

20 October 2023, Cairo, Egypt

Secretary-General's Press Encounter at the Al-Arish Airport in Egypt

I just came from the gate to Gaza (Rafah Crossing) with a deep emotion and a broken heart.

On one hand, to see the generosity of drivers of so many more than 100 trucks.

Some have been there for a few days waiting to be able to cross and they are a lifeline to the people in Gaza.

The difference between death and life, with water, with food, with medicines, with everything the people of Gaza need.

And at the same time when we have the trucks stuck at the border, we have the people in Gaza in a dramatic situation.

Children, mothers, elderly people, all without water, without electricity, without food, without medicine.

And so, we must stop this dramatic impasse.

We absolutely need to move the trucks as quickly as possible, and as many as possible, from Egypt into Gaza.

Now, there was an announcement by the US and by Israel, that humanitarian aid would be allowed into Gaza.

There are agreements in principle between Egypt and Israel in this regard, but we need to overcome the conditionalities and the obstacles that still exist.

We are engaging very actively with Israelis, with Egyptians and with the Americans, to see if as soon as possible we are able to move the trucks.

But it's important that we have not a one-shot operation.

It's important that we have continued support, with a meaningful number of trucks approved every day to cross.

On the other hand, there must be a verification.

That verification needs to be serious, but it needs to be also expedited and practical.

We have seen how many trucks are there that are led by the Egyptian Red Crescent.

It's important to recognize the role of the Egyptian Red Crescent and of other Egyptian institutions that are there also to support the people in Gaza. It's not only the United Nations.

And it is essential to have fuel on the other side from UNRWA to be able to distribute humanitarian aid for the population in Gaza.

At the same time, this is a war zone, and that is the reason why I've asked for a humanitarian ceasefire.

We don't consider it to be a condition sine qua non because we don't want the Gaza people to be punished twice.

First, with water, second, with the absence of humanitarian aid.

But let's be clear, a humanitarian ceasefire would enormously facilitate and make much safer the distribution of humanitarian aid.

I have repeatedly said that the barbaric attack by Hamas needs to be condemned.

But I've also said they can not be a pretext for a collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

It's absolutely essential to respect international humanitarian law.

It's absolutely essential to protect civilians.

And it's absolutely essential to make humanitarian aid come to the Palestinians in need.

Question: When you saw the anger of those protestors, most of it levelled at Israel and the US but also at the international community for failing to stop the situation, what is your response to these protestors?

Answer: Many of them as I said were drivers that have been waiting, and can you imagine what it is to have to be stuck with a truck for two weeks waiting, leaving the family? And so there is considerable amount of anger.

Question: But many of them were just ordinary people as well.

Answer: But most of them were volunteers that are waiting to be able to act and the drivers. I think what's important to say is that we are doing everything we can, engaging with all the parties to make sure that sooner rather than later, we are able to have not only a first convoy, but continued aid to the population.

Question: But no timeline?

Answer: I think, it should be as quickly as possible, and with as many as possible trucks to cross in the first few days.

Question: There have been extraordinary diplomatic efforts involving you, the President of United States and the president of Egypt and still not a single bottle of water, not a single bale of grain or flour has made it into Gaza, why?

Answer: As I mentioned, there were, when these announcements were made some conditions and some limitations. And it's necessary to have the conditions clarified, and that's exactly what we are doing and some of the limitations removed, and others reduced to a minimum, because this is a very complex operation, and we need to make sure that it is a success. To cut a long story short, we need to have as quickly as possible the first convoy and we need to create all the guarantees for that first convoy not to be the last.

Question: Time is running out for people in Gaza.

Answer: Of course time is running out because without electricity, without fuel, without water, without food, I mean, life is not possible.

Question: How much is the delivery of aid tied to people coming out evacuations?

Answer: From our perspective, we should never create bargaining chips with humanitarian issues. We need to have conditions for hostages to be released. We need to have conditions for humanitarian aid to be delivered and we need to have conditions for those foreigners that are in Gaza and want to come out to be able to come out.

As I said, I do not accept the idea that we make this a kind of business. Everything has a value in itself and water has value in itself. It needs to be done because it's the right thing to do.

Question: So, what is the main thing holding this process up?

Answer: There are lots of complexities in the management of a border like that, and we are doing everything we can with all the parties to [address] those complexities.

Well, thank you very much. Thank you.

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