

22 December 2023

New York

Secretary-General's press conference on the situation in the Middle East

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the media.

Over the last weeks and days, there has been no significant change in the way the war has been unfolding in Gaza.

There is no effective protection of civilians.

Intense Israeli bombardment and ground operations continue. More than 20,000 Palestinians have reportedly been killed, the vast majority women and children.

Meanwhile, Hamas and other Palestinian factions continue to fire rockets from Gaza into Israel.

Some 1.9 million people – 85 percent of Gaza's population – have been forced from their homes.

The health system is on its knees. Hospitals in the south are dealing with at least three times their capacity. In the north, they are barely operational.

One colleague described the deathly silence of a hospital with no medication or treatment for its sick and injured patients.

According to the World Food Programme, widespread famine looms.

More than half a million people – a quarter of the population – are facing what experts classify as catastrophic levels of hunger.

Four out of five of the hungriest people anywhere in the world are in Gaza.

And clean water is at a trickle.

UNICEF found that displaced children in the south have access to just ten percent of the water they need.

In these desperate conditions, it is little wonder that many people cannot wait for humanitarian distributions and are grabbing whatever they can from aid trucks.

As I warned, public order is at risk of breaking down.

Humanitarian veterans who have served in war zones and disasters around the world – people who have seen everything – tell me they have seen nothing like what they see today in Gaza.

Israel began its military operation in response to the horrific terror attacks launched by Hamas on 7 October. Nothing can possibly justify those attacks, or the brutal abduction of some 250 hostages. I repeat my call for all remaining hostages to be released immediately and unconditionally.

And nothing can justify the continued firing of rockets from Gaza at civilian targets in Israel, or the use of civilians as human shields.

But at the same time, these violations of international humanitarian law can never justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people, and they do not free Israel from its own legal obligations under International Law.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Press,

Many people are measuring the effectiveness of the humanitarian operation in Gaza based on the number of trucks from the Egyptian Red Crescent, the UN and our partners that are allowed to unload aid across the border.

This is a mistake.

The real problem is that the way Israel is conducting this offensive is creating massive obstacles to the distribution of humanitarian aid inside Gaza.

An effective aid operation in Gaza requires security; staff who can work in safety; logistical capacity; and the resumption of commercial activity.

These four elements do not exist.

First, security.

We are providing aid in a war zone.

The intense Israeli bombardment and active combat in densely populated urban areas throughout Gaza threaten the lives of civilians and humanitarian aid workers alike.

We waited 71 days for Israel finally to allow aid to enter Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing.

The crossing was then hit while aid trucks were in the area.

Second, the humanitarian operation requires staff who can live and work in safety.

136 of our colleagues in Gaza have been killed in 75 days – something we have never seen in the history of the United Nations.

Nowhere is safe in Gaza.

I honour the women and men who have made the ultimate sacrifice, and I pay tribute to the thousands of humanitarian aid workers who are risking their health and lives in Gaza, even as I speak.

Most of our staff have been forced from their homes. All of them spend hours each day simply struggling to survive and support their families.

It is a miracle that they have been able to continue working under these conditions.

And yet, those same colleagues are expanding humanitarian operations in southern Gaza to support people living there, while trying to assist the flood of displaced people who arrived from the north – with nothing.

They are currently providing aid in Rafah, western Khan Younis, Deir El Balah and Nuseirat in the south, and doing their best to reach the north despite huge challenges, namely security.

In these appalling conditions, they can only meet a fraction of the needs.

Third, logistics.

Every truck that arrives at Kerem Shalom and Rafah must be unloaded, and its cargo reloaded for distribution across Gaza. We ourselves have a limited and insufficient number of trucks available for this.

Many of our vehicles and trucks were destroyed or left behind following our forced, hurried evacuation from the north, but the Israeli authorities have not allowed any additional trucks to operate in Gaza. This is massively hampering the aid operation.

Delivering in the north is extremely dangerous due to active conflict, unexploded ordnance, and heavily damaged roads.

Everywhere, frequent communications blackouts make it virtually impossible to coordinate the distribution of aid, and to let people know how to access it.

Fourth and finally, the resumption of commercial activities is essential.

Shelves are empty; wallets are empty; stomachs are empty. Just one bakery is operating in the whole of Gaza.

I urge the Israeli authorities to lift restrictions on commercial activity immediately.

We are ready to scale up our cash grant support to vulnerable families – the most effective form of humanitarian aid. But in Gaza, there is very little to buy.

Ladies and gentlemen of the media,

In the circumstances I have just described, a humanitarian ceasefire is the only way to begin to meet the desperate needs of people in Gaza and end their ongoing nightmare.

I hope that today's Security Council Resolution may help this finally to happen but much more is needed immediately.

Looking at the longer-term, I am extremely disappointed by comments from senior Israeli officials that put the two-state solution into question.

As difficult as it might appear today, the two-state solution, in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements, is the only path to sustainable peace.

Any suggestion otherwise denies human rights, dignity and hope to the Palestinian people, fueling rage that reverberates far beyond Gaza.

It also denies a safe future for Israel.

The spillover is already happening.

The occupied West Bank is at boiling point.

Daily exchanges of fire across the Blue Line between Lebanon and Israel pose a grave risk to regional stability.

Attacks and threats to shipping on the Red Sea by the Houthis in Yemen are impacting shipping with the potential to affect global supply chains.

Beyond the immediate region, the conflict is polarizing communities, feeding hate speech and fueling extremism.

All this poses a significant and growing threat to global peace and security.

As the conflict intensifies and the horror grows, we will continue to do our part.

We will not give up.

But at the same time, it is imperative that the international community speak with one voice: for peace, for the protection of civilians, for an end to suffering, and for a commitment to the two-state solution – backed with action.

Thank you.

Spokesperson: Thank you. Anade, Al Jazeera.

Question: Thank you very much, Secretary-General, Anade Situma, Al Jazeera English. On behalf of the UN Correspondence Association, thank you very much for this briefing. My question to you, it's been over two weeks since you invoked Article 99, and up until this point, until today, the Security Council has failed to act, and we haven't seen a resolution until the resolution we just saw passed. This resolution calls for increase to aid, but it does not join your call for a ceasefire. When you invoked Article 99, were you hoping for more urgency on the part of the Security Council and perhaps even for them to join your call for a ceasefire?

Secretary-General: Of course, I was hopeful. That doesn't mean that things happen according to our hopes. But in any case today, you can see, always, a glass as half full or half empty. I hope that today's resolution will make people understand that a

humanitarian ceasefire is indeed something that is needed if we want humanitarian aid to be effectively delivered.

Spokesperson: Linda, then Joe.

Question: Secretary-General, on behalf of NPR, I was just wondering, the resolution calls for both sides to allow unhindered safe delivery of aid. We know the status, more or less, about Israel's role. I was wondering on the other side in terms of Hamas, how significant is Hamas' control or not allowing access to aid to the people?

Secretary-General: Well, we have condemned all violations of International Humanitarian Law. Violations by Hamas in relation to civilian shields or in relation to the rockets sent to Israel. And the violations done by Israel through these relentless bombardments and the fact that we are having a toll of civilians that is totally unprecedented in all conflicts I've seen until now. So obviously, that is why a ceasefire is needed, to stop all obstacles coming from wherever they come - A humanitarian ceasefire.

Question: But I'm sorry, again, but just how significant is Hamas' denial of access to aid? I mean, is it minor? Or is it, you know, a medium amount?

Secretary-General: I think it is one of the contributions that needs to be taken into account.

Spokesperson: Joe and then...

Secretary-General: But it's obviously not the major factor when we look at the situation today in Gaza?

Question: Yeah, it's Joseph Klein of Canada Free Press. First, I want to wish you and your family a very happy holiday.

Secretary-General: Happy holiday too.

Question: Thank you. My question also involves Hamas. Do you realistically think that a viable, sustainable, two-state solution is possible as long as Hamas exists, with their threats to repeat October 7th over and over again? And what is your comment on the fact that Israel has offered, I believe it is, at least a seven-day pause to allow the release of more hostages and more aid to come into Gaza? But Hamas has flatly turned that down. They're demanding a complete permanent ceasefire. Thank you.

Secretary-General: First of all, I do believe that we need a humanitarian ceasefire, that has been what I believe it is needed. But of course, we are favourable to any pause that can lead to improvement in humanitarian aid and to the exchange of prisoners. And we know that negotiations are taking place. I've been actively in contact with Qatar, with Egypt, and with others. And I hope that these negotiations will be able to lead to new opportunities for the release of hostages, but our position in relation to the release of hostages is very clear. We believe that there must be an immediate and unconditional

release of hostages.

Your first question was...?

Question: Yeah. Well, my first question, they kind of relate to each other. The first question was whether you believe...?

Secretary-General: Ah, yes.

Question: Realistically that there could be a two-state solution as long as Hamas exists. And then responding to the second question, I specifically would be interested in knowing your comment on Hamas' refusal to accept even a seven-day pause. They want all or nothing.

Secretary-General: I mean, both sides, apparently, want all or nothing. And that is why we do not manage to have an agreement. I think it's important to have a spirit of compromise. But the first question is very important. We believe that the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people is the Palestinian Authority. And what we want to see is the creation of conditions that will allow the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibilities in Gaza and that is, in our opinion, the solution to allow for the two-state solution to become a reality.

Spokesperson: Denis, then Dezhi, then we'll close it.

Question: Denis Akishev, TASS News Agency. Turning back from Gaza. What is the current situation with the Grain Deal? And do you plan to communicate with Russian officials or maybe with Russian President Vladimir Putin?

Secretary-General: Sorry the...?

Spokesperson: The Grain Deal.

Secretary-General: We have been in contact with both sides, trying to explore new forms that -I don't think the repetition of the Grain Deal would make sense- but I'm a strong believer that it would be very interesting if we would be able to have conditions for freedom of navigation in the Black Sea.

Spokesperson: And last question. Dezhi?

Question: Sir?

Spokesperson: No, sorry. Dezhi last question.

Question: Secretary-General, Dezhi Xu with China Central Television. Let me ask you a broader picture question. It seems like in 2023, it seems very chaotic. We have two conflicts going on. We have SDGs even driving away further and the United Nations and you yourself has been put into a huge pressure. Where's the silver lining? What kind of hope do you see for 2024?

Secretary-General: Well, we have, in the UN, a very important process taking place, The Summit of the Future. And in The Summit of The Future, I hope it will be possible for us to agree on a new agenda for peace with a moralistic approach to prevention. We had, yesterday, a very important victory in the Security Council. After many years in which I'm fighting for the need to have peace-enforcing operations done by our African partners of the African Union, with mandates by the Security Council and assessed contributions, it was possible to have a resolution of the Security Council that creates the possibility of funding at 75 per cent. It was one of the key elements of the Agenda for Peace, but there are many others. On the other hand, we have already... we will be publishing, I believe today, the report of our High-level panel on Artificial Intelligence. And I hope it will be possible to have some form of networked governance of artificial intelligence with flexibility, of course, taking into account different situations around the world, but that will create more opportunities for artificial intelligence to be a force for good and minimize the risks of artificial intelligence. And I hope to see the UN in the centre of that effort.

We have, simultaneously, a number of other very important questions on the table, in which member states will be able to take decisions in relation to participation of youth and future generations in decision-making, in relation to the reform of the International Financial System, reform of the Security Council. So, I see that, independently of the crises that are happening, I see that there is a dynamic effort within the UN to look seriously into the need to reform multilateralism and to make multilateralism stronger and more effective in a world that is becoming multipolar - but multipolarity will not guarantee peace, if there is not the stressing of multilateral governance institutions. So, I'm very optimistic about the work that can be done within the UN, knowing that some of these crises that you mentioned will be very difficult to overcome.

Spokesperson: Thank you very much.

Secretary-General: Thank you.

Question: Thank you.

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