

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ursula Mueller – Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in the occupied Palestinian territory

UN Headquarters, New York, 21 January 2020

As delivered

Mr. President,

Thank you for the opportunity to update the Council on the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory.

I have just returned from a six-day mission to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, where I heard from Palestinian and Israeli people, as well as representatives of the international community and humanitarian partners. These meetings conveyed hardships and challenges and opportunities for positive change.

Today, Palestinian families throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in Gaza, struggle to live in dignity across a fragmented territory. One in every two Palestinians – some 2.4 million people – need humanitarian aid in 2020, due to a protection crisis stemming from occupation, the blockade on Gaza, recurrent cycles of violence, and over a decade of Hamas control which has fueled the internal Palestinian political divide. Widespread humanitarian access and civilian movement restrictions, rising demolitions and destruction of property, the excessive use of force, restrictive planning regimes, forced displacement, and impediments to livelihood and economic opportunity, combine as drivers of chronic vulnerability and humanitarian need. Humanitarian partners work to meet those growing needs in the face of increasing constraints on operations and record-low funding.

In Gaza, I met Salwa, a 53-year-old cancer survivor who told me how she was overwhelmed with a sense of fear and devastation while battling her illness and trying to care for her family. She was allowed to leave Gaza to receive medical treatment in the West Bank, but her permit was subsequently denied without explanation, interrupting critical treatment, deepening her anxiety and creating a sense of hopelessness.

I also met Anas, a 24-year-old medical graduate who spoke about the limited options for youth and how movement restrictions have severely curtailed opportunities for a productive life. He expressed concern that the energy and passion of Palestinians in Gaza is being lost, making young people more susceptible to extremism and driving too many to attempt suicide.

These stories underscore the fragility in Gaza. But I also saw tremendous potential. Young women like Bissan, who, at the age of 21, has already started a charity to help. Razan, another young woman, told me “we have people here with high skills and abilities, with innovative ways of thinking, but we need opportunities.”

In 2019, violence during the Great March of Return demonstrations at the Gaza fence caused injury and claimed lives. Since March 2018, over 210 Palestinians, including 46 children, were killed and another over 8,000 shot with live ammunition. While there have been fewer casualties in the latter part of 2019, we continue to have concerns about Israel’s excessive use of force during these demonstrations, and the instrumentalization of Palestinian children by Hamas.

The large number of injuries from these demonstrations has overstretched Gaza’s already limited health services, which suffer from acute shortages in drugs, personnel, equipment and electricity. Over 1,200 people have required limb reconstruction and some 150 have undergone amputations; all of them need long-term rehabilitation. The World Health Organization has also reported over 200 incidents involving health workers in Gaza in 2019, resulting in 270 injured.

Since the start of 2019, there have been multiple escalations in hostilities between armed groups in Gaza and Israel, most of which have fortunately been contained thanks to an intense joint United Nations and Egyptian mediation effort. Nevertheless, 29 Palestinian civilians, as well as some 33 members of armed groups, were killed in Israeli airstrikes and five Israeli civilians were killed by Palestinian indiscriminate rocket fire. I urge all parties to take all feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm in the course of hostilities.

Unemployment in Gaza is at 45 per cent, with youth unemployment at over 60 per cent. Some 46 per cent of the population live below the US\$5.50 poverty line and an estimated 60 per cent of households are food insecure. The youth I met in Gaza, like anywhere else in the world, simply ask for peace and the opportunity for a productive life.

While the Government of Israel’s efforts to ease movement by increasing the number of permits for people to leave Gaza is acknowledged, the rate of approval of permit applications for patients to leave Gaza through Erez crossing for medical treatment was 65 per cent, on average, in 2019. According to UNICEF, over a third of children who left Gaza for medical treatment between October 2018 and July 2019, were unaccompanied by a parent, who was not allowed exit.

It is also acknowledged that efforts have been made by Israeli authorities to ease the import and export of goods and to reduce the number of restricted items on the dual-use list. However, significant limits remain that undermine the economy and impede the ability to improve essential services and infrastructure. This is exacerbated by the longstanding political and administrative Palestinian divide which has reduced the capacity of service providers in Gaza to provide basic services. Nearly half of essential medicines and around 30 per cent of essential supplies are at less than one month’s

supply. According to the World Health Organization, Israel's restrictions on imports have impacted access to medical supplies and maintenance of medical equipment.

Amid a decline in external aid, high unemployment and economic recession, vulnerable people in Gaza are trapped in a cycle of deepening poverty and insecurity, with few opportunities to become self-reliant. They are resorting to harmful coping mechanisms, impacting children the most. UNICEF reports rising rates of school dropout, child labour and child marriage and an estimated 270,000 children suffer from some form of mental disorder.

Similarly, I have seen how the lives and well-being of residents in Israeli communities around Gaza are disrupted by rocket fire from Palestinian armed groups, with mental health impacts, particularly among children.

Within this bigger picture, however, there is room for cautious optimism:

- The number of people permitted by the Israeli authorities to leave Gaza increased by 46 per cent in 2019, compared to 2018, and reached the highest level since 2007;
- The volume of goods exiting Gaza increased by 20 per cent, compared to 2018. December 2019 witnessed the largest number of goods exiting in any month, also since 2007;
- The number of people leaving Gaza through the Egyptian-controlled Rafah crossing increased by nearly 40 per cent in 2019, compared to 2018;
- Israel expanded the permissible fishing area along the southern and central parts of Gaza's coast to 15 nautical miles off shore allowing access to deeper waters;
- Funding provided by the Government of Qatar enabled the electricity supply to increase in 2019 to an average of 12 hours a day;
- And, as Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo has stated, by the end of 2019, 37,000 jobs were created by UNRWA, UNDP and the World Bank.

These improvements give me hope for Gaza if we build on this momentum. It will be key for Israel to further relax movement restrictions, alongside measures that stimulate the economy, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1860. The Palestinian Authority must refrain from impeding the allocation of resources to people in Gaza as a way of exerting pressure on Hamas, and Hamas must prioritize people's needs in Gaza. All parties must uphold their international legal obligations.

Mr. President,

In the West Bank, I visited a Palestinian Bedouin community in the Jordan Valley. I met Jamil and Manar, a young couple, who described the pressures their community faces, including home demolitions, the constant threat of further demolition of their property, and movement restrictions. Manar, a 24-year-old mother, described her personal fears and challenges shared by her family and neighbours. She spoke of the anxiety over simple activities, such as transport to schools without the threat of harassment from Israeli settlers, entry by the Israeli military to the community, and her fear that she cannot protect her children. Families there are not connected to the water or electricity network. Although they have lived in the area since the 1970s, the Israeli authorities consider their presence illegal.

Jamil and Manar's experience mirrors that of many Palestinians in the West Bank, where families face difficulty in securing adequate shelter, accessing basic services and protecting their children and the elderly. Economic development is undermined by Israeli administrative and physical constraints that fragment the territory, limiting Palestinian access to land and natural resources. This is most extreme in Area C, comprising 60 per cent of the West Bank, where the planning regime makes it virtually impossible for Palestinians to develop adequate housing and infrastructure. Most public land is allocated to Israeli settlements or to military use and most private land is zoned as agricultural or 'green' areas.

Homes, clinics, schools, water cisterns and animal shelters lacking permits face the risk of demolition or confiscation. In 2019, 620 structures were demolished across the West Bank (mainly in Area C and East Jerusalem), displacing over 900 Palestinians and affecting access to services and livelihoods for tens of thousands of people. This represents an increase of 35 per cent in demolitions and nearly double the number of displaced compared to 2018. The number of structures demolished in East Jerusalem is the highest in two decades. Today, over 12,500 demolition orders are pending against Palestinian properties in Area C and nearly one third of homes in East Jerusalem face a risk of demolition because they lack building permits. These measures increase the vulnerability of communities, generating the need for humanitarian support. But the aid provided to these Palestinians is also impacted. A total of 126 structures demolished or confiscated in 2019 had been provided as humanitarian assistance.

An estimated 162,000 Palestinians across Area C have limited access to primary health-care services, relying only on mobile clinics. Earlier this month, on 2 January, the Israeli authorities citing a lack of prior coordination, seized a vehicle which was used to transport medical staff and equipment to a mobile health clinic in Masafer Yatta south of Hebron, impeding residents' access to health care.

Through a range of legal and administrative measures, Israel has enabled the establishment and expansion of Israeli settlements in the heart of Palestinian

neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem and Hebron city, at times resulting in the forced eviction of Palestinian families.

In 2019, OCHA recorded 340 attacks carried out by Israelis, including settlers, resulting in two fatalities, 135 injuries, and property damage, including to more than 6,200 fruit-bearing trees, representing a 100 per cent increase compared to 2017. These attacks undermine the physical security and livelihoods of Palestinians. Despite the Israeli authorities' efforts to prevent and address such violence, concerns remain about serious gaps in accountability that may contribute to the prevalence of settler attacks.

In 2019, there were 112 Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians, including settlers, in the West Bank and Israel, resulting in three deaths and 26 injuries, along with damage to Israeli property. In addition, 26 Palestinians were killed and 3,455 were injured by Israeli forces in the West Bank in search and arrest operations, demonstrations and clashes. There are concerns of excessive use of force by Israel in the context of law enforcement operations during protests and other clashes. The combined impact of many of these challenges places pressure on families to leave their communities, contributing to a coercive environment that places them at risk of forcible transfer.

Mr. President,

To conclude, operating space for humanitarian actors is constrained by both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities. Efforts to delegitimize humanitarian action in the occupied Palestinian territory continue to undermine our ability to provide protection and assistance to people in need. We are also facing record low funding levels.

The Humanitarian Response Plan for 2020 is highly prioritized, and requests \$348 million to provide basic food, protection, health care, shelter, water and sanitation to 1.5 million of the most vulnerable Palestinians. Over 75 per cent of the requested funds are for Gaza. I urge Member States to increase their support to humanitarian operations in the occupied Palestinian territory, to both the Humanitarian Response Plan and the oPt Humanitarian Fund. In 2019, the Humanitarian Fund allocated \$27.4 million benefitting 1.1 million people. Providing funding to UNRWA, the largest humanitarian actor in the occupied Palestinian territory, is also critical to prevent deterioration, especially in Gaza.

Member States are also encouraged to support interventions that strengthen humanitarian-development collaboration and reduce Palestinians' reliance on humanitarian aid. Such strategic assistance is critical, where deterioration risks further destabilization in an already volatile region. Aside from funding, strong Member State support is required to ensure that humanitarian partners are able to operate according to humanitarian principles and to counter the impact of unsubstantiated allegations against operational partners.

In order to decrease vulnerabilities in the longer-term, it is vital that all parties work towards the policy shifts required to reduce humanitarian need and uphold obligations

under international law. We saw improvements in Gaza in 2019 that, if developed and expanded to the West Bank, have the potential to generate positive change in 2020. We must galvanize our efforts, as the international community, to ensure that Palestinian families are increasingly able to live in dignity.

I continue to urge all parties – Israeli and Palestinian – to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian and international human rights law. The basic needs of Palestinians in Gaza and in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, must be met, including by allowing the entry of essential supplies and humanitarian relief. Lethal force in law enforcement operations must only be used when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Ultimately, the solution for the occupied Palestinian territory is neither humanitarian nor development action, but lies in political discourse and agreement. In closing, I reiterate Special Coordinator Mladenov's call to this body urging "... leaders on all sides to summon the necessary political will to take concrete steps in support of ending the occupation and realizing a lasting peace, resulting in two democratic States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace...".