
Interview with John Ging, Director of Operations, Gaza, UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

20 January 2009 – **John Ging has been Director of Operations for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Gaza for the past three years, overseeing efforts to provide basic services – education, health, relief and social services – to some 750,000 registered Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip. He was a daily eyewitness to the three-week offensive Israel launched in December with the stated aim of ending Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza. In recent days, Mr. Ging has reported that more than 1,300 Gazans have died and over 5,000 have been wounded. Prior to his current post, he served in places like Lebanon, Rwanda and the Balkans.**

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, as he wound up a trip to several Middle East countries and to Gaza, said he was concerned about the potential long-term impact of the recent crisis on this entire society, and particularly young children. He paid tribute to the staff of UNRWA and noted that without their efforts, the suffering of thousands upon thousands of innocent people would have been all the greater.

UN News Centre: Did anything in your previous jobs prepare you for enormity of the present conflict in Gaza?

John Ging: In the late 1980s, I was in Lebanon as a UNIFIL [UN Interim Force in Lebanon] peacekeeper so I had some Middle East experience before I came to Gaza. Then I was in Rwanda for two years during the genocide and its aftermath. Afterwards, I moved to the Balkans for about nine years spending time between Bosnia and Kosovo. So you know I have worked through the period of ethnic cleansing. Every conflict has its own dynamic and its own complexities and I feel more and more, the common thread is human nature.

When we break it down, it's all about humanity or inhumanity. If you go back to the core, people are either humane or inhumane. I came from Ireland, where we grew up on a diet of listening to very divisive political rhetoric, propaganda, whatever you want to call it, from two sides of a religious divide and of course, I witnessed a transformation in my own country which has found solutions to what, when I was growing up, seemed unsolvable. So again, I draw some, if you like, confidence from being a national of a country that has found a way to solve its problems, and they were very difficult and resulted in massive loss of life. My colleagues here, both the international and national staff around me, are emblems of humanity and courage.

UN News Centre: In what capacity were you serving in Rwanda?

John Ging: I was the regional director with the Irish non-governmental organization GOAL for Rwanda, Zaire (at the time), Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda. We had humanitarian programmes, so we handled camp management, medicine, food aid and so on in the refugee camps, both inside Rwanda for displaced people and for those who fled Rwanda.

UN News Centre: As a child, did you ever imagine you would go into the international humanitarian field? When did this first dawn on you as a career path?

John Ging: Working in the Rwandan crisis brought me to a realization of the value of this type of work, and the contribution that you can make and the impact you can have on ordinary people. And it was from then on that I was convinced that this was the kind of work that I would prefer to do – when I hope to look back on my life, I want to measure my life's worth in terms of the difference you can make to the lives of ordinary people.

It's not about the accumulation of wealth, the rank you achieve or the position you hold. It's really the difference you make to the lives of ordinary people, that's what I value most – and it's a privilege to have the opportunity to do that. There go any of us but for our good fortune that we are not in that predicament ourselves.

UN News Centre: Coming back to Rwanda and the Balkans, do you feel that the UN did not do enough to protect civilians and it could have done more?

John Ging: I always try to distinguish between the staff on the ground and the institutional failures. Oftentimes, the staff on the ground have done a heroic job even if overall there's been an institutional failure. But looking back, it wasn't just the UN – there was a global community with collective responsibility. With genocide or ethnic cleansing or massive killing or destruction on a large scale, we need to look at ourselves and ask what we could have done better because each life is precious. And when it's lost on a large scale, we need to think about it seriously and it has to be addressed.

UN News Centre: How have you found inner strength in the last three weeks? Did you draw on your experience in Ireland or in Rwanda?

John Ging: I would say I drew it from the staff around me. I always look at the ambulance driver who races out the gates and into the front lines to rescue people. There were two sides to the conflict – the humanity and courage from ordinary people to do a phenomenal job to help their fellow human beings. And then you witness the consequences of inhumanity – that's the negative side. My colleagues here, both the international and national staff around me, are emblems of humanity and courage.

UN News Centre: What would you say to Israeli critics who may see you as biased in favour of Palestinians?

John Ging: I would welcome a right to reply. My experience here I take very seriously. You have to ensure that you keep perspective and that you always seek to understand all sides in a conflict. My personal experience was that I was attacked by Palestinians myself – after a short period, perhaps a year of being here and setting a certain course for the operation on the ground, my convoy came under fire. We were ambushed, and our armoured vehicle took 18 rounds. I had a superb and competent driver and that's why I am here to talk to you today. This happened the very same week when Alan Johnston was kidnapped, which was a crazy time here.

About two months later, we were attacked again when we were launching a big recreation programme for 200,000 children. The extremists here didn't like that and it was something they objected to quite strongly.

In my time here, I have dismissed staff who have been involved in politics, in militant activities, we've had major standoffs. We've certainly held a very clear line on zero tolerance; it's not a passive approach we take here, it's an active approach. So, I'm ready to answer any critics and to be accountable for my responsibilities as the Director of this operation of 10,000 staff that we uphold the values of the United Nations which include objectivity, impartiality and neutrality.

I've been here three years and in all of my time, I have had nothing but positive experiences of my interactions with all Israeli officials at every level, with civil society and the business community. I have the greatest respect for the Israeli people with whom I have interacted as I do for the Palestinian people. What is the greatest shame of all is that the two peoples here are much better than the political situation.

Time and again this is proven when I go out there and I talk to so many people. They are able to rationalize what is happening and the dynamic behind all of this, as they hope the Israeli people can also do likewise. They don't label them for the actions of a few. So civil society here do not support the firing of rockets into Israel terrorizing the people there and they hope the people of Israel appreciate that, just as they don't blame the people of Israel for the actions of their military. We've a lot of work to do to get a credible situation here so that both sides are fed a diet of truth, and so that we get rid of propaganda and build from a basis of truth on all issues.

UN News Centre: You have frequently used the analogy that "You don't shoot the hostages to get at the hostage-taker," but how do you convince people that Hamas can be negotiated with?

John Ging: Again, I don't want to stray into the political debate and I have to respect my role here and the role of others. The bottom line is what is wrong at the moment here is that the premise on which policies are based is flawed, and priority is not given to the interests of ordinary people. We have policies which are negative in their approach with an expectation that the more negative you are with sanctions, closures, military campaigns...that this is going to bring about a positive result. When in actual fact, it is self-evident that it only generates a negative response and it feeds into the ideology of extremism that is all grounded in despair, frustration, poverty and so on.

You come to the end of this conflict after three horrific weeks and the resolution of the conflict is found in political terms, which was the result of very active and intense diplomatic relations – why was that not possible before 1,300 people were killed or 6,500 were injured and all the destruction that took place? This is our failure and we need to take stock of that. We need to stop throwing out sound-bites with one side blaming the other. I'm not interested in the head-count. Everyone in Israel is entitled to live without the fear of these rockets – it has to stop. This is not legitimate resistance. We have to teach the Palestinian children here the difference between legitimate resistance and illegal resistance. If you are seeking justice, you have to live by the standards of justice.

Equally, on the other side, Israel cannot come along and say the extremists were using them as human shields and they were killed, as if it were a passive thing. You have to answer for your duty of care, you now know that they are using them as human shields, that's a war crime and that's contrary to international law, but what extra measures did Israel take to ensure that those poor civilians would not be killed? There have to be credible effective mechanisms of accountability for all the people injured and killed and the destruction caused. We want to impress on the minds of the people of Gaza and in Israel that the rule of law will prevail because the extremists would have them believe that the rule of the gun will prevail.

UN News Centre: There are stories of young children and pre-teens being taught hatred of Israel by Hamas. How does one deal with that?

John Ging: In UNRWA classrooms, we need to educate them according to UN standards. It is a unique opportunity and the wider environment is a reality we have to deal with. This school year, we are launching a comprehensive human rights programme which has, of course, been disrupted. We realize that there is a growing challenge to be faced. We are developing a much more comprehensive human rights curriculum which should have been under way by now. We will do so as we resume our education programme.

UN News Centre: So do you believe that the vast majority of people in Gaza want to live in peace with Israel?

John Ging: They have proven this time and again. Support for the recreation activities were attacked by websites from extremists groups denouncing UNRWA for having an agenda and encouraging parents not to send children to these programmes. This year some 250,000 children enrolled so the parents are sending a clear message of support. Half the population here are kids and know no other existence. The adult population do know another reality. They would travel to places like Ashkelon in the evening, they were working with Israel, they were friendly with Israelis. The ambition of so many people in Gaza is to get up every morning and to go to Israel to get to work – that's what they want to do.

Why are they prevented from going into Israel to work since they are vetted by Israel? This is one of the most sophisticated crossing points in the world, the Israelis are proud of it. Operationally, it is not possible for people to go in with a suicide belt. So why the political decision not to allow tens of thousands of people from going to work in Israel and make their living there, to bring their experience back to Gaza and to bring their reality on a human level to Israel? That's the problem of the last few years. The human to human interaction with both societies being cut off from each other has a detrimental impact as it dehumanizes the other side in the conflict.

UN News Centre: Do you feel that the vast majority, the silent majority of Gaza, accepts the Quartet peace plan?

John Ging: Of course, it's a fact. One has only to look at and analyze the situation and I'm not a political analyst per se. The elections were monitored, and the people were offered a choice in internationally monitored elections. They shouldn't be punished for making a choice offered to them. But they haven't been allowed to get on with their lives.

UN News Centre: But if the majority voted for Hamas and one of its electoral platforms was the destruction of Israel, what message does that send?

John Ging: The bottom line is I grew up on this. The image that sticks in my mind in recent periods is Ian Paisley (pro-British Protestant) and Martin McGuinness (pro-unified Ireland Catholic) as First Minister and Deputy at a press conference in Brussels in 2008. I grew up listening to them sending a message to their respective supporters that was very intolerant. Ian led the campaign against the peace agreement when 90 per cent were in favour of it. Yet in a period of ten years, he came around to sharing power with the adversaries that he claimed he never would.

It was a bitter conflict in Northern Ireland, two human beings who were extremely intolerant of each other for decades and inspired others to be the same. They resolved differences through the political process and came around to being a poster image of what was possible. They were genuinely smiling, side-by-side at Brussels, and certainly, it happened after over 30 years of that conflict. Of course, there were a lot of people who died and a lot of destruction.

We have to create a protective buffer between the political and the ramifications for the ordinary people. The poor people of Gaza have paid the price for the political issues – there should be a way of providing solutions while preserving the interests of the civilian population, as well as monitoring their mindset and orientation as you will have to come back to the people. You want to promote a state of mind that is rational and conducive to compromise.

UN News Centre: Is that the vision of reconciliation you have in mind as you think of the future?

John Ging: You must remember it was the people who demanded an end to the conflict in Northern Ireland and it brings me back to the conflicts in Rwanda and the Balkans. It all depends on the mindset and orientation of the people. I actually draw a lot of hope from my experience, limited as it is, with the Israeli side but which has been so positive. Also here in Gaza, the foundation is already in place – a good and decent people, civilized and politically sophisticated.