

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**REMARKS TO THE OPENING OF THE 2024 SESSION
OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE EXERCISE
OF THE INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE**

New York, 31 January 2024

[as delivered]

Mr. Chair, Ambassador Cheikh Niang, congratulations on your election to the Bureau.

The Committee's mandate and advocacy are crucial amidst the unresolved Question of Palestine and the enormous violence and suffering, particularly since the horrific 7 October attack by Hamas in Israel and Israel's ensuing military operations in Gaza.

The death, destruction, displacement, hunger, loss, and grief in Gaza over the past 120 days are a scar on our shared humanity and conscience.

And I once again condemn the horrifying attacks by Hamas and other groups that claimed the lives of over 1,200 Israelis and others – and call for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

There is no justification for the intentional killing, injuring, torture or kidnapping of civilians, using sexual violence against them, or launching rockets towards civilian targets.

But at the same time, nothing can justify the collective punishment of the people in Gaza.

The ongoing conflict and relentless bombardment by Israeli forces across Gaza have resulted in killings of civilians and destruction at a pace and scale unlike anything we have witnessed in recent years.

I am horrified by incessant military strikes that have killed and maimed civilians and protected personnel, and that have damaged or destroyed civilian infrastructure.

Over 26,750 Palestinians have been reportedly been killed in Gaza alone – more than two-thirds women and children.

Over 70 per cent of civilian infrastructure -- including homes, hospitals, schools, water, and sanitation facilities in Gaza -- have been destroyed or severely damaged.

1.7 million people have been displaced, and not knowing if they will have homes to return to.

No party to an armed conflict is above international law.

International humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack, must be upheld at all times.

And the binding decisions of the International Court of Justice must be complied with.

I also want to add that the United Nations immediately acted following the very serious allegations against UNRWA staff members.

I was personally horrified by these accusations.

And yesterday, I met with donors to listen to their concerns and to outline the steps we are taking to address them.

I underscored the importance of keeping UNRWA's vital work going to meet the dire needs of civilians in Gaza, and to ensure its continuity of services to Palestine refugees in the occupied West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

UNRWA is the backbone of all humanitarian response in Gaza.

I appeal to all Member States to guarantee the continuity of UNRWA's life-saving work.

Excellencies,

The humanitarian system in Gaza is collapsing.

I am extremely concerned by the inhumane conditions faced by Gaza's 2.2 million people, as they struggle to survive without any of the basics.

Everyone in Gaza is hungry, while half a million grapple with catastrophic levels of food insecurity.

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

This is particularly crucial in the north, where most missions have been denied access by Israel, amid continued insecurity and fighting.

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

I ask all parties to continue their active engagement with UN actors on the ground and to work closely with newly appointed Under-Secretary-General Sigrid Kaag -- the UN Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza -- to scale up humanitarian aid to Gaza.

I count on full cooperation to ensure continuous humanitarian access.

And I repeat my call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

Excellencies,

As we seek to address mounting needs in Gaza, we also remain focused on the deteriorating situation in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

I am extremely alarmed by the high levels of settler violence in the occupied West Bank. Palestinian attacks against Israelis also continue.

All of this violence must stop, and the perpetrators held accountable.

Intensive Israeli operations go on, including in Area A of the occupied West Bank, leading to deadly armed exchanges.

Dozens of Palestinians have been arrested, with many detained without charge, including children.

The violence has not been limited to the occupied territory.

Rising hostilities across the Blue Line and attacks in Syria, Iraq and the Red Sea risk triggering a broader escalation risking regional stability.

I call for urgent steps to de-escalate the situation and spare the region from more violence before it is too late.

Excellencies,

The conflict must end with tangible progress towards a two-State solution – an end to the occupation and the establishment of a fully independent, viable and sovereign Palestinian State, of which Gaza is an integral part.

Only the two-State solution – based on the 1967 lines, with Israel and Palestine living side-by-side, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States, in line with UN resolutions, international law and prior agreements -- can ensure the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people as well as a just and lasting peace and stability in the region.

The international community must not waver in its commitment.

Let us work together to advance a meaningful peace process that will put an end to the tragic cycles of fear, hatred and violence and build a more peaceful and hopeful future for Palestinians and Israelis.

Thank you.



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