

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

New York, 23 January 2024

[all-English]

Mr. President, Excellencies,

Over 100 days have passed since more than 1,200 Israelis and others were killed in the horrific terror attacks launched by Hamas against Israel, with over 250 people taken hostage.

For all those affected, these have been 100 days of heartache and anguish.

Nothing can justify deliberate killing, injuring, kidnapping of civilians, the use of sexual violence against them – or the indiscriminate launching of rockets towards civilian targets.

I once again demand the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. In the interim they must be treated humanely and allowed to receive visits and assistance from the Red Cross.

Last week in Davos, I had another moving meeting with families of hostages and in this case, even some former hostages themselves.

Since the beginning, I have maintained close contact with Qatari and Egyptian authorities on the efforts for their release. And yesterday, I received from the Israeli mission a list of many of the remaining hostages.

It was also reported yesterday that Israel is proposing a two-month pause in hostilities in exchange for a phased release of all remaining hostages.

I will continue, in my limited capacity, to pursue all efforts to contribute to their release.

Excellencies,

The past 100 days have been heartbreaking and catastrophic for Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

More than 25,000 people, mainly women and children, have reportedly been killed in operations launched by Israeli forces. More than 60,000 others have been reportedly injured.

In recent days, the military offensive has intensified in Khan Yunis with many additional casualties.

The entire population of Gaza is enduring destruction at a scale and speed without parallel in recent history.

Nothing can justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

Excellencies,

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is appalling.

With winter bearing down, 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza face inhumane, squalid conditions, struggling to simply make it through another day without proper shelter, heating, sanitary facilities, food, and drinking water.

Everyone in Gaza is hungry – with a quarter of Gaza’s population – more than half a million people – grappling with catastrophic levels of food insecurity.

Meanwhile, nearly one and a half million people are now crammed inside Rafah Governorate.

Disease is spreading as the health system collapses. Only 16 of Gaza’s 36 hospitals are even partly functional.

That means the people of Gaza not only risk being killed or injured by relentless bombardments; they also run a growing chance of contracting infectious diseases like hepatitis A, dysentery, cholera.

Without functioning hospitals, and with minimal opportunities for patients to exit Gaza, thousands suffering from chronic diseases like cancer and kidney failure are at risk of dying.

A functioning medical evacuation system is urgently needed.

Excellencies,

In the face of colossal human suffering and enormous obstacles, our United Nations humanitarian operations are striving to deliver.

Tragically, 153 of our colleagues have been killed – a source of bottomless grief for us all.

At the same time, the women and men of the United Nations alongside our partners in Gaza are working heroically every day to reach people in need. Many have lost loved ones and left behind shattered homes.

They have been distributing ready-to-eat meals and other food items to shelters.

They are supporting the very few bakeries that are still functioning.

They are delivering medicines, medical supplies, bottled water and trucked water, hygiene kits and cleaning kits, tents, tarpaulin sheets, and blankets. But in quantities that are far from enough.

In the south, food distributions are helping to bring down prices – and 250,000 Palestinians in Gaza were able to buy bread at a subsidized price.

I welcome the agreement, facilitated by Qatar and France, of an operation to deliver additional medicines and healthcare supplies to civilians in Gaza, and to hostages held in Gaza.

I also welcome Israel’s announcement that it will allow a United Nations assessment mission to the north – but that mission is on hold because of renewed fighting.

Under-Secretary-General Sigrid Kaag started her work as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza on 8 January, in line with Security Council resolution 2720. She visited Gaza today and will update you next week on her overall efforts.

I ask all parties to the conflict to cooperate with her, as demanded by the Security Council.

Excellencies,

Let's face it. Despite all the efforts I described, no effective humanitarian aid operation can function under the conditions that have been forced on Palestinians in Gaza and those doing everything possible to help them.

The quantity of aid is highly insufficient in light of needs.

It is fantasy to think that 2.2 million people can survive on aid alone.

Basic commodities from the private sector must enter in meaningful quantities -- as they did for many years before the current fighting.

This is essential to address rising needs and avert both a complete breakdown and ever-mounting death toll.

For our part, we are determined to do much more to scale up the distribution of food items, tents and shelter materials, medicines, clean water and spare parts to repair critical sanitation infrastructure.

Excellencies,

Humanitarian delivery is not an exercise of counting trucks. It is about ensuring the right volume and quality of assistance reaches people in need, in line with Security Council resolution 2720.

To be able to do our work, a set of operational requirements must be met.

We need safety. We are operating in a war zone. The current humanitarian notification mechanisms do not offer any real confidence for operations and planning humanitarian responses.

A number of serious incidents have shown how these essential mechanisms need to be substantially improved.

Safety also entails reliable and cleared roads inside Gaza, and unimpeded crossings at checkpoints.

We need to be equipped to do our job.

This includes telecommunications equipment, so convoys can communicate with each other; armoured vehicles and protective gear, given the ongoing hostilities and the widespread contamination with explosive remnants of war; far greater logistical capacity; spare parts for infrastructure such as desalination plants, and other critical humanitarian items.

We are grateful to Member States for their funding support. We are finally seeing a few signs of progress in the authorization of entry permits for certain goods – and some measures to reduce screening and crossing times.

But we still face a cumbersome process of verifications and multiple unjustified rejections of desperately needed items.

We need more crossing points into Gaza to reduce congestion and avoid chokepoints.

The provision of aid to Gaza via the Ashdod port in Israel must also resume. A first shipment of flour reached Gaza from Ashdod but much more is required.

We need access to the north. In the first two weeks of January, out of 29 planned humanitarian missions to deliver lifesaving supplies north of Wadi Gaza, only 7 were accomplished, fully or partially.

The majority of missions were denied access by Israel. After over 100 days of operations in the north, insecurity and fighting has continued.

And we need visas. Dozens of humanitarians have been waiting for months to receive their visas from the Government of Israel.

I call for rapid, safe, unhindered, expanded and sustained humanitarian access throughout Gaza.

I repeat my call for an end to all violations of International Humanitarian Law.

The use of human shields is unacceptable -- as are the unprecedented levels of devastation and civilian killings.

I am also deeply troubled by reports of Israel's inhumane treatment of Palestinians detained during military operations.

Excellencies,

I renew my appeal for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

This will ensure sufficient aid gets to where it is needed, facilitate the release of hostages, and help lower tensions around the Middle East.

War and misery in Gaza are fueling turmoil far beyond.

We are seeing dangerous developments across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where tensions are off the charts – with a dramatic increase in casualties.

Dozens of Palestinians are being arrested daily. Over 6,000 Palestinians were detained since 7 October, with many subsequently released.

Settler violence is also another major concern.

The demolition and seizure of Palestinian-owned houses and other structures continues.

The Palestinian economy is in crisis.

Israel's withholding of a significant portion of Palestinian tax revenues, the continued prohibition on nearly all Palestinian workers entering Israel since 7 October, and severe movement and access restrictions across the West Bank are all contributing to soaring unemployment and poverty.

I hope that ongoing negotiations will allow for the full payment of employees of the Palestinian Authority.

Excellencies,

The risks of broader regional escalation are now becoming a reality.

Turning to the north, daily exchanges of fire across the Blue Line, including strikes on civilian areas, have killed 6 Israelis and 25 Lebanese civilians and driven tens of thousands from their homes on both sides.

The risk of miscalculation is dangerously high.

I urge all parties to refrain from aggressive rhetoric, and to immediately end activities that could further inflame tensions.

My Special Coordinators and I continue our extensive outreach to all key stakeholders to reduce regional tensions and I welcome the efforts of the United States and several European and Arab governments for a negotiated de-escalation.

The situation in the Red Sea is also deeply worrying.

Houthi attacks are disrupting global trade. These have been followed by airstrikes by the United States and the United Kingdom on Houthi positions in Yemen.

De-escalation is essential – and all attacks on merchant and commercial vessels in the Red Sea must cease immediately.

Meanwhile, there are almost daily attacks on facilities hosting US and international coalition forces in Iraq and Syria.

In response, the United States has launched airstrikes targeting individuals and groups suspected of these actions.

And in Syria, airstrikes that Iran and Syria have attributed to Israel, have targeted officials of Hamas and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran.

I urge all parties to step back from the brink and to consider the horrendous human cost of a regional conflict.

Beyond the need for immediate de-escalation, each situation demands the implementation of a clear political roadmap that would contribute to long-term regional stability.

In Syria, that is a UN-facilitated political solution in line with Security Council resolution 2254 that meets the needs of all Syrians.

Along the Blue Line, we need full implementation of Security Council resolution 1701.

And in Yemen, the establishment of a UN roadmap to implement the commitments made by the parties and prepare for a Yemeni-owned, inclusive political process under UN auspices.

Excellencies,

A lasting end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can only come through a two-State solution.

Israelis must see their legitimate needs for security materialized, and Palestinians must see their legitimate aspirations for a fully independent, viable and sovereign State realized, in line with United Nations resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

Israel's occupation must end.

Excellencies,

Last week's clear and repeated rejection of the two-State solution at the highest levels of the Israeli government is unacceptable. And this was despite the strongest appeals from even the friends of Israel, including those sitting around this table.

This refusal, and the denial of the right to statehood to the Palestinian people, would indefinitely prolong a conflict that has become a major threat to global peace and security.

It would exacerbate polarization and embolden extremists everywhere.

The right of the Palestinian people to build their own fully independent state must be recognized by all.

And any refusal to accept the two-State solution by any party must be firmly rejected.

What is the alternative? How would a one-State solution look with such a large number of Palestinians inside without any real sense of freedom, rights and dignity. This would be inconceivable.

The two-State solution is the only way to address the legitimate aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

The role of the international community is clear.

We must unite to support Israelis and Palestinians to take determined actions to advance a meaningful peace process.

Over recent decades, the two-state solution has been traduced, undermined and left for dead many times.

However, it remains the only way to achieve durable and equitable peace in Israel, in Palestine, and in the region.

As the events of the past three months have tragically reminded us, it is also the only way to avoid endless cycles of fear, hatred and violence.

This terrible time for Israelis and Palestinians must spur both parties, and the international community, to act with courage and determination to achieve a just and lasting peace.

Thank you.