



Press Conference

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

PRESS CONFERENCE ON GAZA HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

"The situation in Gaza is one of growing misery," the top United Nations official in the war-torn territory said today, telling reporters it was "shameful" that Israeli politics had stranded tons of relief supplies at blocked crossing points and, in the latest blow to the beleaguered recovery effort, armed Hamas police had broken into a warehouse and seized thousands of blankets and food packs meant for needy Gaza residents.

Nearly three weeks after an unwritten ceasefire ended fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was struggling to cope with a daunting range of operational challenges. Speaking to reporters at Headquarters via video link, John Ging, UNRWA's Director of Operations in Gaza, said that the situation was becoming increasingly untenable -- basic humanitarian needs were going unmet, people stuck for hours at aid distribution points were becoming frustrated and, as a result, extremism was on the rise. At the same time, Hamas militants were waging a damaging public misinformation campaign about the Agency's work.

Clearly frustrated, Mr. Ging said: "There's no reason to talk about recovery and reconstruction here until we get this business with the crossing sorted out. Let's not talk about it. It's [...] disingenuous even to consider it." Israel was refusing to allow into the area not only basic necessities -- the Agency expected to run out of the plastic bags it needed to pre-package relief supplies by Sunday -- but textbooks and other materials to jumpstart UNRWA's human rights curriculum. "We are having no success at the operation level [and that] is feeding the despair and frustration of the people," he said.

He frankly could not understand why the flow of basic necessities, building materials and school supplies was being obstructed. "It's beyond comprehension. I need these questions answered simply," he continued, saying he was tired of hearing the same "circular argument rationalized by political analysis" about who might get access to this or that. The politicians were not paying the price. Students and ordinary people were being hurt, because they were being denied access to educational materials and basic necessities. Everyone knew that all this would lead to more desperation, more anger and more violence.

Thousands of tons of aid were stuck outside Gaza, at staging areas in Egypt, Israel and Jordan. Humanitarian agencies were left trying to push supplies "through the eye of a needle" at Kerem Shalom crossing, which was totally inadequate to handle the volume needed, but currently the only point open for bringing in food, clothes and medicine. "The bottom line is, we're neither getting in the volume nor the range of supplies that we need here and this is, of course, creating a lot of misery among the people, so many of whom [...] were still without blankets and clothes and very basic items," he said.

For example, Mr. Ging said UNRWA was caring for some 900,000 food-aid recipients, but had been able to get supplies out only at a rate of about 30,000 people a day. "That just gives a sense of how long a wait it will be for those at the end of the queue," he said, stressing: "We have the infrastructure. We have the staff. We just can't get the food. It's quite shameful to have such a backlog."

He went on to say that, while he and his staff had worked diligently to get United Nations-affiliated schools up and running as soon as possible after the fighting stopped -- UNRWA had merely been able to clean them up and make them safe because no cement or other construction materials were being allowed into the city -- since then, 60 per cent of the students had returned to classrooms that had no textbooks, notebooks, supplies or even writing paper. Those items were being denied entry into Gaza at the moment. "We are being obstructed, as far as I'm concerned, in the education of the children here," he said.

Responding to questions about the blocked borders and shipping delays, Mr. Ging said Israel was taking those measures and he believed those decisions were "purely political". For example, he said that the Sufa crossing point in southern Israel had remained open during much of Israel's 18-month blockade of Gaza; yet, it wasn't open today. That being the case, the decision to shut it down appeared to be a political one. Granted, Sufa wasn't the most optimal location, but if it were open, it would nearly double the number of relief trucks UNRWA could get in, he added.

Continuing, he said that, when plastic bags ran out, there was no back up. Everyone involved was aware that UNRWA needed raw materials on site to make the huge quantity of bags required to pre-wrap packages of relief supplies. Israel had suggested bringing in shipments of plastic bags, but that was ridiculous, because that would require a large number of trucks and only add to the already clogged delivery pipeline.

"So, there is no excuse. Everyone needs to be clear about the consequences of these decisions," he continued, citing not only the serious humanitarian impact, but also their effect on the mood of the people of Gaza. "Extremism is on the rise here in Gaza and we on the ground are trying to counter it, particularly with our education programmes," he declared, but warned that trying to ensure Palestinian children were able to build a positive future required adequate tools. "So it continues to be all about the crossings; all about access."

On the Hamas police force that had raided a warehouse and stolen relief goods at gunpoint yesterday, Mr. Ging acknowledged that such incidents were only making matters worse. Many members of the militant group were disconnected from their leadership, which remained underground since the Israeli offensive.

However, those that were above ground remained bent on destructive and disruptive behaviour.

He told reporters that UNRWA had expressed its outrage at the incident and was remaining vigilant. "We're not bringing aid in to have it stolen by anybody. We're bringing it in to help refugees according to our criteria," he said, adding that the Agency was looking to Hamas' so-called leadership to get the organization under control "because the reckless acts of a few are jeopardizing our entire operation".

UNRWA did not know what had happened to the stolen food and blankets, but Mr. Ging sincerely hoped Hamas had the goods intact "because we want them back". While the amount stolen was small, and while it was the first time an event such as this had occurred, it was massive in significance because Hamas had "crossed a red line". UNRWA would not take seriously any commitments Hamas gave regarding future action until they first and foremost returned the aid that they had stolen and secondly made public their assurances that it would not happen again.

"I don't care for the nonsense they've been coming out with trying to justify what they did [...] their reaction and the way they are spinning this for the public," he continued. At the same time, however, he was pleased that ordinary Gazans and community leaders had been equally shocked and outraged by the incident and had bolstered their support for the Agency.

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