

I thank my colleague Mr. Nickolay Mladenov for his authoritative and comprehensive briefing, and I shall complement his remarks on the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. Last month, I also provided an overview of the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory (see S/PV.7792). Today, I will focus my remarks on the increasing challenges humanitarian actors are facing in responding to the needs of these vulnerable Palestinians, and for which we need greater support from the Council.

In the occupied Gaza Strip, 70 per cent of the population currently receives some form of international assistance, mostly food aid. Yet our ability to deliver that assistance has become increasingly restricted. Israel bans or restricts the import of certain goods into Gaza, on the grounds that they have a dual military and civilian purpose. Affected items range from communications equipment to cement, wood and even water pumps, fire trucks and medical X-ray machines. Mr. Mladenov has already spoken about the growing and dramatic gap between how much material Israel is permitting to be imported to Gaza through the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, and the growing waiting lists of beneficiaries. That translates very directly into the humanitarian realm, with 60,000 highly vulnerable, displaced persons in Gaza still waiting for their home to be rebuilt, who need rental assistance and much more in the interim.

It is not just about concrete. Urgent projects, which aim to reduce the risk of flooding that threatens nearly 500,000 people as winter approaches, have been on hold for 10 months as they await clearance of equipment. Projects to rehabilitate water wells and the construction of a neonatal intensive care unit are other examples of urgent needs suffering unnecessary long delays.

Aid workers have also been caught up in the increased restrictions. United Nations staff in Gaza require a permit to leave Gaza in order to meet with their managers in Jerusalem or Ramallah, or to attend training programmes elsewhere. While those permits were relatively easy to receive in previous years, when never more than 10 per cent were typically rejected, last month more than half of our United Nations applicants were turned away, with some advised not to apply again for 12 months. No explanation other than “security” is cited, leaving us at a loss as to how to respond and with a growing morale problem. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), embassies and others are experiencing similar trends.

Those new access restrictions are hitting other Gaza residents hard as well, of course; over half of the 2,000 permit applications by patients seeking urgent medical treatment outside Gaza in October, most typically for cancer treatment, were not approved by Israel. Inside Gaza, the operating space for NGOs is also difficult. The de facto authorities, Hamas, regularly seek to do audits, review staff or beneficiary lists or introduce new permit requirements and restrictions on work in certain areas of the Strip. NGOs need to resist those pressures and navigate anti-terrorist legislation set up by many Member States, which generate their own restrictions on the type of programming that is allowed and with whom one can and cannot engage.

The ongoing internal divisions between the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and those in Gaza also inevitably transfer an increasing burden onto humanitarian actors and humanitarian budgets, as unstaffed operating theatres, dilapidated equipment and breaks in fuel supplies take their toll on people and services.

Ultimately, real progress in Gaza requires a full lifting of the blockade by Israel, in line with the resolutions of the Council and the General Assembly. Until that happens, Israel must ensure that items needed for reconstruction, relief and emergency preparedness are allowed entry, and that aid workers are able to move about to do their vital work.

While it is not a substitute for the opening of access to Israel, we also look to Egypt, in line with its own security considerations, to maintain the welcome increase in openings at the Rafah Border Crossing, which remains, literally, a life line for some. We must also see greater action from Palestinian leaders in Ramallah and Gaza; internal differences must be resolved for the sake of Palestine's most vulnerable constituents.

In the occupied West Bank, as the pressures increase on communities in Area C, so too do the obstacles to our operations there as well. As I have reported to the Council before, the pace of demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian property by the Israeli authorities has far exceeded any previous years on record — more than double this year as compared to 2015. Those have occurred mainly within herding communities in Area C, which count among Palestine's most vulnerable households. Obstruction to our operations in those areas is occurring in the most egregious way, with our relief items themselves frequently demolished or confiscated by Israeli forces. The rate of demolition or seizure of such donor-funded relief is on a trajectory to potentially triple as compared to 2015. Affected relief items include shelters and tents, water cisterns, animal pens and other basic structures for survival and livelihoods.

More fundamentally, Palestinians in Area C are living in an increasingly coercive environment that is created by discriminatory planning policies, demolitions, the active promotion of plans to relocate Bedouin to new townships and other practices that generate miserable living conditions and create pressure on people to move elsewhere. Much of that occurs in the line of sight of new or expanding Israeli settlements, which are illegal under international law, as reiterated by successive resolutions by the Council. About a quarter of the structures targeted this year were in Palestinian Bedouin communities located within or near the area allocated to the E-1 settlement expansion project on the outskirts of occupied East Jerusalem.

It is critical that the interests of those vulnerable Bedouin communities be placed first. They need and deserve our unequivocal support to resist those coercive pressures by the occupying Power, and must not be burdened by still more pressures from Palestinian leaders, some of whom appear to view those communities as a key battleground in Palestine's long struggle. Those vulnerable civilians have no place as instruments in a political strategy.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's call to Israel to end the policies and practices that place those Palestinians at risk of forcible transfer. I also remind the Palestinian authorities of the need to respect the principles of independence, impartiality, neutrality and humanity, which are the bedrock of the humanitarian imperative.

The continued lack of a resolution to the core drivers of the ongoing humanitarian crisis has left Palestinians stuck in a perpetual cycle of humanitarian relief, increasingly dependent on assistance and facing an ongoing lack of respect for their rights and heightened instability. We need a coherent international response that will enhance the protection of civilians and deliver accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. That is especially important in the absence of an active political process between Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Israel, the main duty-bearer, is a signatory to the Fourth Geneva Convention and has clear obligations as an occupying Power, and both Israel and Palestine have ratified the major human rights treaties. They are bound by customary international law as well, as are all countries. The members of the Security Council have a vital role to play in motivating the parties to respect their obligations. Similarly, all parties to the Geneva Conventions have an obligation not only to respect them but also to ensure that others respect them.

The challenges facing Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territory, and the challenges that humanitarian personnel face in trying to assist them, require action not only by the Israeli and Palestinian authorities but by every member of the Council. If we want to prevent further deterioration in a region already overwhelmed with humanitarian emergencies, the Council's decisive collective action is vital. If it would help the members of the Council to have a specific list of humanitarian relief actions that should be taken or avoided, I and my colleagues will be pleased to provide it.

However, those actions notwithstanding, the principles of international humanitarian law do and must apply. That includes all members of the Council, all those in the occupied Palestinian territory, both Israelis and Palestinians, and all who have signed international legal obligations to which they are, and must be held, accountable. We look to the Council to ensure greater respect for obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law and to enhance the protection of civilians. We look to the Council to safeguard the operational space that aid workers require to provide assistance to those most in need. And we look to the Council to address the underlying driver of Palestine's protection crisis through a political resolve to end the occupation, which is now approaching its fiftieth anniversary.

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