



## Press Conference

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

### **PRESS CONFERENCE ON GAZA BY UNITED NATIONS PALESTINE RELIEF AGENCY**

The Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Operations in Gaza today described the humanitarian plight of the people there as bewilderingly difficult and a struggle to survive on a daily basis, as the third year of the blockade approached and 18 months after the last round of conflict that had wreaked tremendous devastation.

Updating correspondents on the situation there, John Ging, speaking at a Headquarters press conference, said UNRWA's focus and preoccupation at the moment, in addition to all the other elements and dimensions of the recovery and reconstruction, was the registration for the next school year, because the agency was unable to accommodate thousands of children who were seeking a United Nations education and who, by United Nations resolution, had a right to a United Nations education. That education was apolitical, human rights-based, and carried out in violence-free schools. It was also not just about academic development, but the development of positive values and mindsets, he asserted.

The parents of Gaza, he went on, were voting overwhelmingly to exercise the right to have their children insulated and protected from the disruptive influence of their environment, and they were demanding that the international community accommodate their children in their schools. UNRWA had not been allowed to build a school in Gaza for three years and there was no proposal on the table at the moment to do so, he said.

In his view, there was need to move beyond "a truck for this and a truck for that" by addressing urgent needs. For UNRWA, that started with the schools. The only way to meet the needs of the thousands the agency was unable to accommodate was to get the construction of schools under way, now. "We have no credibility with the population to tell them, as the United Nations, that we can't do it. They expect us to find the way, to mobilize the support that is needed by whatever means and in whatever way to discharge our responsibility to the children," he said.

Further, he believed effectively addressing that issue mattered not only to the concerned children and to all others in the region concerned with how their children were educated, but also to the international community.

Continuing, he told reporters that the water and sanitation infrastructure and all that went with it in Gaza was in a state of collapse, as there was no legitimate economy anymore, nor was there any prospect of a restoration of it, because there was no commercial trade into or out of the area. That situation had led to the impoverishment of the people, and their physical, as well as psychological, suffering continued. As a result, people felt they were at their wits end in trying to understand when all that would come to an end.

In that gloomy picture, however, there had been some positive and much welcome developments recently, Mr. Ging said, and he urged the international community to seize upon every such positive opportunity, with the full recognition of not just what that did in terms of the physical relief, but also the psychological relief of seeing something positive happening.

He said the scale of recent developments in the area were best stated by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on his recent visit there, when he noted that the increases in access were a drop in the bucket. It was important to reflect on the Secretary-General's characterization in the context of the scale of the needs there, which was vast. The Sharm el-Sheikh conference last year had put the price tag on the reconstruction and recovery of Gaza at \$4.5 billion. The "easing" that had occurred in the last few weeks, whereby some supplies of wood and some clothing and aluminium had been allowed in, was welcome not only for the physical impact it had, but also for its psychological impact as a first positive step. Further, the development was also important for the practical proof it provided that it could be done. "So, if we can have 20 truckloads of aluminium a month; then why not 50? And if you can have 50, why not a 100?" he asked.

Continuing, he observed that the arguments that had been put forward to in some way excuse the blockade were now being undermined by those positive developments, because it was now demonstrated that there were ways of overcoming the security challenges, and such efforts needed to be capitalized on, keeping in mind the urgency of getting momentum going. As had been stated many times before, the entire undertaking had to be about the people, and he strongly believed it was time to put the people before the politics by prioritizing and focusing on their needs. If that were done, it would make the politics easier moving forward. "Ignore the people, abandon the people; leave the people to despair and desperation, and that would make the politics more difficult going forward," he said.

Mr. Ging said he agreed with a correspondent's characterization of the situation that the agreement on movement and access in Gaza was not being implemented, in that although the agreement had specified certain steps to be taken, those steps were never taken. He said the consequences of that were the

"bewildering human suffering and misery" for 1.5 million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip. And, in that context, he explained that was why there was no need for a new agreement, because a very detailed agreement was already in place, and all that was lacking was its implementation.

In response to another question, Mr. Ging said that "a drop in the bucket is not a half-full glass", and there was still a long way to go before he could be confident that his agency was going to have the sort of material impact on the daily lives of the 1.5 million people that had lived in such despair and anguish for so long. Asked to describe the crime situation in Gaza, given the fact that the area had neither a legitimate economy nor authority, after three years of blockade, he said, operationally, UNRWA enjoyed the respect of the population. Its operations and its staff were respected and there was no criminal activity or interference directed against its operations. He said he would leave it to human rights organizations to describe the crime rate, because that was not something that UNRWA as the humanitarian agency concerned itself with on a daily basis.

To another correspondent's question, he said another encouraging reality had been that high-level visitors, whether they were politicians or others, had enjoyed relative safety and had not been subjected to any criminal acts or even verbal attacks, and he said it was a "mischaracterization" of Gaza to call it a hostile entity. He also said that the supplies that were coming in through the illegal tunnels were being used to repair Government schools.

Asked to comment on the recent power blackouts, Mr. Ging said the problem and cause of those was the shortage of fuel, as there was not enough fuel to run the electricity plant to its capacity. This was also as a result of a dispute between the Palestinian de facto government in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. He asserted that the answer was for the two sides to put the interests of the people above the political divide and priorities and find the solution that was necessary.

"UNRWA had not been involved in that particular dispute because "frankly speaking, it's also time for Palestinians to stand up to their own responsibility," he said. "And yes, there has to be a solution for the people and it's in their hands to solve this particular problem."

He believed progress was made last week where an agreement was brokered between them on the transfer of money collected by the de facto Government in Gaza from electricity bills that were being issued. Although he understood there were some elements of dispute, he was hopeful those would be resolved quickly.

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