

UNITED NATIONS RESPONSE TO THE ONGOING CONFLICT IN PALESTINE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Gaza, the Palestinian enclave home to over 2.2 million people, has been subjected to a comprehensive blockade imposed by Israel since the year 2007. This blockade encompasses various forms of restrictions including control over airspace, land borders, and maritime access. The Gaza Strip is increasingly becoming a land of violations of the laws of war by Israel as it deprives its population of food and medicine, electricity and fuel, conducts attacks on hospitals, and uses white phosphorous bombs in killing civilian population. In the first week of the invasion, Israel dropped 6000 bombs on Gaza, weighing 4000 tonnes.¹

The 'war crimes' in Gaza by Israel have left the world more divided -- especially in the aftermath of the complete blockade of food, water, and vital services put in place by Israel.² The United Nations has expressed strong reservations and concerns about Israel's attacks on Gaza over the years, as the situation is complex and subject to ongoing developments. United Nations has repeatedly called upon the parties for restraint, protection of civilians, and cease-fire.

1 "When a Family Dies Under Israel's Bombs, Part of Gaza's History Disappears," *Al Jazeera*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/13/when-a-family-dies-under-israels-bombs-part-of-gazas-history-disappears>

2 "Explainer: UN on the Ground Amid Israel-Palestine Crisis," *United Nations*, October 11, 2023, <https://turkiye.un.org/en/249084-explainer-un-ground-amid-israel-palestine-crisis>

The United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) António Guterres said that the situation in Gaza has reached “a dangerous new low,” adding that “moving more than one million people across a densely populated warzone to a place with no food, water, or accommodation, when the entire territory is under siege, is extremely dangerous – and in some cases, simply not possible.”³ In addition, UN independent experts have condemned the indiscriminate attacks against Palestinian civilians in Gaza and a further tightening of the unlawful blockade, which will have devastating impacts on the whole civilian population.⁴ The UN Human Rights Office further condemned the withholding of essential supplies such as food, water, electricity and medicines. Such actions will precipitate a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza, where its population is now at an inescapable risk of starvation. Intentional starvation is a crime against humanity.⁵

Besides the UN offices, multiple other international organizations have condemned the deplorable state of affairs in the Gaza Strip and have called out Israel for the brutal and indiscriminate use of force. The Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor has stated that Israel's relentless aerial and artillery attacks on the Gaza Strip have turned it into a ‘hell hole’ where Israel has dropped bombs equivalent to a quarter of a nuclear bomb leading to death and destruction, extremely complex humanitarian conditions, without any basic life services with at least 14 Palestinians are killed every hour.⁶

According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, 4,385 people have been killed since 7 October, including 1,756 children and 967 women; a further 13,561 persons were injured due to heavy Israeli bombardments on Gaza with hundreds of additional fatalities trapped under the rubble.⁷

In response to the intensifying humanitarian emergency in Gaza, several United Nations agencies are strategically positioning critical supplies, such as food and medical provisions, near the Egypt-Gaza border. However, the crucial factor for addressing this crisis is the timely reopening of the border

³ UN/Guterres Gaza Israel, *United Nations*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/3113/3113769/>

⁴ “Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territory: UN Experts Deplore Attacks On Civilians, Call For Truce And Urge International Community To Address Root Causes Of Violence,” *United Nations Human Rights*, Office of the High Commissioner, October 12, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/israeloccupied-palestinian-territory-un-experts-deplore-attacks-civilians>

⁵ “Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territory: UN Experts Deplore Attacks On Civilians, Call For Truce And Urge International Community To Address Root Causes Of Violence,” *United Nations Human Rights*, Office of the High Commissioner, October 12, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/israeloccupied-palestinian-territory-un-experts-deplore-attacks-civilians>

⁶ “Israel Kills 14 Palestinians Every Hour in Its Brutal Attack on Gaza – Israel Dropped Equivalent to a Quarter of a Nuclear Bomb,” *Relief Web*, October 14, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/israel-kills-14-palestinians-every-hour-its-brutal-attack-gaza-israel-dropped-equivalent-quarter-nuclear-bomb-enar>

⁷ UNRWA Situation Report #11 on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Including East Jerusalem,” Situation Report, *UNRWA*, October 22, 2023, <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-11-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem>

from the Israeli side. Regardless of the efforts made by the UN and other international bodies the United Nations Security Council (UNSG) failed to adopt a resolution put forth by the Russian Federation that would have called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the ongoing Israel-Palestine crisis.⁸

The United Nations is assisting on the ground in various ways:

On October 19, 2023, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, undertook a visit to the Rafah border crossing situated between Egypt and the Gaza Strip with the objective of facilitating the distribution of humanitarian aid to the besieged Palestinian territory. During his visit he stressed on the urgency of humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza and called the delivery of aid as a 'lifeline' for the people and a question of 'life and death.'⁹ During his visit he also engaged with Egypt, Israel, the United States for a stable flow of the aid agreeing for the passage of the aid conveys with items such as medical supplies, tins of tuna and tomato paste, wheat flour, and enough drinking water for 22,000 people for a day with hundreds more trucks in witing on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing awaiting entry.¹⁰

1. The UN relief agency for Palestine refugees, UNRWA, is offering shelter to around 137,500 individuals who have been displaced by heavy airstrikes in Gaza.
2. Top UN officials and organizations such as the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) are engaging with parties involved in the conflict and key stakeholders to de-escalate tensions.
3. The UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon, UNIFIL, is actively monitoring the security situation along the Israel-Lebanon border and working to prevent any misunderstandings that could lead to further escalation.
4. Emergency services are being provided to address urgent needs. As a result of Israel's blockade on food, water, fuel, and electricity in Gaza, there is a risk of food scarcity and a looming crisis. To mitigate this, mobile toilets and showers are being deployed to UNRWA shelters.

⁸ "With 4 Members in Favour, 5 Against, Security Council Rejects Russian Federation's Resolution Calling for Immediate Humanitarian Ceasefire in Israel-Palestine Crisis," United Nations, October 16, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15445.doc.htm>

⁹ "UN Chief Calls on Israel to Open Aid 'Lifeline' for Gaza," Al-Jazeera, October 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/20/un-chief-visits-rafah-crossing-pushes-to-get-aid-into-gaza>

¹⁰ "Second Aid Convoy 'Another Glimmer Of Hope' For Millions In Gaza: UN Relief Chief," United Nations, October 22, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142677>

5. The World Food Programme (WFP) and UNRWA are coordinating the distribution of bread to displaced people in Gaza's shelters. However, due to the closures of UNRWA food distribution centres, nearly half a million people have been unable to receive their food rations.
6. The UN's country-based pooled funds (CBPF) and its partners have released necessary medical supplies and drugs for trauma and emergencies. Additionally, health staff are working at UNRWA health centres with some clinics offering primary healthcare services during specified hours.
7. The World Health Organization (WHO) and other UN agencies are working with partners to establish a corridor to provide critical supplies in Gaza. Efforts are being made to establish humanitarian corridors for the delivery of aid. However, access to humanitarian staff and supplies has been limited due to the ongoing hostilities.

The Israel-Hamas conflict represents an acute litmus test, not only for the United Nations but for the global community at large. This protracted and deeply rooted conflict, characterized by episodes of violence, underscores the intricate and protracted nature of the challenge at hand. This situation underscores the pressing necessity for concerted international action aimed at mitigating the unprecedented surge in hostilities and the apparent disregard for established tenets of international law by Israel.

Moreover, it is essential to underscore that the Israel-Gaza conflict has evolved into a multifaceted conundrum, necessitating a multifaceted approach involving a diverse array of stakeholders. This approach is contingent upon the amalgamation of diplomatic, humanitarian, and political mechanisms underpinned by the guidance and facilitation of the United Nations, regional entities, and influential global powers. These efforts must be designed to encourage negotiations and dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian entities, with the pivotal objective of achieving ceasefire arrangements, safeguarding civilian lives, and moving towards a political process that leads to a just and lasting solution of this most intractable dispute of the century.