

**MR. MARTIN GRIFFITHS, UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN  
AFFAIRS AND EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR**

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**Transcript of Press Briefing on the Humanitarian Situation in Gaza**

*Geneva, 7 December 2023*

Thank you very much, thank you very much indeed.

Today marks two months to the day since the start of the Gazan tragedy. That day, October the 7<sup>th</sup>, with the terrible events that happened to the people of Israel living near Gaza, and that led to the terrible events that continue to this day.

And the message that we have been giving – we here being the humanitarian community, and I represent the humanitarian community writ large, not just the United Nations – is that we do not have a humanitarian operation in southern Gaza that can be called by that name anymore. That the pace of the military assault in southern Gaza is a repeat of the assault in northern Gaza. That it has made no place safe for civilians in southern Gaza, which had been a cornerstone of the humanitarian plan to protect civilians and thus to provide aid to them. But without places of safety, that plan is in tatters.

And so what we have at the moment in Gaza – northern Gaza, even more difficult – but in Gaza, where we have trucks still crossing daily through the Rafah crossing, is at best humanitarian opportunism, to try to reach through some roads which are still accessible, which haven't been mined or destroyed, to some people who can be found, where some food or some water or some other supply can be given. But it's a program of opportunism. Its erratic, it's undependable, and frankly, it's not sustainable.

It's as a result of this declaration and judgment by the humanitarian community, the global humanitarian community, that the Secretary-General of the United Nations [António Guterres], as you know, wrote yesterday to the President of the Security Council, invoking for the first time ever in his tenure as Secretary-General, Article 99 of the [UN] Charter, which speaks of the threat to international peace and security of a specific event, as raised by and in the judgment of the Secretary-General.

Now, I don't want to end these opening remarks without saying one more important thing, and that is this: That even while we have said, enough, done, finish, stop the fighting, let's have that immediate ceasefire, that doesn't mean to say that humanitarians are themselves running for cover.

We're still negotiating, and with some promising signs at the moment, access through Kerem Shalom – that other crossing, as you know, to the [east] of Rafah, from Israel into Gaza – which

has been such a feature of discussion these many weeks. And there are some promising signs now that that may be able to open soon.

And we're still at it. We are still in Gaza. [The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] UNRWA is still in Gaza. My Office [for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] is still there. We are still unloading trucks in the Rafah crossing.

But what we don't have is any sense of clarity of planning, is any sense of what's going to happen tomorrow.

And to be specific, none of us can see where this will end. None of us can see where the people crammed into that southern pocket of Gaza will go, those 2 million people, what do they think their futures are.

I have just come from a meeting with my own staff around the world, buried in the tragedy of conflicts, and they have spoken to me this morning now about two things. One is that in Gaza, there is no exit for the people of Gaza. And the other is, in Gaza, as a result, hope for the future is, at its best, at a premium.

So our humanitarian program is no longer a functioning one – it is one of response to opportunity. Yet we are still trying to build a new access point. And the Secretary-General has clearly, evidently and quickly renewed his advocacy for what must be the only serious policy response to this globally, which is: Silence the guns.

Thank you.

**Q:** Mr. Griffiths, a question regarding the promising signs on the possible opening of the Kerem Shalom crossing – what are these promising signs? Thank you.

**Under-Secretary-General Griffiths:** Thank you very much indeed, very specific – we've been arguing in favor, obviously, for the opening of Kerem Shalom for months, I mean, not for months, for weeks. These negotiations have been taking place in a committee called the COGAT [Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories] committee, which meets daily and nightly, where the Israeli Government is represented, as is the US by the way, as well as the Egyptians and the United Nations, my own office is present. And in that milieu, in that environment, we have been arguing for the opening of Kerem Shalom – not just as an opening to allow trucks to go through there to then go through Rafah and then up into Gaza, but to go straight through Kerem Shalom up into the northern parts of Gaza, or where the need is greatest. Now, of late, in these most recent days in those discussions, there have been some signs that the Member States, related to that, Egypt and Israel obviously are related to that, have become much more open to the idea of opening Kerem Shalom, probably not in one go, but certainly gradually.

Secondly, I have a representative, as we speak, in Jordan, already lining up the potential deliveries of aid by land from Jordan, which could come straight through from Jordan over the Allenby bridge, straight to Kerem Shalom – that's one entry point to Kerem Shalom. If we get that, well, it'll be the first miracle we've seen for some weeks, but it will be a huge boost to the

logistical process and logistical base of a humanitarian operation. It doesn't mean to say that it will solve the security problems that of course I've spoken about, but it would change the nature of humanitarian access.

**Q:** Swiss news agency – if that doesn't happen and if the situation goes on like it is today, how long do you think there will be still a possibility to go on with at least that humanitarian opportunism? And how long will Palestinian population bear it?

**Under-Secretary-General Griffiths:** I think the second part of your question is the killer: How long would the Palestinian people of Gaza bear this? Because they're being pushed further and further south. They tell everyone every day, we tell everyone every day, there's no place of safety. There's no safe zones. People aren't even talking about safe zones anymore. So they're being pushed south. We know Israel has a very firm policy of no entry for the people of Gaza into Israel for reasons I think we can all understand. But that pressure, that pressure will grow exponentially over these days. The humanitarian activities, as you say, humanitarian opportunism – it can't be a humanitarian program, that will be too ample a description of it – that will continue so long as there are people in Gaza there and trucks that can cross into Rafah. That will not stop.

The people of Gaza should know, do know, that the aid agencies that they have relied on, God help us, these many decades, will not desert them at this time. But the prospects for safety for those million or more people forced into that southern pocket – your guess is surely as good as mine – that we ain't seen the end of this movie. We'll see more of that.

And we will see more pressure, and we haven't even begun to talk about the impact of the increase in violence in the West Bank. The worry about violence in Lebanon, the anxieties in Jordan of an outflow into Jordan. I was in Amman last week with Their Majesties convening a very practical operational meeting about what needs to be done to help the people of Gaza where they are. What's happening in Gaza is forcing the people of Gaza to choose where to be and to choose on the basis of violence – and pressure.

**Q:** France24 – thank you for being with us. A question related to security. We've seen recently that civilians, WHO [World Health Organization] or humanitarians, journalists, are openly targeted by Israeli forces. How will you be sure that the convoys with humanitarian aid will not be targeted? What will be the evidence that will be given by the Israeli forces? Thank you.

**Under-Secretary-General Griffiths:** First of all, it is very good question because plans for deliveries, convoys, whatever, although a convoy sounds a bit surreal in the context of the current situation in southern Gaza, are discussed every day or every night in this committee that I've spoken of, the COGAT committee. But relying on the safety of those convoys is something that is also at a premium, also in doubt. Because there has been so much evidence of attacks, for example, on people moving, they thought safely from the north, remember from hospitals in the north, south, and yet being bombed on their way south.

And that's why this notion, this statement, that there is no place of safety in Gaza relates also to humanitarian operations, which means that if you're planning a humanitarian delivery in Gaza

today, you must, you must plan for the likelihood that it will be interrupted, that it may be attacked, that it may be looted, that it may be stopped, it may be diverted, that it may not succeed. You cannot, as we do in most other places around the world, assume that a plan that has been agreed between parties is one that will go through without incident.

And I think that uncertainty about the likelihood of aid reaching people in need is yet another aspect of the absence of hope for the people of Gaza because they don't know when their next aid will come from and where from. What they do know is that the destruction of the health system, and I think Dr. Tedros [Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General,] today has made an announcement of the demise of yet another hospital of the few remaining hospitals that work, that the erosion, that elimination, the destruction of the health system has meant that disease, hunger, deprivation, challenges bombing as a cause of death and wounding of the people of Gaza.

There are two horsemen of the apocalypse in Gaza today – conflict, of course, but also disease. And that will only get worse, as we are unable to sustain any supplies to hospitals, any safe water desalination and so on and so forth. So the vectors, the signs, the pointers are going in the wrong direction, all of them.

**Q:** Actually, today, we saw photos and videos showing the arrest of dozens of Palestinians in northern Gaza, including a journalist called [inaudible], he is one of my friends. I saw him in one of the videos among the detainees. Do you have any ability to know the fate of those people or to deliver aid or help to them? And does Israel cooperate with you regarding providing information about the detainees since the 7<sup>th</sup> of October? And we know the number of those detainees are more than 2,700 people. At the same time, we hear the United Nations repeatedly talking about Israeli detainees detained in Gaza. How do you classify Palestinians detained by Israel since October the 7<sup>th</sup>? And why don't you talk about them at the same level as the Israeli detainees? Thank you.

**Under-Secretary-General Griffiths:** I am not a lawyer, so I am not somebody getting into defining what is the name for one person and the name for another. For a humanitarian, people who are in need are all civilians in need unless they are combatants, whether they are detained or not. The release of hostages and also of Palestinian prisoners, which happened in that seven-day pause last week, showed us very clearly in every single take of their reuniting with their family, reminded us what humanity is. A seven-day pause also allowed us to do some repair of systems, restocking of plants, preparation and aid.

We do not distinguish, as humanitarian agencies, in terms of need between those detained by either side. We want hostages released. We have said it every time, we say that publicly. We decry, that's a painfully weak word, we have deplored the taking of those hostages back on October the 7<sup>th</sup>. We deplore the detention of civilians, we deplore the killing of civilians, more than either, and we deplore the lack of our ability to function effectively for the benefit of those civilians, but we do not discriminate according to nationality.

**Q:** Thanks very much. It's a couple, I hope you don't mind. I mean, you were talking about the situation in Gaza and now obviously your focus is on the short term, but I am just wondering,

when you look at what's happening, if you think Gaza can ever be livable in the foreseeable future, given the destruction? And my other question is really about your trust with Israel. Your relationship of trust, because the UN Resident [and Humanitarian] Coordinator [Lynn Hastings], you know, her visa is not going to be renewed. There has been quite a lot of, what here in Geneva, people would say is misinformation, even disinformation, about the role of humanitarian agencies, including the UN. I mean, what is your feeling? How do you approach that? Must be quite awkward.

**Under-Secretary-General Griffiths:** It is occasionally awkward, but I visited Israel, now about 10 days ago, had meetings with Israeli officials, and they were very constructive. They introduced me, by the way, to some of the families of the hostages, which was very important for me, to be able to speak to them and hear their direct experience. The Israeli contingent, which is in that negotiating committee that I mentioned earlier, COGAT, negotiates constructively, every day, is not absent, is always present, as is my office, of course, as are the Egyptian representatives, as well as the US representatives. So we continue to negotiate as we do everywhere in the world – on the basis of humanitarian principles and with humanitarian aspirations. Now, I have publicly said that it is wrong to decry the reputation of my colleague, the Humanitarian Coordinator Lynn Hastings, for whom I have a great respect, and who leads our team in the Occupied [Palestinian Territory] and has done so for some time. Not always an easy job, always demanding, always requiring neutrality. And Lynn is one of those who has all those values in a very good place. So it is always distressing for me, as it has been in a very different way for the Secretary-General, to be criticized for what we believe is doing our job. But we will continue to do so.

And although there may be awkward moments, there are also moments of achievement and that is why I was glad to say earlier on that there are those promising signs that I mentioned, which are promising signs in negotiations with the Israeli authorities over the opening of Kerem Shalom. Let us not lose our faith in the possibilities of humanity.

Thank you.