

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**  
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**REMARKS TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**

**New York, 8 December 2023**

Mr. President,

Thank you for convening this Security Council meeting in response to my letter of 6 December on the situation in Gaza and Israel.

Mr. President, Excellencies,

I wrote to the Security Council invoking Article 99 because we are at a breaking point.

There is a high risk of the total collapse of the humanitarian support system in Gaza, which would have devastating consequences.

We anticipate that it would result in a complete breakdown of public order and increased pressure for mass displacement into Egypt.

I fear the consequences could be devastating for the security of the entire region.

We have already seen the spillover in the Occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

There is clearly, in my view, a serious risk of aggravating existing threats to the maintenance of international peace and security.

The risk of collapse of the humanitarian system is fundamentally linked with a complete lack of safety and security for our staff in Gaza, and with the nature and intensity of military operations, which are severely limiting access to people in desperate need.

The threat to the safety and security of United Nations staff in Gaza is unprecedented.

More than 130 of my colleagues have already been killed, many with their families.

This is the largest single loss of life in the history of our Organization.

Some of our staff take their children to work so they know they will live or die together.

Colleagues have shared heartbreaking messages from staff members pleading for help.

The Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Safety and Security has advised me that all possible means of mitigating the risk to staff within Gaza, short of evacuation, are closed off, because of the way this conflict has evolved.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the UN is totally committed to stay and deliver for the people of Gaza.

I pay tribute to the heroic humanitarian aid workers who remain committed to their work, despite the enormous dangers to their health and their lives.

But the situation is simply becoming untenable.

This Council called in Resolution 2712 for “the scaling up of the provision of such supplies to meet the humanitarian needs of the civilian population, especially children”.

I deeply regret to inform the Council that under current conditions on the ground, the fulfilment of this mandate has become impossible.

The conditions for the effective delivery of humanitarian aid no longer exist.

The crossing point at Rafah was not designed for hundreds of trucks and is a major bottleneck.

But even if sufficient supplies were permitted into Gaza, intense bombardment and hostilities, Israeli restrictions on movement, fuel shortages, and interrupted communications, make it impossible for UN agencies and their partners to reach most of the people in need.

Between 3 and 5 December – the two days preceding my letter – the UN could only distribute aid in one of Gaza’s five governorates – Rafah.

Elsewhere, access was impossible.

People are desperate, fearful and angry. In some cases, they have expressed that anger towards our staff.

Mr. President,

All this takes place amid a spiraling humanitarian nightmare.

First, there is no effective protection of civilians.

More than 17,000 Palestinians have reportedly been killed since the start of Israel’s military operations. This includes more than 4,000 women and 7,000 children. Tens of thousands are reported to have been injured, and many are missing, presumably under the rubble.

All these numbers are increasing by the day.

Attacks from air, land and sea are intense, continuous and widespread. So far, they have reportedly hit 339 education facilities, 26 hospitals, 56 healthcare facilities, 88 mosques and three churches.

Over 60 percent of Gaza's housing has reportedly been destroyed or damaged – some 300,000 houses and apartments.

Some 85 percent of the population have been forced from their homes.

The people of Gaza are being told to move like human pinballs – ricocheting between ever-smaller slivers of the south, without any of the basics for survival.

But nowhere in Gaza is safe.

At least 88 UNRWA shelters have been hit, killing over 270 people and injuring over 900.

Conditions in shelters are overcrowded and unsanitary. People nurse open wounds. Hundreds of people stand in line for hours to use one shower or toilet.

Families who have lost everything sleep on bare concrete floors, wearing clothes they have not changed for two months.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians arrived in Rafah in recent days, overwhelming shelters there.

Many displaced families – including children, older people, pregnant women and people with disabilities – are sleeping in streets and public spaces across the city.

Mr. President,

Second, Gazans are running out of food.

According to the World Food Programme, there is a serious risk of starvation and famine.

In northern Gaza, 97 percent of households are not eating enough. In the south, the figure among displaced people is 83 percent. Half the people of the north and more than one third of displaced people in the south are simply starving.

WFP's own food stocks are running out.

In the north, nine out of ten people have spent at least one full day and night without food.

The last functioning flour mill in Gaza was destroyed on 15 November.

WFP has provided food and cash assistance to hundreds of thousands of people across Gaza since the crisis began, and is ready to scale up its operations.

However, that would require effective access to all people in need, and at least 40 trucks of food supplies every day – many times the current level.

Mr. President,

Third, Gaza's health system is collapsing while needs are escalating.

At least 286 health workers have been killed.

Hospitals have suffered heavy bombardment. Just 14 out of 36 are still functioning. Of these, three are providing basic first aid, while the others are delivering partial services.

The European Gaza Hospital, one of the two main hospitals in southern Gaza, has 370 beds. It is currently housing 1000 patients and an estimated 70,000 people seeking shelter.

There are critical shortages of drugs, blood products and medical supplies. Fuel to run the hospitals is severely rationed. Many patients are being treated on the floor and without anesthetics.

As patients with life-threatening injuries continue to arrive, wards are overflowing and staff are overwhelmed.

At the same time, the unsanitary conditions in shelters and severe shortages of food and water are leading to increases in respiratory infections, scabies, jaundice and diarrhea.

Everything I have just described represents an unprecedented situation that led to my unprecedented decision to invoke Article 99, urging the members of the Security Council to press to avert a humanitarian catastrophe, and appealing for a humanitarian ceasefire to be declared.

Mr. President,

We are all aware that Israel began its military operation in response to the brutal terror attacks unleashed by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups on 7 October.

I unreservedly condemn those attacks. I am appalled by the reports of sexual violence.

There is no possible justification for deliberately killing some 1,200 people, including 33 children, injuring thousands more, and taking hundreds of hostages.

Some 130 hostages are still held captive. I call for their immediate and unconditional release, as well as their humane treatment and visits from the International Committee of the Red Cross until they are freed.

At the same time, the brutality perpetrated by Hamas can never justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

And while indiscriminate rocket fire by Hamas into Israel, and the use of civilians as human shields, are in contravention of the laws of war, such conduct does not absolve Israel of its own violations.

International humanitarian law includes the duty to protect civilians and to comply with the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution.

The laws of war also demand that civilians' essential needs must be met, including by facilitating the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian relief.

International humanitarian law cannot be applied selectively. It is binding on all parties equally at all times, and the obligation to observe it does not depend on reciprocity.

Mr. President,

The people of Gaza are looking into the abyss.

The international community must do everything possible to end their ordeal.

I urge the Council to spare no effort to push for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, for the protection of civilians, and for the urgent delivery of lifesaving aid.

While we deal with the current crisis, we cannot lose sight of the only viable possibility for a peaceful future: a two-State solution, on the basis of United Nations resolutions and international law, with Israel and Palestine living side-by-side in peace and security.

This is vital for Israelis, Palestinians, and for international peace and security.

The eyes of the world – and the eyes of history – are watching.

It's time to act.

Thank you.