

UN envoys witness unimaginable suffering on trip to Gaza border



Rafah, December 12 (RHC)-- UN Security Council envoys have spoken of unimaginable suffering and urged an end to the war in the Gaza Strip as they visited the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing, the only entry point for aid into the besieged territory.

China's representative to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, asked by reporters on Monday if he had a message to nations that oppose a ceasefire in Gaza, said simply: "Enough is enough." A majority of UN member states support an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas as dire conditions worsen for

Gaza's 2.3 million residents.

The United States, which backs Israel, last week vetoed a draft resolution at the Security Council that called for an immediate ceasefire as Israeli tanks and troops press an assault that has displaced most of Gaza's population and killed and injured thousands.

A dozen Security Council envoys attended the trip organised by the United Arab Emirates to visit Rafah, just days after Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that thousands of people in the besieged Palestinian enclave were "simply starving".

After flying to the town of Al-Arish, Egypt, they were briefed by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) on conditions in Gaza before heading towards Rafah 48 km (30 miles) away.

"The reality is even worse than what words can speak," Ecuador's UN ambassador, Jose De La Gasca, told reporters after the UNRWA briefing.

The U.S. and French representatives did not participate in the trip.

UAE Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh said the envoys were told Gazans are dying from malnutrition, a collapsing medical system and a lack of water and food in addition to the actual conflict in itself.

Israel has bombarded Gaza from the air, sea and land; imposed a siege; and mounted a ground offensive since October 7, killing more than 18,000 people and injuring more than 49,500, according to Palestinian officials. Israeli forces launched the assault after Hamas carried out attacks on southern Israel, killing about 1,200 people and taking 240 captive, according to Israeli authorities.

Gaza's Ministry of Health spokesman Ashraf al-Qudra said on Monday that the bodies of at least 208 Palestinians had arrived at several hospitals in Gaza in the previous few hours.

At least 416 people had been wounded in the same timeframe, he said, while "a large number" of victims remains under the rubble as Israeli forces block ambulances from reaching these areas.

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini described an "implosion of civil order" in which Gazans who have not eaten for days looted aid distribution centres and stopped trucks on roads as they tried to secure supplies for their families. "There is not enough assistance," Lazzarini said. "Hunger is prevailing in Gaza. ... Most of the people are just sleeping on the concrete."

Russian envoy Vasily Nebenzia described conditions in Gaza as "catastrophic" and said those countries against a ceasefire should "face the reality and afford dignity to the Palestinians." Nebenzia rejected accusations it was hypocritical to condemn Israel when Moscow continues to press its war on Ukraine.

Limited humanitarian aid and fuel deliveries have crossed into Gaza via the Rafah crossing, but aid officials said it comes nowhere near to satisfying the most basic needs of residents.

Meanwhile, the European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, said the situation in Gaza is "catastrophic, apocalyptic" with destruction proportionally "even greater" than Germany experienced in World War II.

"The human suffering constitutes an unprecedented challenge to the international community," Borrell said. "Civilian casualties are between 60 and 70 percent of the overall deaths" and "85 percent of the population is internally displaced."

With almost all of Gaza's 2.3 million people crowded into the south after Israel's offensive and evacuation orders in the north, there are growing concerns among Palestinians that they could be forced out of the territory altogether in a repeat of the 1948 mass expulsion known as the Nakba, or "catastrophe",

surrounding the establishment of the state of Israel.

The aid group Doctors Without Borders said on Monday that people in southern Gaza were falling ill as they pack into crowded shelters or sleep in tents in open areas. Nicholas Papachrysostomou, the group's emergency coordinator in Gaza, said "every other patient" at a clinic in Rafah has a respiratory infection after prolonged exposure to cold and rain.

"In some shelters, 600 people share a single toilet. We are already seeing many cases of diarrhoea. Often children are the worst affected," he said.

As the UN envoys travelled towards the Rafah border, hundreds of trucks were parked along the road leading to the crossing, waiting to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Nusseibeh said Abu Dhabi was coordinating with relevant authorities so drinkable water could be pumped into Gaza from an Emirati-funded desalination plant in Egypt.

While Israel has severely restricted the water going into Gaza, it is also unclear if Gaza's infrastructure is capable of receiving the desalinated water after damage caused by weeks of heavy Israeli bombardment.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said 100 trucks carrying humanitarian supplies entered Gaza from Egypt on Sunday, the same number as the previous day. It noted that was "well below" the daily average of 500 truckloads, including fuel, that entered every working day prior to October 7.

A UNICEF employee, speaking to reporters on the condition of anonymity, said a logistics centre near Al-Arish was storing items Israel had banned from being sent into Gaza, including solar panels and an ultrasound machine. The employee said they were banned because they were electrical and contained metal.

The 15-member Security Council is negotiating a UAE-drafted resolution that demands warring parties "allow the use of all land, sea and air routes to and throughout" Gaza for aid deliveries.

It would also establish a UN-run aid monitoring mechanism in Gaza Strip. It was not clear when the draft resolution could be put to a vote.

Guterres last week formally warned the Security Council of a global threat to peace and security posed by the conflict. The UN chief said half of Palestinians in the north of Gaza and at least a third of those displaced in the south were "simply starving" and later criticised the council for having "failed" to help bring about a humanitarian ceasefire.

The UN General Assembly will meet about Gaza on Tuesday at the request of Arab and Muslim states. The 193-member body is likely to vote on a draft resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, diplomats said.

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