

# UN SECURITY COUNCIL EMERGENCY BRIEFING ON "THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST, INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION"



## UNRWA COMMISSIONER-GENERAL PHILIPPE LAZZARINI REMARKS

New York via video conference from Amman, Jordan

Mr. President,

Members of the Council,

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The last three weeks have been horrific. Almost everyone in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory and the broader region is in mourning.

The horrific attacks by Hamas in Israel on 7 October were shocking.

The relentless bombardments by the Israeli Forces of the Gaza Strip are shocking.

The level of destruction is unprecedented, the human tragedy unfolding under our watch is unbearable.

One million people, half the population of Gaza, were pushed from the north of the Gaza Strip towards the south in three weeks.

The south, however, has not been spared from bombardment, with significant numbers killed.

I have said many times, and I will say it again "no place is safe in Gaza."

Now, civilians remaining in the north are receiving evacuation notices from the Israeli forces, urging them south to receive scarce humanitarian assistance.

But many, including pregnant women, people with disabilities, the sick and the wounded, are unable to move.

What happened and continues to happen is forced displacement.

Over 670,000 displaced people are now in overcrowded UNRWA schools and buildings.

They live in appalling, unsanitary conditions, with limited food and water, sleeping on the floor without mattresses, or outside, in the open.

Hunger and despair are turning into anger against the international community, and in Gaza, the international community is better known as UNRWA.

**Mr. President,**

Nearly 70 per cent of those reported killed are children and women.

Save the Children reported yesterday that nearly 3,200 children were killed in Gaza in just three weeks. This surpasses the number of children killed annually across the world's conflict zones since 2019.

This cannot be "collateral damage."

Churches, mosques, hospitals, and UNRWA facilities, including those sheltering displaced people, have not been spared.

Too many people have been killed and injured whilst seeking safety in places protected by international humanitarian law.

The current siege imposed on Gaza is collective punishment.

Two weeks of full siege followed by the trickle of aid last week mean that:

- Basic services are crumbling.
- Medicine is running out.
- Food and water are running out.
- Fuel is running out.

The streets of Gaza have started overflowing with sewage, which will cause a massive health hazard very soon.

In the latest blow, the communications blackout over the weekend has aggravated the panic and distress of people.

The blackout meant that:

- People could not communicate with their loved ones inside Gaza to know who is dead and who is alive.
- They no longer knew whether they would receive bread from UNRWA.
- They felt abandoned and cut off from the rest of the world.

The communication blackout has accelerated the breaking down of civil order.

Panic pushed thousands of desperate people to head to the UNRWA warehouse and distribution centres where we store the food and other supplies we started receiving via Egypt last week.

A further breakdown in civil order will make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the largest UN Agency in Gaza to continue operating. It will also make it impossible to bring in convoys.

I say this while being fully aware that UNRWA is the last remaining lifeline for the Palestinian people in Gaza.

### **Members of the Council,**

UNRWA is calling on you for support.

I lost 64 colleagues in just over three weeks. The last tragic passing was 2 hours ago. Samir, Head of Security and Safety in the middle region was killed with his wife and eight children.

This is the highest number of UN aid workers killed in a conflict in such a short time.

My 13,000 colleagues in Gaza are from a community of 1.7 million Palestine Refugees, out of 2.2 million residents of the Gaza Strip.

Those who are alive, have, for the most part, lost relatives, friends, neighbours and are displaced like the majority of Gazans.

Many of my own colleagues now live, sleep and work in UNRWA shelters.

And yet, they are showing exceptional dedication to UN values. No words can do justice to thousands of UNRWA staff who continue to work tirelessly to support their community.

These are teachers, doctors, social workers, engineers and support staff. They are mothers and fathers. If they were not in Gaza, they could have been your neighbors, your friends.

They are operating 150 UNRWA shelters.

They are keeping one-third of our health centers open and run 80 mobile health teams.

They support the entry of humanitarian convoys and the storage and distribution of aid.

They distribute the little fuel we have left to hospitals, bakeries and shelters.

My UNRWA colleagues are the only glimmer of hope for the entire Gaza Strip, a ray of light as humanity sinks into its darkest hour.

But they are running out of fuel, out of water, out of food and medicine and will soon be unable to operate.

Let me be clear – the handful of convoys being allowed through Rafah is nothing compared to the needs of over 2 million people trapped in Gaza.

The system in place to allow aid into Gaza is geared to fail unless there is political will to make the flow of supplies meaningful, matching the unprecedented humanitarian needs.

**Mr. President,**

Gaza has over 2 million people, half of them children.

Gazans are vibrant, educated people who aspire to have normal lives, families, children, education, and dreams of a better future.

Today, Gazans feel that they are not treated as other civilians. Most of

them feel trapped in a war they have nothing to do with! They feel the world is equating all of them to Hamas.

This is dangerous. And we know this too well from previous conflicts and crises.

An entire population is being de-humanized.

The atrocities of Hamas do not absolve the State of Israel from its obligations under International Humanitarian Law.

Every war has rules, and this one is no exception.

Hannah Arendt said, "The death of human empathy is one of the first and most revealing signs of a culture that is about to fall into barbarity."

More than ever, Gazans deserve our empathy.

Its absence will deepen the polarization in the region and further push away any prospect of peace.

### **Mister President,**

While a lot of the focus is on Gaza, I wish to reiterate that another crisis is unfolding in the West Bank including East Jerusalem.

The United Nations has been sounding the alarm for months on the increased violence.

Palestinian fatalities this year are the highest since the UN started to keep records in 2005. At least 115 Palestinians have been killed since 7 October, including 33 children.

The movement restrictions imposed across the West Bank are impacting our services, including schools and health centres.

Meanwhile, the situation on the Israeli Lebanese border is getting worse, with regular exchanges of fire and civilian casualties reported.

**In conclusion,**

I am very worried about the potential spillover of this conflict beyond Gaza unless the following is enforced:

**First, there must be strict adherence to international humanitarian law.**

This means civilians and civilian infrastructure, including UN premises, schools, hospitals, places of worship, and shelters hosting civilians must be protected all over the Gaza Strip, north and south, and at all times.

This is not an option; it is an **obligation**.

**Second, we need a safe, unimpeded, substantial and continuous flow of humanitarian aid, including fuel, into the Gaza strip and across it.**

**For this we need an immediate humanitarian cease-fire.**

**Third, UNRWA still needs funds.**

We have the necessary and largest presence on the ground, we can deliver if we have the means and the resources, including the finances to pay staff on the frontlines.

UNRWA has received generous contributions towards its initial flash appeal. But without a fully funded core budget we cannot pay salaries and deliver.

**Finally,**

In these dark times, we must not lose sight of our humanity.

Our empathy should apply to all. Palestinians, Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The rules of war must be followed by all parties, at all times, in all places. Civilians must be protected, hostages released, and a genuine humanitarian response facilitated.

An immediate humanitarian ceasefire has become a matter of life and death for millions. The present and future of Palestinians and Israelis depend on it.

I urge all Member States to change the trajectory of this crisis, and work towards a genuine political solution.

Before it's too late, thank you.

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[UNRWA](#) is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations pending a just and lasting solution to their plight.

UNRWA operates in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, The Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Tens of thousands of Palestine refugees who lost their homes and livelihoods due to the 1948 conflict continue to be displaced and in need of support, nearly 75 years on.

UNRWA helps Palestine Refugees achieve their full potential in human development through quality services it provides in education, health care, relief and social services, protection, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance, and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.



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