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**29 DECEMBER 2008**

# PRESS CONFERENCE ON SITUATION IN GAZA

“I am deeply alarmed by the current escalation of violence in and around Gaza,” United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told correspondents today at a Headquarters press conference, adding, “This is unacceptable.”

The Secretary-General read out an opening statement (Press Release [SG/SM/12027](http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/sgsm12027.doc.htm)), after which John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator briefed correspondents.  He was joined through video link from Gaza by Karen AbuZayd, Commissioner-General for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and from Jerusalem by Maxwell Gaylard, Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process.

Mr. Holmes said that, based on his latest information, there were 320 dead on the Palestinian side and 1,400 people injured.  Based on UNRWA information, 62 of the casualties were civilian casualties, a count that included only women and children, and not civilian casualties who were men.  On the Israeli side, two persons had been killed by rocket attacks.  He did not have a number of injured people.  The scale of casualties on the Palestinian side reflected that no matter how hard one tried to target, in a densely populated area such as Gaza, civilian casualties were almost impossible to avoid.  A United Nations compound had been hit and badly damaged and one United Nations staff member and eight UNRWA trainees had been killed a couple of days ago.

The Secretary-General, among other things, had called on all parties to respect international humanitarian law, he said, which meant a proportionate response and a very clear distinction between combatants and civilians.  It was hard to say that that was happening during the present attacks on Gaza, although it was true that the fired rockets into Israel were indiscriminate in their effects.  That was why an immediate ceasefire, fully respected by all sides, was being stressed.

He said that, on the humanitarian supply side, the situation was “very worrying”.  Because of the blockade that had been in place for months and the recent tightening of that blockade, the stocks of some vital items were very low or non-existent.  Today, however, around 60 truckloads of goods had been allowed in, including 4 trucks of medical supplies for UNRWA and 18 trucks of food supplies for UNRWA and the World Food Programme (WFP).  UNRWA needed about 100 trucks of wheat flour a day.  As no fuel had been allowed in, supplies for the power plant were very low.  Medical supplies were “about enough to cope”, unless there was more violence.  It was, therefore, vital that the crossings remained open, whatever the level of violence.  There was also a spare part shortage.  There had been damage to infrastructures and the population had been psychologically traumatized.

Ms. AbuZayd stressed that, in such a densely packed area as Gaza, it was almost impossible to avoid civilian casualties as “collateral damage”.  There were always civilian or United Nations structures around targets.  Eight students had died and 12 were still in the hospital.  Because targets had included Hamas institutions and police stations, as well as individual houses, people had been warned to leave their houses.  As people did not know where to go, 200 had taken refuge in UNRWA schools, which did not function anymore.  Humanitarian access was a problem, although Israel had become more cooperative.  Among the most severe psychological problems was the fear of a land invasion by Israeli troops that everyone was expecting.

Mr. Gaylard added that his office had been working closely with Israeli authorities to persuade them that entry of wheat grain was very important.  He noted that UNRWA had assisted the Palestinian Authority in getting four truckloads of medical supplies into Gaza from Ramallah.

Asked about discrepancies between the number of 320 dead mentioned by him and the number of 345 mentioned by the Health Ministry of Palestine, Mr. Holmes said it might have been a question of timing in releasing the numbers.  His number came from hospitals and was verified by UNRWA.  Of course, the number of casualties was rising all the time.

To another question, Mr. Holmes said a military solution was not possible.  The way forward was through politics and dialogue.  A ceasefire was needed now, in order to return to a political dialogue.

Asked what the current state of “unhindered access” through the border crossings was, Mr. Holmes said there had been no “unhindered access” ever since Hamas had taken over Gaza.  The Karni crossing had been closed for some 18 months.  Border crossings were closed, partly because they had been damaged by Hamas shelling.  One crossing had been open intermittently.

He said 100 trucks of wheat flour were needed daily by UNRWA in order to feed some 750,000 refugees.  Other parts of the Gaza population in need were fed by the World Food Programme (WFP).  The power plant had only one and a half days of fuel, as of yesterday.  A lack of power did not jeopardize lives directly.  However, hospitals were dependent on generators.  Once their fuel ran out, people’s lives were endangered.

Ms. AbuZayd added that approval for crossings was needed.  Mostly, approval was given late at night and UNRWA had to “scramble” to get everything in order.  Another problem was that crossings, if opened, were only open for a couple of hours.

In response to a question about what the United Nations was doing to persuade Hamas to stop firing rockets, Mr. Holmes said the Organization did not have a political dialogue with Hamas, only technical communications regarding humanitarian issues.

Asked to describe the situation in Gaza and the impact on the population, Ms. AbuZayd said the events had obviously been a major blow to the population.  In the eight and a half years she had been in the area, she had never seen anything like it.  The events had taken Gaza back decades.  Buildings that had been repaired were again damaged.  It was impossible to target something without damaging something else.  She did not know of Hamas using humans as a shield, but they lived among the population.  Turning to the lack of power, she said Gaza was an urban environment with multi-storey buildings.  If there were no electricity, there was no water.  Some people had only water every other day.  Sewage was not being treated.  Generators were breaking down and could not be repaired, because of a lack of spare parts.

As for the impact on Israelis, Mr. Holmes said that he had visited Sderot and that there was no doubt about the psychological trauma caused by the militants’ rocket fire, which had increased dramatically over the last days.

Responding to numerous questions about why only women and children were counted as civilian casualties, Mr. Holmes said the UNRWA figure of civilian casualties had been given to avoid accusations of exaggeration or unclearness about civilians, or others who might be Hamas militants.  It was meant to give a credible, minimum figure.  He knew that there were civilian men who had been killed, including one UNRWA staff.  It was not meant to be “super considerate” of Israel, as one correspondent suggested.  There were civilians killed who were men, but women and children were the only ones one could reasonably be sure were civilians.  The given number was not based on a methodology, he said.  Neither did he mean to say that all men killed were Hamas.

Ms. AbuZayd confirmed that the account was correct.  The Emergency Coordinator based in Jerusalem had come up with the tally, and she had questioned it immediately.  The director of her office, a lawyer, immediately had said that the numbers should not be used, because they were not legitimate and made no sense.  She agreed with that, saying that the numbers had to be looked at again.  Her emergency food distributor, who had been killed, was a civilian and a man.

Answering a related question, Ms. AbuZayd said houses targeted were said by the Israeli side to have weapons in them, or to house senior Hamas officials.  Warning telephone calls to houses to tell people to evacuate were scattered.   Israel did not indicate where it was safe to go.  Many of the people who had been killed, including police cadets during their graduation ceremony, had joined the police only recently, because they were unemployed, not because they had any connection to Hamas.

There was no intention to pull out United Nations staff, Mr. Holmes answered to a question in that regard.  Ms. AbuZayd said there were few international staff in Gaza, and they stayed inside.  Although the 11,000 UNRWA staff did not feel safe, they risked their lives daily to distribute food and do their work.  There were contingency plans for a land invasion, but the biggest problem with that was that there were few or no supplies held in reserve.

When asked if she had seen any Hamas targeted when the University was being bombed, as the United Nations compound was situated across from that building, Ms. AbuZayd said Israel was targeting Hamas, and the University was a Hamas symbol.

Asked if the Gaza population at large was aware that the current attacks were the result of Hamas unilaterally terminating the truce and firing rockets, Ms. AbuZayd said that, in general, they did not think that the truce had been violated by Hamas.  They had seen that Hamas had observed the truce quite strictly for almost six months, and that they had gotten nothing in return.  The deal was that if there were no rockets, the crossing would be opened.  The crossings, however, were not opened.  Also, before Hamas started launching any rockets, there had been an incursion into Gaza to target militants, seven of whom had been killed.  After that, the rockets were fired and that was the end of the truce.

On Friday, 26 December, the Israelis had said they would wait 48 hours, until Sunday morning, after which they would evaluate.  On Friday, only one rocket had been fired.  It had been obvious that Hamas had been trying, again, to observe the truce and get it back under control.  On Saturday morning, at 11:30 a.m., everything “broke loose”, to everybody’s surprise.  After that, the rockets were fired.  In such a conflict area as Gaza, it was hard to tell what happened first, she said.  One could “sort of tell” though, what has been done proportionately and disproportionately.