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# Press Conference by Director of Gaza Operations, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

Decrying mounting civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip since Israel launched its military offensive there some 11 days ago, the head of United Nations relief operations in the enclave today demanded an independent investigation into a spate of overnight and early-morning air strikes on several clearly marked schools, which reportedly left more than 30 people dead and scores wounded.

“It’s quite a horrific scene here today,” said John Ging, Director of Operations in Gaza for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), speaking via video-link to a Headquarters press conference.  In addition to the 30 people killed, 55 others had been injured by three Israeli artillery shells landing on the perimeter of a United Nations school in the Jabaliya refugee camp, where civilians had fled seeking refuge from the ongoing violence.  Another artillery shell had struck an empty boys’ school in Jabaliya.

In attacks beginning last night, three Gazans had been killed at another UNRWA school, Mr. Ging said, adding that they had been among more than 400 people who had fled their homes in Beit Lahai “under heavy fire” earlier in the evening and been given refuge at the school.  Earlier this morning, a house in the Bureij refugee camp had been targeted without notice in a shelling that had injured seven UNRWA staff and three patients at the Agency’s local health facility.

Emphasizing that all United Nations schools in Gaza were clearly marked, he said they flew the Organization’s flag and Israel had long been provided with the GPS coordinates of all its installations in the area.  “So the people in Gaza feel that nowhere is safe.  There’s just no other way out of this; the Palestinians have to stop firing the rockets and the Israelis have to end their disproportionate and inappropriate use of force in densely populated urban areas.”

Demanding an independent investigation into the attacks on United Nations schools, he stressed that there had been too little accountability for actions on all sides.  The innocent civilians of Gaza were entitled to protection under international law and entitled to answers.  “We must uphold the rule of law even during times of conflict.  We must not yield to the rule of the gun.”

Noting that UNRWA had received no response from Israel about the attacks, he went on to say:  “We also need more than words; we need effective action.”  International political actors should act quickly and decisively to stop the violence and end the mounting casualties.  “It’s truly tragic.  People are dying here by the hour in full view of the global community […] I sincerely hope that, for the sake of those that have died, it would not have been in vain.”  While UNRWA had suspended its school programmes at the start of the offensive, its humanitarian work would continue but under great constraints “because this is a war zone at the moment”.

Responding to questions, Mr. Ging expressed the hope that the school attacks would spur the international community to immediate action to get a ceasefire agreed.  While UNRWA was demanding full accountability for the attacks, in the meantime, it was also urging the political leadership on both sides of the conflict to take unilateral action to stop the violence.  The heart of the dilemma was that the people of Gaza believed that nowhere was safe and, in light of the scale of the violence, “I have no advice for them, except to stress that the only solution is a ceasefire”.

Asked whether Hamas militants had been in the vicinity of the Jabaliya school at the time of the strike, he said that he would not speculate on that since he was not following the tactics or operations between Israeli forces and militants, but trying to get humanitarian relief to the “undisputedly civilian population that is so desperately in need of it”.

At the same time, he stressed that UNRWA was “hugely sensitive” to maintaining the integrity of its facilities.  Experienced United Nations staff vetted all those seeking shelter in the Agency’s facilities to make sure militants were not taking advantage of them.  “So far, we’ve not had violations by militants of our facilities.”

Responding to another question, he said the severe shortage of cash was having a “massive impact” on relief operations.  Indeed, the Agency had been unable to disburse hardship payments since mid-November because there had been no re-supply of cash into Gaza since that time.  Further, UNRWA staff was only receiving partial payment because the banks just did not have the cash on hand.  UNRWA had been seeking solutions with Israeli authorities for the past few months, but no decision had been reached thus far.  The bottom line was that Gaza was under myriad embargoes and many of UNRWA’s strategic reserves had been depleted during the past months.  Therefore, cash and some humanitarian goods were in short supply.

On other matters, he said that, while he did not have precise figures, doctors at the main hospital in Gaza stood by reports that civilians accounted for some 50 per cent of the injuries and 25 per cent of the dead.  Two surgeons had underscored the large number of civilian casualties.

He stressed that UNRWA and the wider humanitarian community working in Gaza were at a loss as to the absence of a vibrant and impartial press corps on the ground.  The Agency would continue to call for a media presence not only because the truth must be told, but also because those making important decisions must be able to base their information on the facts.