



the commissioner-general
المفوض العام

7 December 2023

Dear Mr President,

I write pursuant to my responsibilities as Commissioner-General of the General Assembly-mandated United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), at the darkest hour in the Agency's 75-year history.

I submit this letter fully cognizant that the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General has written to the President of the Security Council on December 6, invoking article 99 of the UN charter.

I must inform you that UNRWA's ability to implement its General Assembly mandate in Gaza is today severely limited with immediate and dire consequences for the UN humanitarian response and the lives of civilians in Gaza. The long-term implications for Palestine Refugees and prospects for a fair and lasting political solution are grave.

On 7 October, Hamas and other militants launched abhorrent attacks in Israel killing more than 1,200 people, among them children and women, and taking over 240 hostages.

By the end of that day, as details of Hamas' action became public, several thousand civilians in Gaza moved pre-emptively to UNRWA premises, fearing unprecedented conflict and seeking safety under the UN flag protected by the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and by international humanitarian law.

Today, as a result of Israel's military operation, nearly 1.2 million civilians are sheltering in UNRWA premises. The Agency has become the primary platform for humanitarian assistance to over 2.2 million people in Gaza – a platform on the verge of collapse.

His Excellency
Mr Dennis Francis
President of the General Assembly
New York

UNRWA is, as of today, still operational in Gaza, though just barely. Our staff are still operating health centers, managing shelters, and supporting traumatized people, some arriving carrying their dead children. We are still distributing food, even though the corridors and courtyards of our premises are too crowded to walk through. Our staff take their children to work so they know they are safe or can die together. More than 130 UNRWA staff are confirmed killed in bombardments, most with their families; the number might rise by the time you read this. At least 70% of UNRWA staff are displaced, and lack food, water and adequate shelter. We are hanging on by our fingertips. If UNRWA collapses, humanitarian assistance in Gaza will also collapse.

The humanitarian situation is now untenable. Conditions in Gaza were already appalling when I stayed overnight two weeks ago. I witnessed constant explosive munitions from sky, land and sea, and the massive destruction of civilian infrastructure.

This week, the Israeli military forces have instructed people to move further South, forcing Gaza's population into an ever-shrinking space. Shelters are shockingly overcrowded, with high risk of epidemic illness. In these overfull and unsanitary spaces, more than 700 people use a single toilet, women give birth (an average of 25 per day), and people nurse open wounds. Tens of thousands sleep in courtyards and streets. People burn plastic to stay warm. Nearly 90 UNRWA premises, including schools, have been hit or impacted by munitions, killing over 270 internally displaced people, many this week. In Gaza as a whole, over 16,000 people, two thirds of whom are women and children, are reported killed during bombardments. Large swathes of Gaza are destroyed and uninhabitable.

The premise of UNRWA's mandate – to provide services to Palestine Refugees until there is a political solution – is at great risk: without safe shelter and aid, civilians in Gaza risk death or will be forced to Egypt and beyond. Forced displacement out of Gaza may end prospects for the political solution that is intrinsic to UNRWA's mandate, with grave risks for regional peace and security. A forced displacement beyond Palestinian land, reminiscent of the 1948 Nakba, must be prevented.

In my 35 years working in complex emergencies, I have never written such a letter - predicting the killing of my staff and the collapse of the mandate I am expected to fulfill.

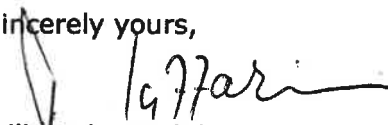
To prevent such an irreversible disaster, I urge you, as President of the General Assembly, and through you, Members States to take immediate action to (i) implement an immediate humanitarian ceasefire; (ii) enforce international law, including the protection of civilians and UN staff, as well as UN premises, hospitals and public buildings that provide safe shelter from attacks, disease, deprivation and indignity; and (iii) protect prospects for a political solution that is vital to peace, security and rights for Palestinians, Israelis and the region.

Calling for an end to the decimation of Gaza and its people is not a denial of the atrocities of 7 October. It is the opposite. It is recognition of the equal rights of all people – recognition that is essential to the future of Palestinians and Israelis alike. Our response to the situation in Gaza today will mark the history of the General Assembly and of the UN.

I implore the General Assembly to take immediate action.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Sincerely yours,



Philippe Lazzarini