

**MS. LISA DOUGHTEN, DIRECTOR, FINANCING AND
PARTNERSHIPS DIVISION, UN OFFICE FOR THE
COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS, ON BEHALF OF
ACTING UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN
AFFAIRS AND EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR MS.
JOYCE MSUYA**

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Briefing to the Security Council on Gaza

13 August 2024

As delivered

Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

Here we are again, in the aftermath of yet another horrendous episode in this brutal war in Gaza.

Like Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo, we are deeply horrified by the strike on Al Tabi'een School in Ad Daraj by Israeli forces on Saturday.

The school was sheltering several hundred displaced families, many of whom had moved there because of recent evacuation orders. And the strike was conducted during dawn prayers.

Initial reports suggest that this was one of the deadliest attacks on a school sheltering displaced people since the start of this conflict.

Tragically, this was far from an isolated incident.

Indeed, such attacks appear to be occurring with increasing frequency.

The most recent incidents include three schools hit within 48 hours between 3 and 4 August and two schools hit on 8 August, all in Gaza City, with Al Tabi'een on Saturday the latest such attack.

According to OHCHR [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights], this is at least the 21st strike on a school that has been serving as a shelter recorded since 4 July this year. Scores of people have been killed in these strikes, among them women and children.

Mr. President,

Sadly, these large-scale incidents are, sadly, only some of the myriad ways in which this horrendous conflict is causing unbearable suffering and devastation.

Unremitting violence in Gaza has now killed almost 40,000 Palestinians and injured more than 90,000 others, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. Some 10,000 people remain unaccounted for and are thought to be buried under the rubble.

And as of 9 August, an estimated 115 hostages remain captive in Gaza, despite repeated demands for their release, including hostages who have been declared dead and whose remains are in Gaza.

The health situation in Gaza remains critical and the healthcare system is barely functional, providing brave but limited support for the injured and the sick; for the women in childbirth; and against rapidly spreading disease. Thousands of patients in critical conditions are on waiting lists for medical evacuations.

More than 60 per cent of residential buildings and 65 per cent of the road network have been damaged or destroyed, according to recent UN analysis.

In just two weeks, more than a quarter of a million people have been displaced, often on multiple occasions.

Evacuation orders – supposedly for civilians’ security – are clearly having the opposite outcome.

Civilians are repeatedly asked to evacuate to areas where essentials for their survival are absent.

They are repeatedly being killed and injured in the very places they have been told were safe to go.

Shelters and displacement camps are reportedly used for military purposes by Palestinian armed groups, exposing those sheltering there to terrible danger.

Overcrowding in these places is putting immense strain on already severely stretched water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Acute respiratory infections, diarrheal illnesses, acute jaundice syndrome and skin infections are all surging.

And – very worryingly – with school immunization programmes practically impossible, polio looms as a new threat after six circulating poliovirus strains were detected in environmental samples in June. As a matter of urgency, health workers must be allowed to carry out an immunization campaign.

This war is destroying lives, dreams and futures.

More than half a million students have lost an entire academic year, with 39,000 students missing their final exams. Even if this war were to end today, we estimate that at least 8 in 10 schools would require rehabilitation.

And we must not discount the immense emotional and psychological trauma this war has had on children – indeed, people of all ages – trauma that they will carry for the rest of their lives.

It bears repeating: There is no protection of civilians in Gaza. Alongside the relentless mass displacement within Gaza, many thousands of Palestinians have left and many more are trying to.

As this conflict persists and lives are threatened daily, civilians must be allowed to seek protection. Those displaced must also be guaranteed the right to voluntarily return.

What we are seeing in Gaza is the result of a war waged with pitiful – if any – regard for the requirements of international law.

I share the Secretary General's and others' deep concern about violations of international humanitarian law being committed throughout this conflict.

Mr. President,

In the middle of this spiralling catastrophe in Gaza, the humanitarian community doggedly continues efforts to mount an effective response.

We do what we can to increase food assistance, provide education support and boost hospital capacity. Efforts are also ongoing to avert the spread of polio.

And senior UN officials continue discussions with stakeholders, including senior Israeli officials, to increase the flow of aid into the Gaza Strip and improve conditions for delivery on the ground.

However, as things stand, access constraints and high levels of insecurity severely hamper the humanitarian response.

Aid entering Gaza has more than halved since the Rafah ground operation began and Rafah crossing was abruptly closed in early May.

New limits imposed by Israeli authorities on bringing cash to Gaza are significantly limiting the resources available for operations.

Fuel shortages mean water supplies have fallen as low as 2 litres per person per day – far below the 15 litres required.

Organised crime and looting along the route used by humanitarians dispatching cargo from Kerem Shalom crossing continue to hinder aid delivery.

Access to people in need remains a challenge. The increase in bureaucratic and administrative impediments, such as delays in visa issuance and renewals for broader operational support and management is severely impacting the response.

And our concerns for the safety of staff keep growing, with attacks on or near aid vehicles that have been coordinated on the rise. Recently, within a 12-day period, there have been four shooting incidents involving UN convoys, including on a vehicle carrying children on their way to be reunited with their father. NGOs and the Palestinian Red Crescent all report similar attacks.

The result is that hundreds of thousands of people are not getting the life-saving humanitarian assistance they so desperately need.

Mr. President,

How much longer can this continue?

How many more tragedies such as the one in Al Tabi'een School must happen before action is taken?

Can this Council look the children, the people of Gaza and all those affected by this war in the eye – as humanitarian workers have to do every single day – and swear that no stone has been left unturned to end their suffering?

The urgent requirements – so often repeated – remain the same:

First, an immediate cessation of hostilities and a sustained ceasefire.

Secondly, strict adherence to international humanitarian law by all sides. This entails releasing all hostages. It also entails protecting civilians, and meeting their essential needs, including by ensuring the unhindered provision of humanitarian assistance throughout Gaza, as ordered by the International Court of Justice, including through UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East].

And lastly, as we have said before in this context, all Member States must use all their leverage to prevent and stop violations of international humanitarian law, including through diplomatic and economic pressure, and conditioning arms exports on compliance with the rules of war, and cooperation in combating impunity.

We must remember that this is now one of several conflicts in Gaza over the years which humanitarians have had to respond to – conflicts that the population in Gaza was never afforded the ability to recover from or repair. The past ten months have destroyed what little hope for a future existed for any surviving child.

I urge this Council and all Member States to use your influence to protect civilians and bring an end to this conflict and its intolerable toll.

It is imperative that mutual security and lasting peace is pursued, so that hope can be restored, so that civilians there can enjoy the hope that we take for granted and the hope they have never experienced.

Thank you, Mr. President.