Lebanon and in the West Bank.

Question: Israel yesterday accused you, accused the UN, of being an anti-Israeli entity. They are accusing UNRWA of working with Hamas. How are you intending to deal with these incidents, how does it effect to support the Palestinians. And about the Catherine Colonna report..  
[interrupted by moderator]

SG: What is your question?

Question: So, my question is, how this is affecting your ability to support Palestinians and how you are? How do you...

SG: No, the Colonna report, what is the question?

Question: The Colonna report, in the initial report they talk about measures to be taken, are these in any way related to the Israeli claims against UNRWA?

SG: In relation to the first question, to what extent these kind of accusations have an impact on our work, my answer is very simple; there is no impact at all, we are not against anybody. We are in favour of principles and values; principles and values that are the UN Charter; principles and values that are in international law; principles and values that are in international humanitarian law; principles and values that have to do with the right of self-determination; and namely the right of the self-determination of the Palestinian people, and the right to exist - a Palestinian State.

These are the reasons why we work. And it's based on these principles, that we do what we do. If someone feels that this is against someone, that is not our problem. We will stick to the values that I believe are the universal values that should guide us all.

At the same time, naturally we regret when there are situations of harassment when there are blockages, when there are all kinds of difficulties, but again, that will not impact negatively on our determination to go on supporting the Palestinian people in distress.

Now, in relation to UNRWA, any organization has the possibility that at a certain moment [will] suffer an infiltration.

I was living my life, my first life, as a politician in Portugal, and before there was a period of dictatorship, and at that time, I remember the secret police of the state was infiltrating the opposition parties. And it's perfectly possible that in any entity, in UNRWA, there might have been infiltrations from Hamas, and we recognize that those infiltrations led with a certain credibility to participation of some of these elements in the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>. We recognized that, and we took measures.

Those that we have credible, credible perception that it was true, were immediately separated. We put a team of investigators working hard to detect any other possible source of infiltration. And at the same time, we asked Catherine Colonna and a group of Institutes of the Nordic countries to do an analysis of the conditions in which UNRWA operates, and how to strengthen its capacity to abide by the UN humanitarian principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality, as all humanitarian entities must abide by.

And obviously, nobody's perfect. UNRWA is not perfect, the UN is not perfect. Any other organization is not perfect. We will look seriously into the recommendations that will be presented and we want to strengthen the UNRWA in its capacity to deliver to the Palestinian people, and in its capacity to be fully in line with the UN values as it is the firm determination of the leadership of UNRWA that is represented here by Philippe Lazzarini.

Question [from Arabic]: Is the UN restricted when dealing with Israel? Did you try to go into Gaza, and you were prevented from that?

SG: I'm not sure if I understood well, because of the difficulty [in the audio]. But if I'm not responding well, you will please ask again.

It is clear for me that the basic principle of international humanitarian law is the protection of civilians. And when one looks at the way the military operations have been conducted in Gaza, it is obvious that protection of civilians was not a concern. And it was always that there were violations of international humanitarian law, as to take hostages is a violation of international humanitarian law. But it is clear to me that the way the military operations have been conducted are in violation of international humanitarian law.

It is also clear that humanitarian aid and humanitarian access must be always guaranteed and there are Security Council resolutions on top of that, that insist on that fact. To obstruct humanitarian aid is also a clear violation of essential principles.

Question: Did you try to go into Gaza, and was prevented by Israel?

SG: No, I didn't ask to enter Gaza because two days before, the head of UNRWA had asked to enter Gaza and that request was refused.



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