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'EVERY GAZAN HAS A TALE OF PROFOUND GRIEF TO TELL', YET PEOPLE ALSO DETERMINED

TO OVERCOME PAIN, REBUILD LIVES, SECURITY COUNCIL TOLD

Briefed by United Nations Humanitarian Affairs Head,
Commissioner-General of Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees

With fragile ceasefires holding between Israel and Hamas, senior United Nations officials today appealed to the Security Council to press all the parties for the political action needed ensure safe humanitarian access to the war-ravaged Gaza Strip and the immediate opening of the Strip's crossing points to allow the free flow of aid, supplies and commerce.

Karen AbuZayd, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), told the Security Council that, in the days since Israel had ended its three-week offensive against Hamas, with the stated aim of stopping Hamas rocket attacks against southern Israel, she had been deeply saddened by what appeared to be the systematic destruction of schools, homes, factories, shops and farms. "Every Gazan projects a sense of having stared death in the face [...] every Gazan has a tale of profound grief to tell," she said.

While she had witnessed rage against the attackers for often failing to distinguish between military targets and civilians, as well as resentment towards the international community for having allowed first the siege and then the war to go on for so long, the Palestinians of Gaza had evinced their determination to overcome the pain of loss and their belief in the possibilities of rebuilding their lives, said Ms. AbuZayd, the first UNRWA chief to brief the Council. She noted that the conflict had further imperilled the authority of international law in the Middle East and had raised "hard questions" about the ability of the United Nations to be effective in its role as the custodian of international legality in that particular regional context.

Highlighting the Agency's early-recovery activities, including its quick response plan, which aimed, among other things, to help restore and strengthen primary education and health care, and establish emergency food aid, cash assistance and job creation programmes, she stressed that there were challenges that went well beyond the humanitarian realm. "They lie in the province of political action [and], for this reason, it is on this Council and its esteemed members that part of the burden of restoring normalcy to Gaza rests," she said.

She said that re-establishing law and order in Gaza would enable the identification of reliable local interlocutors to ensure the security of humanitarian personnel and operations, as well as the protection of civilians. She went on to say that all Gaza's borders needed to be opened and kept open continuously – on both the Egyptian and Israeli sides – to allow two-way freedom of movement for people, goods and cash, and critical negotiations to end the Israel-Hamas conflict should proceed in an inclusive and balanced manner.

From UNRWA's operational vantage point, she said that addressing such issues was fundamental to the success of early recovery and human development work, especially since reconstruction demanded open borders, and job creation would be fruitless without a self-sustaining employment market. Acknowledging the need to tackle the long unfinished business of ensuring a just and lasting solution to all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian question, she appealed to the Council to exercise its authority in ways that transformed into reality the shared dream of both Israeli and Palestinians for a secure, peaceful and prosperous tomorrow.

Also briefing the Council, and making a similar plea, was John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, who provided details on his 21-25 January visit to Gaza. Saying he had been shocked by the extent of the destruction and suffering, he added that, along with nearly 1,300 Palestinians killed and more than 5,300 injured, some 21,000 homes had been destroyed or badly damaged and Gaza's economic and civil infrastructure had been devastated, with damage to power, water, sanitation, medical, education and agricultural facilities widely visible.

Mr. Holmes, who is also Emergency Relief Coordinator, announced plans to launch, on 2 February, an "emergency appeal" as a prioritized plan for urgent needs. However, for the massive humanitarian and reconstruction effort that was required to be in earnest, there were two basic conditions that needed to be met: much freer access of goods and staff; and ensuring that relief agencies worked more effectively with Israeli officials and the Palestinian Authority, and dealt practically

with those in control on the ground.

On the critical need to open the border crossings, he said Israel had a particular responsibility as the occupying Power in that context, because of its control of Gaza's borders with Israel, to respect the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law. "It is, therefore, critical that new steps are taken immediately by the Israeli authorities to move to the sustained re-opening of crossing points," he said, stressing that improving the living conditions of Gaza's 1.5 million people was vital to avoid further despair and undermining the two-State diplomatic solution to the decades-old Middle East conflict.

"We already see relief goods piling up in Egypt for lack of ready access," he continued, acknowledging that the wider problems of the fragile situation had been demonstrated today. Following an incident in south Gaza, when an Israeli patrol was attacked and a farmer killed, all Gaza crossings had been shut down. Commercial goods must also be allowed in and out, and most urgently the cash needed for normal activity. "Gazans do not want or deserve to be ever more dependent on aid. They must be able to work and trade, to rebuild their economy, to use their manifest skills [...] to create hope for the future, not the despair that can only breed more violence and extremism," he said.

Mr. Holmes said that the Israeli Minister for Social Welfare, who coordinated Israel's facilitation of humanitarian assistance, had assured him of his Government's commitment to work with United Nations agencies and the rest of the humanitarian community to provide emergency assistance to the people of Gaza. However, the Minister had also suggested that many categories of items capable of dual use would raise continuing security concerns.

Here, Mr. Holmes emphasized the unacceptability of the status quo, with a limited trickle of items into Gaza continuing the effective collective punishment of the civilian population – and the resultant counterproductive reliance on tunnels for daily essentials, and further build-up of frustration and anger. Israel's security worries were understood, but he was confident that the passage of goods could be arranged in a way that would meet reasonable security concerns, he said.

On the ability to work effectively with the Israeli and Palestinian officials and deal practically with those in control on the ground, without any of the parties trying to exert political control over humanitarian operations, he had been encouraged that Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad had made it clear that meeting immediate needs should be kept separate from the politics, and that the United Nations and its partners had a unique role to play in that respect. Finally, he reiterated that it was in the long-term interests of all parties, including Israel, to ease conditions for the people of Gaza, by opening the crossings, facilitating the provision of assistance and allowing them to live, work and hope again.

The meeting began at 3:15 p.m. and ended at 3:45 p.m.

Briefings

Briefing the Council following his visit to the area from 21 to 25 January, JOHN HOLMES, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, said that he had expected a distressing situation, but had been, nevertheless, shocked by the destruction and suffering he had seen. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, whose figures had not been seriously challenged, around 1,300 Palestinians had been killed, and more than 5,300 injured, 34 per cent of them children. In short, 1 out of 215 Gazans had been either killed or injured during the three weeks of the conflict. Some 21,000 homes had been destroyed or badly damaged, according to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics.

At the height of the fighting, over 50,000 people had been displaced in UNRWA structures, with tens of thousands more sheltering with families and friends, he continued. Widespread destruction had been caused to Gaza's economic and civil infrastructure, with damage to power, water, sanitation, medical, education and agricultural facilities widely visible.

Continuing, he also remarked on the psychological trauma, "with nowhere safe in Gaza and nowhere to flee to", and recognized the extraordinary efforts of Gazan medical teams and first responders, as well as the staff of other United Nations agencies and the Red Cross and Crescent Movement, despite tremendous risks. Thirteen local medical staff and six United Nations staff had been killed; 34 health facilities had been damaged or destroyed; and aid workers and premises had come under direct fire "on too many occasions". He had seen the UNRWA compound warehouse still smouldering, and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs office in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) compound, where his own staff used to work, damaged beyond use.

"The reckless and cynical use of civilian installations by Hamas, and indiscriminate firing of rockets against civilian populations, are clear violations of international humanitarian law," he said. However, even taking into account Israel's security concern to protect its own civilian population, it was clear that there were major questions to be asked about the failure of the Israel Defense Forces to effectively protect civilians and humanitarian workers in Gaza. Given the scale and nature of the damage and loss of life, there were also obvious concerns about a lack of wider respect for international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of distinction and proportionality. There must be accountability.

But it was also critical to look at what must be done to bring urgent relief, he said. After 18 months of closure, the humanitarian situation in Gaza before 27 December had already been very worrying. A massive humanitarian effort was now needed in such areas as food security, nutrition, water and sanitation, shelter, essential repairs of power, roads and other basic infrastructure, rebuilding of the health system, rubble removal, unexploded ordnance and psychological care. As one example, 1.3 million Gazans, almost 90 per cent of the population, now needed food aid.

He outlined his plans to launch a flash appeal on 2 February, as a prioritized plan for urgent needs, expressing hope that "at least part of the generosity we saw during the fighting [...] can be channelled into flexible financial contributions to this multilateral appeal".

The first condition for the provision of assistance related to access for goods and staff. Israel had allowed increased shipments of basic commodities during the fighting and had continued that since. On good days, 120 truckloads of goods had got into Gaza, but the normal daily requirement, including commercial traffic, was a minimum of 500. Many humanitarian workers, including most international non-governmental organizations, continued to be refused regular entry. The power plant needed almost 500,000 litres of fuel per day to operate normally.

"We already see relief goods piling up in Egypt for lack of ready access," he said. The wider problems of the fragile situation had been demonstrated today. Following an incident in south Gaza, when an Israeli patrol was attacked and a farmer killed, all Gaza crossings had been shut down. Commercial goods must also be allowed in and out, and most urgently the cash needed for normal activity. "Gazans do not want or deserve to be ever more dependent on aid. They must be able to work and trade, to rebuild their economy, to use their manifest skills, energy and talent, and to create hope for the future, not the despair that can only breed more violence and extremism."

There were important principles at stake, as the Council itself had recognized in resolution 1860 (2009), which paid particular attention to the unimpeded provision and distribution of humanitarian assistance. Israel had a particular responsibility as the occupying Power, because of its control of Gaza's borders, to respect relevant provisions of international humanitarian law. It was, therefore, critical that new steps be taken immediately by the Israeli authorities to move quickly to sustained reopening of crossing points on the basis of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access. Many countries supported that. The crossings had to be opened up, not because Hamas wanted it or might benefit from it, but because the Gazans needed it.

The Israeli Minister for Social Welfare, who coordinated Israel's facilitation of humanitarian assistance, had assured him of his Government's commitment to work with United Nations agencies and the rest of the humanitarian community to provide emergency assistance to the people of Gaza. The two had agreed to

put in place new coordination arrangements to that end. However, the Minister had also suggested that many categories of items capable of dual use would raise continuing security concerns. In that connection, he emphasized the unacceptability of the status quo ante, with a limited trickle of items into Gaza continuing the effective collective punishment of the civilian population – and the resultant counterproductive reliance on tunnels for daily essentials, and further build-up of frustration and anger. Israel's security worries were understood, but he was confident that the passage of goods could be arranged in a way that would meet reasonable security concerns.

He said the second condition for successful emergency relief was the ability to work effectively with the Israeli authorities, cooperate closely with the Palestinian Authority, and deal practically with those in control on the ground, without any of the parties trying to exert political control over humanitarian operations. He had been encouraged that Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad had made it clear that meeting immediate needs should be kept separate from the politics, and that the United Nations and its partners had a unique role to play in that respect.

Clearly, the best context for the facilitation of relief and recovery, and the only reliable basis for long-term reconstruction, was Palestinian reconciliation, which the United Nations strongly supported, as the Secretary-General had made clear, he said. Meanwhile, the United Nations would be working closely with the Palestinian Authority in planning for longer-term recovery and reconstruction.

The people of Gaza continued to exist in what was effectively "a giant open-air prison, without normality of dignity", he continued. Their lives had been put at risk recklessly by indiscriminate rocket attacks from their midst, which had also killed, injured and traumatized Israeli civilians in southern Israel. They had now endured a terrifying assault, and must live with its devastating aftermath. That was not sustainable or acceptable and could only lead to more despair, suffering, death and destruction in the coming years, and perhaps fatally undermine the two-State solution that the international community sought. It must, therefore, be in the long-term interests of all parties, including Israel, to ease conditions for the people of Gaza, by opening the crossings, facilitating the provision of assistance and allowing them to live, work and hope again.

KAREN ABUZAYD, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) said that, in her tours of Gaza since the 18 January ceasefires, she had been deeply saddened to see what appeared to have been the systematic destruction of schools, universities, residential buildings, factories, shops and farms. She said the people of Gaza were shocked and saddened by the devastation: "Every Gazan projects a sense of having stared death in the face. Every Gazan has a tale of profound grief to tell." There was rage against the attackers for often failing to distinguish between military targets and civilians, and there was rage against the international community for having allowed first the siege, then the war, to go on for so long.

Yet, her interaction with the Palestinians of Gaza had also evinced their fortitude, their determination to overcome the pain of loss and their belief in the possibilities of rebuilding their lives. "I hope the international community will respond with urgency and resolve, to take advantage to generate recovery and renewal in Gaza," she said. To seize those opportunities, political action was needed to create the conditions that would allow humanitarian and human development activities to have the maximum impact on Palestinian lives. The priority for early recovery was to attend to basic human needs and basic rights, such as education, health care and the right to work. "In the simplest terms, the way forward is to help restore normal life to Gaza," she said.

UNRWA's early recovery activities were already under way, she continued, noting that some 200,000 refugee children had been helped to return to school last Saturday, while 50,000 displaced Palestinians who had taken refuge in UNRWA classrooms were being helped to rebuild their lives at home or in alternative accommodation. The Agency had prepared a quick response plan, the main components of which included restoring and strengthening primary education and primary health care; establishing emergency food aid, cash assistance and job creation programmes; repairing civilian homes and UNRWA facilities; supporting humanitarian community-based organizations; providing environmental health services in alliance with municipal authorities; and offering psycho-social support to the most traumatized Gazans, including to children in UNRWA schools. Surveys showed that the majority of Gazans suffered from shock and were clinically depressed.

Beyond UNRWA's focus on refugees, a coordinated inter-agency response was central to the success of the recovery process. That would harness the varied capabilities of the United Nations system, working in partnership with the Palestinian Authority, the World Bank and donor countries. She said that UNRWA considered its approach – incremental, service driven and designed to build on the substantial development investments the international community had made in Gaza over the years – the most effective way to ensure recovery and promote reconstruction. "The surest path to calm and stability is to create social and economic conditions in which Palestinians can sustain themselves and their families in dignity," she added.

There were challenges, however, that went beyond the humanitarian realm and lay in the province of political action. "For this reason, it is on the Council and its esteemed members that part of the burden of restoring normalcy in Gaza rests," she said, acknowledging that the burden was heavy, but stressing that it was far from insurmountable, if the international community, led by the Council, took concerted action in a number of key well-known areas.

Laying out priorities for the Council, she said law and order needed to be re-established in Gaza, which would enable the identification of reliable local interlocutors to ensure security for humanitarian personnel and the protection of civilians; all Gaza's borders needed to be opened and kept open continuously – on both the Egyptian and Israeli sides – to allow two-way freedom of movement for people, goods and cash; and negotiations to end the occupation and peacefully resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were now more vital than ever. The negotiations must be inclusive, balanced and allow for refugee representation, and address, along with other final status matters, the question of Palestinian refugees in a manner consistent with their rights.

Continuing, she said moves to investigate apparent contraventions of international law, including direct attacks on United Nations personnel and facilities, and accountability under the law where breaches were established must be pursued. She added that none of those goals was achievable without reconciliation among Palestinians and restoration of the integrity of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. From UNRWA's operational vantage point, addressing those issues was fundamental to the success of early recovery and human development work, especially since reconstruction demanded open borders, and job creation would be fruitless without a self-sustaining employment market.

She went on to say that through the days of violence, the humanitarian work of the United Nations had persevered, illustrating in concrete and often heroic ways, commitment to the principles of humanity on which the United Nations Charter was based. UNRWA staff had run the gauntlet of shelling, aerial bombardments and small arms fire to attend to the injured and to deliver food and fuel to hospitals, municipalities and the people of Gaza. She noted with deep regret that four of the Agency's staff had lost their lives during the conflict.

"What we witnessed in Gaza seared the global conscience with harrowing images of broken bodies and shattered homes, of thousands of Palestinian and tens of Israeli civilians [...] wounded, dying and fleeing from indiscriminate violence," she said, stressing that, while the guns might now have fallen silent, those images might well linger as a reminder of the futility of seeking military solutions to political problems, and of the peril of political inaction.

Those images of human suffering might also be the result of the international community's failure to protect those who had no part and no stake in armed conflict, she said, adding: "And I am afraid this war will be remembered for the absence of restraint among the combatants and disregard for principles of humanity and the sanctity of human life." Equally disturbing was that the conflict placed in further jeopardy the authority of international law in the Middle East and had raised "hard questions" about the ability of the community of States to be effective in its role as the custodian of international legality in that particular regional context.

While highlighting the need to tackle the long unfinished business of ensuring a just and lasting solution to all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian question, she appealed to the Council to exercise its authority in ways that transformed into reality the shared dream of both Israeli and Palestinians for a secure peaceful and prosperous tomorrow.

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