



Security Council

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Letter dated 5 January 2024 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to refer to Security Council resolution [2720 \(2023\)](#), in which the Council requested that I report in writing, within five working days of the adoption of that resolution, on the implementation of Security Council resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#).

Resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#) was adopted in the context of the widespread death and destruction unleashed by the conflict in Gaza and Israel. Sadly, devastating levels of death and destruction continue.

According to Israeli authorities, more than 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals were killed in Israel in the abhorrent acts of terror perpetrated by Hamas and other groups on 7 October 2023, during which some 250 Israelis and foreign nationals, including around 65 women and 34 children, were abducted and taken to Gaza. Numerous accounts of sexual violence have also been reported. Thousands of others have been injured in Israel.

According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, since the start of the current Israeli military operations, more than 22,000 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip, tens of thousands of Palestinians have been injured and many have gone missing. More than two thirds of those killed and injured in Gaza are reported to be children and women.

In its resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#), the Council “demands that all parties comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, notably with regard to the protection of civilians, especially children”. I continue to have grave concerns about the possible commission of serious violations of international law. The number of deaths and injuries documented since 7 October is staggering. Furthermore, an estimated 85 per cent of Palestinians in Gaza are currently displaced. Families are repeatedly told to evacuate to other locations for their own safety, but nowhere is dependably safe in Gaza, and nowhere can their essential needs be met.

The scale of death and destruction, especially in northern Gaza, is characteristic of the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in densely populated areas. To date, over 60 per cent of homes in Gaza are estimated to have been damaged or destroyed.

At the same time, the indiscriminate launching of rockets by Hamas and other groups towards population centres in Israel has continued, along with allegations that civilians, hospitals and other civilian objects are being used in an attempt to shield fighters and military objectives.



The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reports that nearly 1.9 million civilians are sheltering in, or in the vicinity of, UNRWA installations in Gaza. Under international law, UNRWA installations, like all United Nations facilities, are inviolable, including in times of armed conflict. UNRWA shares the coordinates of all its facilities across the Gaza Strip with all parties to the conflict. Yet the agency has reported 193 incidents affecting 125 of its installations. Reportedly, a total of 308 internally displaced people sheltering in UNRWA premises have been killed and nearly 1,095 have been injured.

It is with profound sadness that I must also report that, as of today, 144 members of our United Nations family, 142 of whom were UNRWA staff, have been killed in Gaza. This is the largest loss of life during a single conflict in the history of our Organization.

Since the start of the current Israeli military operations in Gaza, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recorded 294 attacks that have affected health care, resulting in the killing of some 600 people and affecting 94 hospitals and other medical facilities, as well as 76 ambulances.

The rules of war are clear: civilians, including United Nations personnel, must be respected and protected. Constant care must be taken in the conduct of military operations to spare the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects. Civilian objects must be respected and protected. Hospitals and other medical facilities enjoy specific protection under international humanitarian law. I am gravely concerned about the apparent disregard for these crucial binding legal obligations by all parties to the conflict. International humanitarian law must be respected by all parties to the conflict at all times. The failure of one party to a conflict to abide by international humanitarian law does not absolve the other party from its obligation to do so.

In its resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#), the Council calls for “urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout the Gaza Strip” to enable “full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for ... humanitarian agencies”. On 22 November, Israel and Hamas, with the assistance of the Governments of Qatar, Egypt and the United States of America, reached an arrangement to pause hostilities on 24 November. This truce was extended multiple times, until 1 December, when hostilities resumed. Since then, no further pauses have been agreed.

While it lasted, the pause in hostilities enabled a welcome increase in the delivery of basic supplies into and across Gaza, primarily by the Egyptian Red Crescent Society, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and United Nations agencies. The resumption of hostilities has once again significantly impeded deliveries of humanitarian aid. Despite formidable challenges, humanitarian partners are working to expand the reach of relief efforts and deliver assistance to as many people as possible.

Humanitarian convoys are being dispatched daily to Rafah, the west of Khan Yunis, the Deir El-Balah camp and Nusayrat, where displaced people and host communities are seeking safety and shelter. In these areas, humanitarians are working to deliver aid to UNRWA facilities, as well as to ad hoc displacement sites that have emerged in open spaces. Delivery of assistance north of Wadi Gaza, where an estimated 300,000 people remain, is extremely difficult owing to active fighting, the presence of Israeli ground forces and the heavily damaged road network. Since the end of the humanitarian pause on 1 December, 12 humanitarian convoys have reached the area north of Wadi Gaza, delivering vital and life-saving health supplies. Each of these convoys encountered major challenges, ranging from the impact of small arms fire to the detention of aid workers at crossing checkpoints controlled by IDF.

To date, a total of 6,099 truckloads of humanitarian aid have been delivered to the Gaza Strip, including 5,197 through Rafah and 902 through the Karem Abu Salim/Kerem Shalom crossing, which Israel opened to deliveries from Egypt on 17 December.

Despite these efforts, the level of aid to Palestinians in Gaza is completely inadequate to meet the needs of more than 2 million people. As I have previously noted, measuring the effectiveness of the humanitarian response solely by the number of truckloads of aid entering Gaza is misleading. An effective aid operation requires security, safeguards for humanitarian personnel, logistical capacity and the resumption of commercial activity. It requires electricity and steady communications. All of these remain absent.

I welcome the agreement reached on the entry of fuel into Gaza in support of the humanitarian response. However, although the total volume of fuel allowed has increased, it is still insufficient to sustain basic operations. At present, the United Nations is the only entity allowed to receive and allocate fuel, under strict conditions set by the Israeli authorities, and delivery, especially to the north, remains extremely challenging. It is critical that commercial fuel distribution resumes, to alleviate the current unsustainable task of the United Nations to arrange and coordinate resupply for hospitals, telecommunications companies, financial institutions, and water and sanitation infrastructure.

Civilians in Gaza need a continuous flow of life-saving humanitarian aid and fuel into and across the area. In its absence, aid convoys are increasingly confronted by desperate civilians who forcibly take the assistance they need, heightening risks to aid workers, damaging trucks and hampering delivery to key destinations. The law and order necessary to ensure safe, smooth operations is absent in much of Gaza. This is a necessary prerequisite for humanitarians to be able to work.

Even if scaled up, the humanitarian sector cannot substitute for the near complete lack of commercial imports of essential items. The commercial sector has been decimated, leaving the United Nations and humanitarian partners alone in providing basic necessities that should be available from markets. Israel has a responsibility for ensuring, to the fullest extent of the means available to it, the food and medical supplies of the population, as well as the provision of clothing, bedding, means of shelter and other supplies essential to its survival. This cannot be achieved without an immediate and massive increase in the commercial supply of essential goods.

In its resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#), the Council calls for “the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and other groups”. Following an arrangement on 22 November between Israel and Hamas, brokered by Qatar, Egypt and the United States, the International Committee of the Red Cross has facilitated the release and transfer of over 100 hostages. This is welcome. However, I reiterate that all hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally. They must be treated humanely, and the International Committee of the Red Cross must be allowed to visit. I am deeply concerned by reports that several hostages have been killed or subjected to humiliating and degrading treatment while in captivity. The arrangement reached on 22 November also led to the release of 240 Palestinian prisoners and detainees, most of them women and children, from Israeli jails.

In its resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#), the Council calls for “all parties to refrain from depriving the civilian population in the Gaza Strip of basic services and humanitarian assistance indispensable to their survival, consistent with international humanitarian law”. The intensity of the fighting in Gaza continues to impede ongoing efforts to provide health care and other life-saving assistance to civilians. Insecurity, blocked

or destroyed roads and fuel shortages also hamper humanitarian operations, as do frequent disruptions to telecommunications.

Hunger and thirst are rampant, and widespread famine looms, according to the World Food Programme. More than half a million people – a quarter of the population – are facing what experts classify as catastrophic levels of hunger. WHO indicates that just 13 of the 36 hospitals in Gaza are still functioning, but only partially. They are overwhelmed with trauma cases and operating in unsafe conditions, filled with tens of thousands of people seeking safety. The hospitals are desperately short of supplies and only able to provide a modicum of comfort through the heroic efforts of health workers who have seen colleagues die and who live with the reality that their own death may be imminent.

A public health catastrophe is rapidly evolving in Gaza. Infectious diseases are spreading in overcrowded shelters. Sanitary conditions are appalling, with few toilets and sewage flooding. As winter takes hold, infectious disease outbreaks will spike. WHO reports that Gaza is already experiencing soaring rates of infectious disease outbreaks.

Children, pregnant women, older persons and those with weakened immune systems are at greatest risk. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, children recently displaced to southern Gaza are not able to access 90 per cent of their normal water use. Concerns of waterborne diseases, such as cholera and chronic diarrhoea, are heightened by the lack of safe water. WHO reports that diarrhoea cases among children aged under 5 are 25 times what they were before the current fighting. Around 180 Palestinian women are estimated to be giving birth every day in these extremely difficult conditions.

To facilitate implementation of resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#) and as required by law, Gaza needs an immediate and sustained increase in humanitarian aid, especially food, water, fuel, blankets, medicines and health-care supplies. Israel must fully restore water and electricity services. The private sector must also be able to bring in fuel and critical basic commodities to replenish depleted shops in Gaza and facilitate cash-based assistance programmes.

In its resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#), the Council “underscores the importance of coordination, humanitarian notification, and deconfliction mechanisms, to protect all medical and humanitarian staff, vehicles including ambulances, humanitarian sites, and critical infrastructure, including UN facilities”.

The humanitarian notification system, implemented by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNRWA and the access support unit, was established in 2019 to provide a shared framework by which humanitarian agencies inform parties to the conflict of static humanitarian locations and humanitarian aid movements to ensure humanitarian access to affected populations. To date, a total of 996 humanitarian sites have been notified, including 87 since 7 October, as well as hundreds of humanitarian movements, including nearly 800 since the current fighting began. The framework has exceptionally enabled a limited number of movements to areas in which a high number of kinetic operations are ongoing during the current hostilities, including in the north, via an endorsed coordination mechanism in which IDF is an active participant, providing cleared routes and assurances of security. Given the magnitude of the current hostilities and the scope of civilian casualties, this mechanism has preserved a small degree of humanitarian access. However, as noted above, the parties to the conflict must ensure that civilians are protected, hospitals can function and humanitarians can remain in Gaza and provide aid to highly vulnerable populations in increasingly insecure locations.

At least 130 notified sites, including the 125 UNRWA facilities mentioned above, have been affected since the start of the current round of fighting, and staff involved in coordinated aid missions have seen their work hampered by small arms fire, detentions and delays. Incidents harming structures notified under the humanitarian notification system have resulted in damage to critical infrastructure as well as civilian deaths, injuries and multiple displacements.

I take this opportunity to highlight that, on 26 December, I appointed Sigrid Kaag of the Kingdom of the Netherlands as Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza pursuant to Security Council resolution [2720 \(2023\)](#). In this role, she will facilitate, coordinate, monitor and verify the humanitarian nature of all humanitarian relief consignments to Gaza provided through States not party to the conflict. She will also establish a United Nations mechanism to accelerate humanitarian relief consignments into Gaza through such States, consulting all relevant parties.

To ensure streamlined operations, Ms. Kaag will report to me through the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. She will also work in close coordination with the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and the Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator, who leads the coordination efforts for humanitarian, development and recovery activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and the Commissioner-General of UNRWA. Ms. Kaag will be supported by the United Nations Office for Project Services.

In closing, on the basis of the information received to date, and consistent with my previous updates to the Council, resolution [2712 \(2023\)](#) is far from being implemented and progress remains woefully insufficient.

In line with that resolution, I wrote to the Council outlining options to effectively monitor its implementation. As noted, effective monitoring is heavily predicated on conditions on the ground being conducive to such monitoring, including with respect to security, functioning communication networks, facilitation of movement and access to and from relevant areas, and other operational factors. These factors remain largely absent.

After more than 80 days of intense fighting, the people of Gaza have reached a breaking point of deprivation and despair. This must end. We need civilians and the life-sustaining infrastructure they rely on to be protected. We need the remaining hostages to be released immediately and unconditionally. We need consistent, safe humanitarian access, at scale. We need to ensure that there is no additional spillover to other parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the region or beyond. We need the fighting to stop.

(Signed) António **Guterres**