
REGULAR PRESS BRIEFING BY THE INFORMATION SERVICE

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Corinne Momal-Vanian, Director of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, chaired the briefing, which was attended by the Spokespersons for the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Spokesperson for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East briefed journalists by phone.

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The situation in the Gaza Strip

Nada Doumani, Press Relations Officer for [the International Committee of the Red Cross](#) said that a ceasefire, if adopted, might increase access to the population in need. The International Committee of the Red Cross was working on assistance and protection, as well as documenting violations of the international humanitarian law. Water was a problem which could quickly turn into catastrophe for the hundreds of thousands who were without water in Gaza. Repairs of water supply were being conducted in very difficult conditions. There was still a need to work on casualty chain management in hospitals, where the problem was not so much the shortage of medical material as much as how to cope with influx of casualties. Gaza already had a deteriorating infrastructure for the 1.7 million people who lived in a very small space, and the situation was worsened with the ongoing shelling and bombing. The fate of detainees in bombed Palestinian security offices was also an issue of concern. Structures of the Palestine Red Cross in Jabalya were shelled, and there were many displaced persons in Gaza.

Speaking by phone from Jerusalem, Sami Mshasha, for the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East](#) (UNRWA), said that the crisis in Gaza was entering its eighth day today and that the level of human loss and destruction was immense. There were 174 killed and well over 1,100 injured so far, but those numbers were increasing rapidly; a cause of concern was the large proportion of women and children among casualties. 560 homes were completely destroyed and thousands of other buildings damaged in Israeli airstrikes. There was as yet no thorough assessment of the destruction of public buildings but it was massive; 47 UNRWA installations had sustained various levels of damage. UNRWA was extremely worried that if the ceasefire being negotiated today did not succeed, a ground offensive and military incursion of Israeli into Gaza might unfold, which would bring more death to civilians and more destruction to civilian infrastructure in Gaza which was already in a very precarious state.

As of midnight last night 17,000 refugees sought refuge in 20 UNRWA schools which had been turned into temporary shelters as had been done in 2008 and 2009 and there were another 19 installations that could provide additional shelter to up to 50,000 persons. Mr. Mshasha stressed that people sought refuge in the UNRWA installations because they were marked as United Nations buildings and they felt safe there, however the 2008 experience showed that those buildings had been targeted in the fire. The Israeli Defence Forces must respect the United Nations buildings, and keep in mind that the UNRWA maintained a high degree of neutrality and made sure that all the people in those buildings were civilians in need of refuge. The UNRWA Commissioner-General, Mr. Pierre Krähenbühl, visited Gaza yesterday and called on the Israeli forces to put an end to the attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure and called on both sides to exercise maximum restraint and avoid further casualties among civilians.

Mr. Mshasha underlined that the latest bombings which had hit the Gaza Strip came after eight years of the blockade and hardship; today there were record-high poverty levels, and the fact that today 870,000 refugees received food stipend compared to only 80,000 in 2008 was an indicator of how much the situation had deteriorated. Unemployment among youth was 65 per cent and 80 per cent among women; the water and sewage networks were barely functioning and with sustained bombardment over the past eight days were as good as destroyed and 19 million litres of untreated sewage were flowing into the ocean every day because there was no electricity to treat it. The situation in Gaza was precarious as it was and the past days of bombardment did not help it at all, and the population, most of whom were children, were traumatized from the bombardment and from eight years of a blockade which was suffocating them. There was a sense of despair, anger and loss of hope among the youth of Gaza; there were high hopes for the ceasefire negotiations, and it was of a great concern that, if failed, the civilians of Gaza would, again, pay the ultimate price.

Answering a question about reported reluctance by the Hamas leadership to accept the ceasefire, the UNRWA said that they were monitoring the negotiations and stressed the high level of anticipation and hope of the people of Gaza that the ceasefire would take hold and their extreme worry that if that did not happen they would have to fend for themselves again and find ways to survive; it was sure that, failing the ceasefire, ground invasion would take place or air bombardment would resume and both were bad news for the Gazans.

Concerning the situation of displaced persons in Gaza and the return of internally displaced persons from the north of Gaza, Ms. Doumani from the International Committee of the Red Cross said that many people were staying with their families and friends, and in public buildings and that there was as yet no return.

Answering a question about the safety of displaced persons who found shelter in the UNRWA buildings, Mr. Mshasha said that GPS codes for the UNRWA installations designated as safe heavens or shelters had been provided to the Israeli military. He reiterated the concern that the experience of 2008 and 2009 when UNRWA installations got damaged, might be repeated. Those shelters were marked as United Nations buildings, which hosted people who fled and sought safety and this must be respected by both sides.

Answering another question, Mr. Mshasha said that the destruction of public infrastructure was massive and the number of homes that sustained damage, complete or partial was in thousands. Quick assessment of the destruction was a key task for the UNRWA once the hostilities eased. He also underlined that the funding situation was extremely difficult and the budget deficit was close to 70 million US dollars. The emergency appeal for Gaza was seriously underfunded too and a flash appeal was to be issued soon to ensure funding for the immediate needs of the population. Mr. Mshasha stressed the cyclical nature of the violence and destruction and the impact it had on the 1.6 million people who were exposed to it every two years or so.

Ms. Doumani stressed the need for respect of international humanitarian law and distinction between civilians and combatants and all parties to the conflict were reminded to respect those principles.

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