

Humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory

Report to UN Security Council

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Briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East including the Palestinian question

Statement by John Holmes, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

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Thank you, Mr President, for this opportunity to brief the Council on the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. Ms. Kane's brief on the continued violence speaks for itself. I will not repeat what she has said on the increased number of civilians killed, the unacceptability of the continued firing of Rockets at Israel and of the attacks on the Gaza crossings. Allow me though to put things in a humanitarian perspective. What does this violence mean in humanitarian terms?

The situation in Gaza

Mr. President,

Attacks on civilians are from any perspective unacceptable. Under international humanitarian law, both Israel forces and Palestinian militants have an obligation to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants and to preserve civilians from undue violence and suffering. The continuous disregard in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel of these basic rules remains alarming and is to be condemned, including by this Council.

I would like to say that I welcome Israel's statement that the death of a Reuters cameraman on 16 April would be investigated. I look forward to the conclusion of this investigation. But I also hope that investigations will be launched on a systematic basis when civilians are killed as a result of military operations in the occupied Palestinian territory.

I would like also to highlight the humanitarian impact of the attacks by Palestinian militants on the Gaza crossings. I condemn these attacks as cynical and irresponsible. They contribute to a further escalation of violence, with all the risks of further human suffering that this entails. By putting in danger those trying to operate the crossing and by inevitably increasing the risk of further closures of the crossings, i.e. Gaza's lifeline, they are only likely

to lead to increased suffering for the population in Gaza. They cannot possibly help to end or ease the blockade of Gaza, but risk deepening and prolonging it. I hope and trust that the unacceptable threats we have heard from Hamas that the recent attacks are only a beginning or “practice” are not serious.

Let me illustrate this point. Prior to the 9 April attack on the Nahal Oz fuel crossing, approximately 65% of the fuel needs of the Gaza power plant was being met by imports through the Nahal Oz fuel terminal. Because of the attack, the Nahal Oz was closed from 9a to 21 April, except for two days. Had Nahal Oz not been able to reopen today, the power plant would have shut down and most areas of Gaza would have experienced increased electricity cuts.

Equally critical are the low levels of fuel to meet transportation needs due to the continued closure of Nahal Oz. Even before the 9 April attack, import levels of diesel and petrol had been significantly reduced, with no petrol imported since 18 March and no diesel since 2 April. Vehicular traffic has effectively been brought to a standstill. The impact of the low import levels of petrol and diesel has been exacerbated by the refusal of the Palestinian Petrol Stations Association to distribute the supply that does exist, in protest against the low levels of imports. I fail to see how this can help in any way and hope again this is not dictated by politics.

15-20% of the population now receives water for only 3-5 hours every four days, with serious consequences on daily hygiene. Sixty thousand cubic meters of raw and partially treated sewage continue to be dumped daily into the Mediterranean Sea. Student and teacher absences at schools and universities have reached a level as high as 20% due to the lack of fuel for transport. All classes at Gaza's four main universities were suspended last week. Most fishing vessels are grounded, which will lead to the loss of the sardine season.

Humanitarian agencies are also severely affected. UNRWA's fuel supplies will be exhausted on 24 April. In an effort to save fuel, UNRWA has prioritized food distribution, solid waste removal and sewage projects. It has stopped all monitoring activities and as of 14 April, roughly half of the 1,240 vocational students usually transported by contractors have not been able to attend their classes. As of tomorrow, UNRWA will discontinue its food assistance to 650,000 refugees as well as its garbage collection services benefiting 500,000 Gazans. Another 500,000 Gazans are already living in twelve municipalities without any solid waste management capacity.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains grave in other ways. The level of truck imports increased significantly in March, with 3,399 truckloads of commercial and humanitarian goods being allowed in. This compares positively to the 1,827 and 1,782 truckloads allowed into the Strip in January and February respectively. However, it still represents only 31% of what was allowed in the Strip in March 2007. Moreover, the variety of goods entering Gaza remains minimal. Only food, cattle, medical and cleaning supplies are entering on an ongoing basis. Shortages of daily necessities fluctuate, bringing corresponding price increases in accordance with supply and demand. Clearly the improvement in March was threatened by the attack on Kerem Shalom crossing on 17 April, which led to the closure of the crossing. I am glad to see that trucks were allowed through the Sufa crossing on 22 April, but this is fragile and unsatisfactory at best. Again, the population of Gaza is paying the price for Hamas' attacks.

Currently, no materials are entering for UN humanitarian infrastructure projects. Despite assurances, UNRWA has also not received approval for the import of materials needed for the annual summer games the agency facilitates for 250,000 children. UNRWA also has had to negotiate the entry of its payroll for the five months since November 2007.

During my last brief to the Council, on 26 February, I stressed the urgency of reopening the Gaza crossings in order to avert a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation. My message remains the same, except that the re-opening of the crossings has become even more urgent today than it was two months ago. Until humanitarian and commercial goods and staff are allowed into the Strip in sufficient quantity and in a sustained manner, the humanitarian situation in Gaza will continue to deteriorate. It is therefore critical that workable arrangements acceptable for all those concerned be reached with the shortest delay. That is what we have been trying to achieve in our contacts with the Israeli authorities. Whatever the actions of Hamas, the Israelis still have the responsibility to allow the supply of the population with their basic needs and to avoid the kind of collective punishment we have been seeing. We will go on working with Israel in order to improve the situation as far as we can.

The situation in the West Bank.

Mr. President, Ms. Kane briefed you on the removal of checkpoints in the West Bank and the analysis of this by the OCHA office in Jerusalem. Like her I welcome the removal so far, but underline the urgency to do much more in order to improve access and ease the lives of ordinary Palestinians. As I said in my briefing on 26 February, it is the cumulative effect of these closures with the continuing expansion of the settlements, the extension of the Barrier and a cumbersome permit regime which does so much to aggravate the humanitarian conditions in the West Bank and undermine belief in the possibility of an early political settlement.

Restrictions on UN operations have meanwhile continued to increase in the West Bank, with the installation of Israeli civilian police at checkpoints causing significant delays and security concerns to UN staff crossing from the West Bank into Jerusalem. UN agencies experienced 139 access incidents just during the month of March, compared to the 63 incidents reported in February. As a result of these incidents, UNRWA alone lost more man-hours in one month than they had during the whole of 2007.

In this context, I am alarmed by the decision of Israeli authorities to reduce the number of checkpoints allowed for the passage of humanitarian goods into the West Bank and to request further security clearance for UN vehicles, staff and contractors. In a context of already limited access, the accumulation of such measures will have a serious impact on humanitarian operations. Hence, humanitarian agencies already foresee a significant increase in the cost of humanitarian operations and important delays in the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those in need in 2008 if these measures are implemented.

I therefore call on the Israeli authorities to reconsider these measures and to engage in further discussions with the humanitarian community. We are certainly ready on our side. I believe that if we can engage in a constructive dialogue, we can agree on adequate mechanisms that would address both Israel's legitimate security concerns and relief organisations' urgent need for improved access.

Mr. President, as I have said before, it is my views that the facts and realities on the

ground in both Gaza and the West Bank have to change to transform the prospects for the peace agreement, which alone can resolve the underlying issues. I hope we will see progress in this direction soon.

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