



Press Release

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REGULAR BRIEFING BY THE INFORMATION SERVICE

Elena Ponomareva-Piquier, Chief, Public Relations Section, briefed journalists about the UN Jenin Fact Finding Team; a joint message on World Press Freedom Day; and the start of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Committee against Torture.

UN Jenin Fact Finding Team

Mrs. Ponomareva-Piquier said that the UN Jenin Fact Finding Team was still in Geneva where it was awaiting a response from Israel. The Israeli Cabinet was still discussing the issue, and it would transmit its decision to Headquarters in New York.

[...]
Questions

A correspondent said that journalists were disappointed about not getting enough information on the UN Jenin Fact Finding Team. He felt that there was a lack of transparency. Usually press releases were made available, or meetings with the press were held. For example, he asked why Mr. Martti Ahtisaari did not communicate with the press. He wanted to know what exactly the team was doing in Geneva.

Mrs. Ponomareva-Piquier said that journalists had met with the spokesperson of the Team yesterday afternoon. A note to correspondents was also distributed yesterday. As she had mentioned, the team was continuing with its work in Geneva while it waited for the Israeli decision. When there was further information to share with journalists, another press briefing could be held. In any case, she would pass on this comment to the spokesperson of the Team.

Mrs. Ponomareva-Piquier said that she would give the floor to Rene Aquarone, Chief of the UNRWA Liaison Office in Geneva, who had something further to add in response to the question.

Rene Aquarone, Chief of the UNRWA Liaison Office in Geneva, said that the UN Jenin Fact Finding Team was preparing for its work and was being briefed by a number of persons, including UNRWA's Director of Operations in the West Bank and representatives of UNESCO and OCHA.

Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Mr. Aquarone, Chief of the UNRWA Liaison Office in Geneva, who had just returned from a mission to the occupied territories, said he would give journalists a brief update on the situation not only in Jenin but also in the rest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The entire Gaza Strip was currently under a situation of "economic strangulation". For the last month, the Gaza Strip had been divided into three parts, with internal checkpoints. The junctions were closed except for an hour or two daily. All movement inside the Gaza Strip was severely restricted. Movement from Gaza to Israel was limited to international staff. No Palestinians were entering or leaving the Gaza Strip. The movement of goods was also very very limited, and there were serious shortages of food, cement, and animal fodder. UNRWA had loaned 250 tons of flour to the Palestinian Authority to sell to the bakeries so that bread was available. As a result of the shortage of cement, 54 of UNRWA's 67 Employment Generation Projects were currently suspended. ICRC had also run out of fuel.

As far as the West Bank was concerned, Mr. Aquarone said that the centre of Bethlehem was still under curfew which was lifted every five or six days. UNRWA and other UN agencies attempted to provide the necessary sustenance, both food and medical supplies, during these "windows of opportunity". Hebron had been under curfew since yesterday. Nablus had been the object of considerable destruction, particularly in the old city, and the body count was quite high. There were still tight closures on the movement of Palestinians. This meant UNRWA needed international staff to do everything, including to drive trucks, lead convoys and load and unload trucks. UNRWA was receiving enormous support from all the UN agencies which were active in the West Bank. Jenin had been highlighted considerably, an area of about four football fields had been completely flattened, and all around that area there was considerable destruction of houses. UNRWA's main concern at this point was the issue of unexploded ordinance. There had been casualties since the Israeli withdrawal due to this ordinance.

Mr. Aquarone said that concerning funding, a meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the donors to the Palestinians, the Palestinian Authority and Israel, which met in Oslo last week, estimated that the entire damage to both Palestinian Authority infrastructure, civilian houses, and refugee installations since the beginning of the military incursions was \$ 300 million. UNRWA estimated roughly that \$ 3.7 million were needed for immediate

relief for Jenin camp, and \$ 41.3 million was needed for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the camp. How this would be funded was not an easy matter. UNRWA was heartened by private contributions. And the Commissioner-General of UNRWA who met the rulers of the United Arab Emirates on Sunday was given a formal pledge to fund the reconstruction of Jenin, which would run into the tens of millions of dollars.

Ross Mountain, Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator, who just returned from a mission to the occupied territories, said that it was important to underline that this was a crisis within an emergency within, what was even before the Intifada, a situation which required major support, particularly through UNRWA for the refugee population. So the situation as seen on television in Jenin and Nablus was not the whole story. A full survey of the damage to the infrastructure was going on. In addition, a set of emergency committees had been put together to look after health, food, shelter, infrastructure, electricity and water sanitation. The major humanitarian priorities at the present time were unexploded ordinance, particularly in Jenin and Nablus (an ordinance clearing mechanism was being set up at the present time); shelter, particularly in Jenin where 800 housing units had been destroyed and a number of others would have to be pulled down because of the extensive damage to them; psycho-social work; and of course the infrastructure.

Mr. Mountain said that the continuing problem was very much one of access, not only for the Palestinians but for the humanitarian actors, to the different towns and villages in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Arguably, the humanitarian conditions had deteriorated in the past 18 months much more due to the closures, both external closures of Gaza and the West Bank, and also the internal closures of the individual cities and areas. For example, this had deprived all Palestinians who had been working in Israel of their income. The signs were not good that there would be a relaxation of these closures. OCHA was working with the donors to try and leave in place a viable coordination mechanism to be able to deal with what they feared might be a continuation or even a tightening of the closures.

A Spokesperson for the World Food Programme said WFP was currently locally buying 2,600 tons of wheat for emergency distribution to 265,000 particularly vulnerable persons in the occupied territories. Because of the security restrictions imposed, WFP had been unable to reach many Palestinians. WFP was currently negotiating with Israeli authorities to allow them to bring trucks into the territories for distribution of food. WFP was currently trying to estimate the food needs in all the occupied territories. Two missions had already been sent to Nablus and Qualqilia. In Nablus, WFP estimated that 40,000 persons were in urgent need of food aid, not including the Palestinian refugees. And in Qualqilia, where 70 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line, 20,000 Palestinians needed urgent food aid.

A Spokesperson for the World Health Organization said that the WHO Coordinator for Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip had been in Ramallah yesterday where he met with the Deputy Palestinian Health Minister. The Deputy Minister said that the biggest problem was the restriction on the movement of health workers, nurses and doctors. There were shortages of vaccinations, and the situation of drinking water was also a problem. The Minister asked the WHO Coordinator for chemical products to add to the water supplies to eliminate the possibility of the spread of some illnesses.

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