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# Press Conference by Humanitarian, Human Rights Organizations on Gaza

Speaking from New York, Gaza and Jerusalem at a Headquarters press conference were:  Brenden Cox, Executive Director of Crisis Action; Michael Bailey, OXFAM International Spokesperson based in Jerusalem; Yazdan al Amawi, Team Leader, CARE; Sarah Leah Whitson, Executive Director of the Middle East and North Africa Division of Human Rights Watch; and Allyn Dhynes, Advocacy/Communications Manager of World Vision Jerusalem/West Bank/Gaza.

Opening the briefing, Mr. Cox said the purpose of the press conference was to stress the need for the Security Council to take action on the crisis, both from the humanitarian and human rights perspectives.

Presenting a detailed update, Mr. Al Amawi said that the humanitarian situation was very dire on the twelfth day of air strikes and ground operations by Israel, which had followed an 18-month blockade.  Some 218 children and 85 women were among the 660 casualties of the conflict.  “Women are really in a panic and we are all the time trying to establish any kind of humanitarian corridor to supply the people with the needed supplies and food.”

Various humanitarian organizations and international agencies on the ground had faced many challenges in their efforts to alleviate the suffering of the population, including displaced and injured people, he continued.  While some supplies had been able to reach the Gaza Strip, the humanitarian situation was seriously exacerbated by the lack of equipment, medical supplies, access and safety.  The lack of electricity, depleting food supplies and water shortages also represented serious problems.

Speaking from Jerusalem, Mr. Bailey of OXFAM added that since 20 June 2007, the Israeli authorities had only allowed a minimum of humanitarian aid into Gaza.  As a result of the blockade, about 70,000 jobs had disappeared, leading to the freezing of the economy, closure of some 95 per cent of the factories and a 50 per cent unemployment rate.  Every family in Gaza was hit by poverty, and some 80 per cent of them were dependent on food aid.  As if it were not enough that 1.5 million people were being collectively punished for something they simply could not control -- Palestinian factions firing rockets at Israeli cities on the other side of the Gazan border -- the current “onslaught” had made the situation even more serious.  However, the blockade and the weakening of the population had not achieved any of the stated aims of removing Hamas from control of Gaza or, indeed, impeding the rocket fire.

“When the ceasefire is achieved ‑- and we pray that it be today or tomorrow ‑- we need to see also a change in the policy and a lifting of the blockade”, he insisted, “because otherwise, we would just return the people of Gaza back into the situation of isolated dependency they have been in for the last 18 months.”

Focusing on the legal aspects of the conflict, Ms. Whitson of Human Rights Watch said that the closure of Gaza represented collective punishment, which was unlawful under international humanitarian law.  Under international law, Gaza remained occupied territory, where the occupying forces, Israel, had the primary responsibility for providing food and medicine and securing the welfare of the population.  Clearly, Israel was failing in its legal obligation.  To that end, Egypt was complicit in the collective punishment of the Gaza population, enforcing the closure of the borders on its side.  As for the recent fighting, Gaza was densely populated, and artillery attacks and aerial bombardments were not suitable there.  Since the recent ground incursion, the death toll had nearly doubled, with some 40 per cent of the casualties being civilians, according to the most recent estimates.

Regarding yesterday’s attack on a United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) school, she said that it was an example of civilians being exposed to great harm.  Of course, the Israelis had said that there had been artillery fire from the vicinity of the school, but Human Rights Watch had spoken to witnesses on the ground, as well as UNRWA representatives, who had said that was not the case.  Further, initially, Israel had focused its attacks on the police stations in Gaza.  However, police were not combatants and could not represent legitimate targets, unless actively engaged in hostilities.  It was Israel’s burden of proof to show that the police they had targeted were, indeed, Hamas militants.  Instead, it appeared that Israel had targeted the police stations “on a blanket basis”.

Israel had also made clear that all Hamas entities, affiliates and sympathizers were subject to attack, she continued.  In that regard, it was important to note that only combatants who were actively engaged in fighting were legitimate subjects of attack.  Thus, a Hamas official at the Ministry of Health was not a legitimate target, and neither was a Hamas media broadcasting station.

Right now, all the international community had statements from Israeli officials that all they were doing was retaliating against Hamas rocket fire or attacks on their troops.  Stressing the need to verify those claims, she said that pressure should be brought on Israel to allow access for those in a position to make an independent assessment of the situation on the ground.  To see whether the rules of war were being respected, independent monitors and journalists should be allowed in Gaza.

Responding to a question, she said that Human Rights Watch was calling for respect for international humanitarian law.  With regard to Hamas, that meant containing rocket attacks that were indiscriminate or targeted civilians.  With regard to Israel, it meant cessation of indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas.  Her organization also called for a Security Council-led international investigation into the violation of the rules of war, as well as recommendations for holding those responsible for such violations accountable.

“Without a ceasefire and full opening of the borders to let the humanitarian supplies to flow into Gaza, we will witness a humanitarian catastrophe, on top of the high levels of death and injury caused directly by the violence,” said Mr. Dhynes of World Vision.  Children were the first victims, who needed the attention and protection of the international community.  He urged the Security Council and Quartet to work tirelessly to develop a lasting ceasefire plan that could be implemented, monitored and supported.  In the absence of such a joint agreement, he called on both sides to agree to a pause in the fighting, so that emergency medical supplies and other essential goods could be transported to Gaza.  The international community and parties to the conflict should take seriously the rights of children and civilians to flee the conflict zones.  He urged the Council to include the provisions to protect the rights of children in its resolution.

While welcoming the three-hour daily ceasefire, he also insisted that only a full ceasefire would allow for the crisis to be fully addressed.  Responding to several questions in that regard, Mr. Al Amawi said that, while today’s three-hour cessation of fire had allowed humanitarian organizations to deliver “some more aid” to the needy people, the measure was certainly not adequate to respond to the needs of the ground.  There had also been concerns about “the seriousness of this cessation”.  Mr. Bailey added that he did not want the cessation to become a distraction from the need to achieve a complete ceasefire and allow proper humanitarian access to all the people in need.

Asked how civilians were identified in such a conflict, Ms. Whitson said that, while women and children under the age of 10 were generally considered civilians, in many cases witness information was sought to confirm that the casualties were not combatants.  The task of identification was made easier by the fact that, in most cases, militants did not try to hide their participation in such organizations as Hamas.  It was a point of pride, and militants were usually buried with special grave markings identifying them as martyrs.  It was difficult, however, to determine if a person had died while engaged in fighting.

To another question, Mr. Cox said that some 20 to 30 aid agencies and other organizations had called on the European Union today to reconsider its association agreement with Israel, which was currently under negotiation.  OXFAM’s Mr. Bailey added that the rationale behind that call was that it would be inconsistent for the European Union, which held human rights as an inviolable principle of all its agreements, to be in negotiations with Israel at a time when so much of its activities were “entirely inconsistent with the understanding of international humanitarian law and the application of human rights to civilians”.