**[PRESS CONFERENCE](http://www.un.org/press/en/type-document/press-conference)**

**31 DECEMBER 2008**

# PRESS CONFERENCE ON SITUATION IN GAZA

“On the humanitarian side, the situation [in Gaza] remains alarming,” John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, told correspondents today at a Headquarters press conference.

It had become harder to get reliable figures because of restrictions on movement and communications inside Gaza, he informed them, adding “whatever the exact figures we may have or may quote”, he said, “this is a very bloody operation by anybody’s standards, even by the standards of that part of the world, and it’s hard to exaggerate the degree of constant fear, I think, felt by those in Gaza, in particular, as the attacks continue every 20 minutes or so, I think in many cases, both during the day and during the night.  And of course there is stress on the Israeli side, too, because of the constant threat of rockets, which have continued to fall and falling in new towns and cities as the range increases.”

Mr. Holmes 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), who said that, conservatively, between 20 and 25 per cent of the known dead were civilians.  UNRWA had not distributed any food for two weeks, which meant that 20,000 people a day had been without the food that they expected.  Food distribution was set to begin tomorrow, however, and six or seven food distribution centres were set up for 20,000 people apiece, each day.  The Israel Defense Forces had all the coordinates and had pledged to protect those areas and not have any air strikes near them.

Opening the briefing, Deputy Spokesperson for United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Marie Okabe, said Mr. Ban was holding daily intensive meetings with United Nations officials, who were on the ground in the region.  He was also continuing to work the phones.  Yesterday, he had spoken with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.  He had also had a teleconference with the principals of the Middle East Quartet, and her Office had supplied a readout on that.  Today, the Secretary-General had spoken with the foreign ministers of Brazil and Canada, and he would be on full alert over the coming days as he continued to do what he could to work towards a ceasefire.

Returning to the casualty figures, Mr. Holmes said the last confirmed figure on the Palestinian side was from yesterday -- 318 dead.  That number was probably significantly higher now, but he was unable to put an exact figure on it presently, not least because the air attacks were continuing at regular intervals.  The range of numbers being quoted was between 320 and 390, with the figures being given on a range of those injured of between 1,500 and 1,900.  He was trying to verify those and hoped to “have some better numbers fairly soon”.

On the question of civilian casualties, he could not say much more than he had said on Monday, because of the lack of information and difficulties defining “civilian” casualties, “but it is clear that the civilian casualties are significant, whatever definition you use, and they are certainly too many”.  On the Israeli side, the latest figures indicated that 4 people had been killed from the rocket and mortar attacks and some 30 people had been wounded.

Hospitals were struggling to cope with the casualties, he said.  Medical supplies were entering Gaza, but the situation was “difficult and fragile”.  He reiterated his concern about the power situation, for the hospitals in particular, because without power, the back-up generators had to work constantly.  That meant they only had limited fuel for perhaps 10 to 14 days, if they had to work in that constant way.  There was also the problem of reliability and lack of spare parts.

He reported that no fuel had entered Gaza since Monday, so the power plant, as predicted, had shut down yesterday.  That meant that some 650,000 people in central and northern Gaza would have power cuts of 16 or more hours a day until more fuel reached the enclave.  The Kerem Shalom crossing point had remained open for the past couple of days, and yesterday, 55 truckloads of goods had been allowed to pass, including 28 truckloads of humanitarian supplies -- mainly food and medical supplies -- and five ambulances.  He had hoped that would have grown to 90 truckloads today, but only around 60 had gotten through.  Some medical supplies, ambulances and generators had entered Gaza through the Rafah crossing.  UNRWA was planning to resume food distribution tomorrow, but as long as the Karni conveyor belt was not being used for bulk wheat grain, the stocks remained virtually non-existent.

Apart from medical supplies, the major needs were grain and wheat flour, and fuel, as well as cash for UNRWA, in order to enable people to buy supplies.  He was liaising closely with the Israeli military and civilian authorities on all those fronts, and they were cooperative, in principle, about those supplies, “but we need to see more results, particularly in the key areas I talked about”.  Access out of Gaza for severely injured people in need of treatment was through Rafah into Egypt -- around 30 cases had gone that way; none were currently going into Israel for treatment, although it was not clear why.

Putting the issue of the supplies and crossings into context, he said that 60 truckloads a day were presently entering Gaza, as compared to 125 truckloads daily in October 2008 and 475 truckloads per day in May 2007, just before the Hamas takeover.

The damage to infrastructure remained a concern, but so far, he thought it had been limited to the key parts of the infrastructure.  Nevertheless, at least two serious water wells had been hit, and there had been damage to schools and other infrastructure.  UNRWA had launched an appeal yesterday for $34 million for food, medical supplies and other goods, and there were good indications that donors would respond generously.  More widely, the consolidated appeal was being used for the Occupied Palestinian Territory as a whole, and that appeal was for $462 million for 2009, which was similar to the figure for 2008.  A new humanitarian emergency response fund was being set up.

He appealed to all parties to respect international humanitarian law, in whatever actions they were taking, particularly, to respect the distinction between combatants and civilians, and to respond proportionately to any attacks.  “That had been conspicuous mostly by its absence so far,” he added.  Apart from that, the biggest need remained an immediate ceasefire, fully respected by all sides.  Everyone was very disappointed that the proposal for a 48-hour lull, or ceasefire, had been rejected, but he hoped that diplomatic efforts to achieve a ceasefire would bear some fruit in the coming days.

Ms. AbuZayd echoed Mr. Holmes’ disappointment about the lull, adding that word about that possibility had travelled around among those who had ventured out and into the markets.  Hopes had been raised that they would have a brief respite from the noise of the bombs and drones overhead, at least for a few days.

She said that nearly 100 trucks had gotten in yesterday, 35 of which had been for UNRWA.  People were working at the warehouses through the night.  UNRWA needed 100 trucks a day at Karni alone, with just its bulk grain flour, and she was pretty sure that would not open.  She had spoken with the Coordinator for the Territories earlier this evening, who had been adamant that there were still security threats there and that operations would have to continue at Kerem Shalom.

Describing the offloading and loading process between Israeli and Palestinian trucks at the crossings, she said the Palestinian trucks had only two hours, because they never got in before 3 p.m. and then they had to shut down operations at dark.  So, although people were working through the night, the trucks were unable to get in.  UNRWA was unable to get most of the things it had ordered into Gaza since much of it, normally, went through Karni crossing, so it was borrowing food from the World Food Programme and flour from its own West Bank Programme, but donors were sending desperately needed things.  She thanked two donors -- the Hashemite Foundation from Jordan and the Egyptian Red Cross.

The $34 million appeal concentrated on food, cash assistance, shelter and fuel, she said, adding that there had already been some indications that there would be pledges for the additional appeal to the consolidated appeal that went out only a few weeks ago.  Food distribution would begin tomorrow; six or seven food distribution centres had been set up, each to service 20,000 a day.  The Israel Defense Forces had the coordinates and had pledged to protect those areas.

She said that only one person -- an injured UNRWA student -- had gotten out of Gaza to an Israeli hospital following the air strike that had killed eight others, but he died this morning.  “So that was a bit of sad news for us on top of everything else today.”

To several questions about the fuel, Mr. Holmes said the reasons why the fuel was not getting through “are really for the Israelis to explain”.  He had been pressing very hard for the Israelis to allow the fuel supply to resume.  They had said there were security threats and violence around the crossing point where the fuel pipeline crossed, and they, therefore, could not open the fuel pipeline now.  He hoped they would open it tomorrow, but there was no guarantee of that.  Until it was opened, the power plant would remain closed, which meant a very limited power supply in Gaza.

A lot of medical supplies were entering Gaza, he replied to another question, adding that most of the hospitals were able to operate “just about” on what they had now, but supplies of basic drugs were running very low.  Surgical kits would be supplied in the coming days, sufficient to treat 10,000 casualties.

In terms of coordination with the Israelis, Ms. AbuZayd said the Agency had longstanding lists of things it was trying to bring in and now was in “constant contact” with the Israelis.  But, there was a lot more outside than could be gotten in on a daily basis.  The Israelis watched distributions and UNRWA movement, and they alerted the Agency about any air strikes.  “So there is good coordination, but we’re not getting enough in; the logistics are just not good enough yet.”

The damage to United Nations facilities was mostly collateral damage -- “we’re just near where there is a strike, somehow”, she said, adding that that was what had happened to the warehouses and schools pictured in the media today.  In the case of the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East (UNSCO), that had been “smack up against the presidential guest house”, and when that had been hit, the UNSCO building had suffered serious damage.

As for whether Israeli authorities had been asked to investigate the deadly attack involving students coming out of a United Nations facility, Ms. AbuZayd said UNRWA had taken up the matter with the International Organization Department of Israel’s Foreign Affairs Ministry, which had itself approached the Agency saying it believed the incident should be investigated.

Replying to a question about hunger, she said that people were doing badly, and everyone she knew was sharing what they had, and not just with their family, but with their neighbours as well.  She had not seen widespread hunger, but for the first time in her eight years on the job, she was seeing people begging.

Regarding the source of information about a possible 48-hour lull, she said she thought it was widespread in the media.  She had seen the story herself in the Israeli English newspapers, which had made its way into the Arab newspapers.  So, people had believed it, she added.

Asked if she believed the crossings were closed because of security threats, she said had spoken with the Coordinator for the Territory just before the briefing and he was “quite insistent” that there was intelligence about serious preparation for security operations at all of those places.  “We wonder if it’s serious enough to really keep things completely closed and to keep people, you know, on the edge of subsistence, but that’s what we’re told all the time,” she said.

Mr. Holmes acknowledged that there were questions about how real the security risks were, but the crossing points had at times been targeted by rockets and from within Gaza.  So, there was some evidence for that.

Replying to follow-up questions on the fuel issue, Mr. Holmes said the fuel supply had been cut off since 26 December, with the 650,000 people in central and northern Gaza facing 16 hours or more of power cuts per day.  That was an urban environment where power was a daily necessity.  As for resuming the power supply, he thought it was simply a matter of turning on the tap.

All five mosques that had been attacked were said to be Hamas mosques, Ms. AbuZayd replied to a question about whether those temples had harboured weapons or militants.

Regarding the trauma, she said it was hard to describe.  Everybody was traumatized about what was happening each day and about the future; they were just expecting the worst.

Mr. Holmes added that all the reports spoke of fear and panic among the population because of “the constant nature of it, the unpredictability of it, the bloody nature of it”.

As far as Ms. AbuZayd could tell, “people are not blaming Hamas, they’re blaming Israel, they’re blaming that entity that is bombing it each day and creating this problem; they are not taking any second step on that”, she replied to another question.

Asked about preparations for a possible ground invasion, she said contingency planning was under way.  UNRWA was setting up emergency centres for shelters and distributions, and it was already in touch with the Israelis about protecting those areas.  She thought the scope and duration of what might come was different from past offensives, but she had been assured by the Israelis that UNRWA would be kept well-informed and that humanitarian activities would be protected.