REMARKS BY UNRWA CHIEF OF STAFF, MR. BEN MAJEKODUNMI, AT THE WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY 2024 UN COMMEMORATION

19 August 2024



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UNRWA Chief of Staff, Mr. Ben Majekodunmi, delivers remarks at the World Humanitarian Day 2024 UN commemoration in Geneva © 2024 UN Photo



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GENEVA – Dear friends and colleagues in the humanitarian community,

Thank you for recognizing UNRWA on this World Humanitarian Day.

As we know, since the early morning of 7th October - over 40,000 people, possibly far more, have been [reportedly] killed in Gaza and over 1,200 [reportedly] killed in Israel.

Within this, the humanitarian community has suffered unspeakable tragedy. At least 289 humanitarian personnel have been killed, from Palestinian and international NGOs and from the UN. At least 211 are UN staff, including 207 from UNRWA alone, and staff from WHO, UNDP and UNDSS. At least 190 UNRWA premises have been damaged or destroyed, killing over 560 people sheltering inside. Over 135 children of UNRWA staff have been killed.

Before the war, half of Gaza's 625,000 children went to UNRWA schools. Any chance of recovery in Gaza and of lasting peace must see them return with their teachers to school.

On 10 July, Wafa, an UNRWA teacher was killed with her husband and two children in Nuseirat.

On 18 July, Seham, an UNRWA teacher, was injured and her husband and children killed, in Bureij. Seham later died from her injuries.

On 21 July, Suha, an UNRWA teacher was injured in Nuseirat, and her husband and young daughter and son were killed. Suha died from her injuries on 30 July.

On 24 July, Ibtehal, an UNRWA teacher was killed with her 4 month-old daughter in Khan Younis.

On 19 January, but only recently reported, Ghada, an UNRWA teacher, was killed along with her husband and six children.

All had been displaced from their homes. These are five entries from UNRWA's record of staff deaths. We have two hundred more. They were teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, cleaners, support staff, technicians.

This is by far the greatest loss of UN personnel killed in a single conflict or natural disaster since the creation of the United Nations.

The harm inflicted on humanitarian workers and operations has been [illegible] by competent entities in the UN and beyond as violations of international law and likely war crimes. The consequences go far beyond Gaza. In the humanitarian community we know that the reason we can work in the most dangerous places is not through force of arms, but through force of law and principles. Each day, many of us depend upon the respect for the UN flag not only by governments but also by individual fighters – in a plane above us, at a roadblock. When that respect ceases, we lose the protection required to help those who need it most. There must be accountability.

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Within 30 seconds of entering Gaza through Rafah or Kerem Shalom, humanitarian staff walk into an active conflict. Within the 18% of Gaza not under evacuation orders, it is intensely crowded – a normally five-minute drive takes an hour. There are children everywhere. UNRWA premises, almost all converted into shelters, are filled with people trying to stay clean, trying to care for their children, trying to live. There is the constant sound of drones high in the sky, the sound of incoming fire from ships, the sound of exploding bombs near and far, or silent plumes of smoke rising from the strike of a distant missile. People risk their lives to find clean water and food. Polio spreads in open sewage. Children die from inadequate medical care, while world class hospitals are near.

Almost all UNRWA and humanitarian staff are displaced. Like the general population, they live on the floor of schools, in half destroyed buildings, in tents constructed from rugs and branches.

It is in this environment that humanitarian workers are keeping Gaza alive.

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I asked my colleagues in Gaza what they would want me to say here.

They told me that while at work they worry all day about the safety of their families. That upon hearing each explosion they try to calculate in their minds its size, location and proximity to where their families are displaced.

They said that Gazans are angry at the international community, represented on the ground by humanitarian workers, for not stopping the destruction.

Randa and Farid talked about two dear friends among the deceased UNRWA staff - Seline, an Obstetrician, and Shahar who devoted his life to education for children with special needs. “Gaza has lost so much”, they said.

Rida, an UNRWA school principal now a shelter manager, described how a missile strike on her shelter in Khan Younis killed 17 people immediately. With ambulances unable to come, Rida said she and other UNRWA staff,

without medical training, provided care overnight for many others with trauma injuries. The worst was seeing human beings reduced to s".

Eima works in movement coordination for humanitarian missions. She described how she wakes at 4 a.m to receive and transmit updated instructions on safe routes, and then spends all day worrying if the routes she shared will really keep her colleagues safe.

My colleagues told me that everyone dreams constantly of a ceasefire.

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Amidst the pain, as humanitarians, we look for hope and light where we can find it.

Is there light in the fact that even when an UNRWA school is hit by bombs killing IDPs, and hit again days later killing more, that IDPs still remain there because, in spite of everything, they feel safer under the UN blue flag; safer with UN staff around them?

Is there light in the fact that on a single day in February, UNRWA was able to conduct over 20,000 separate patient visits at our few remaining health clinics? And that one of those clinics, in Nuseirat, on one terrible day, shifted from primary health care to serving as an ICU with staff doing improvised surgery on over 150 trauma cases that arrived within a few hours, under intense bombardment?

Is there hope in the fact that amid the horror of a polio outbreak, the humanitarian community has somehow managed to design a public health campaign to address it; now the parties to the conflict must enable the plan's implementation.

My colleagues said they have enormous pride in their work and in UNRWA and the other humanitarian operations. They said: "We are the door that is always open for the community". UNRWA is part of almost every aspect of humanitarian assistance in Gaza, through our thousands of staff. The day after each terrible moment, no matter how deeply staff are affected, including the death of their own children, they keep reporting to work.

I ask that we recognize the humanitarian personnel working in and on Gaza. From Palestinian public health and safety organizations, to international NGOs, to UN agencies and departments including WHO, UNDP, UNDSS, OCHA, WFP, IOM, UNICEF, OHCHR, UNMAS, the Resident Coordinator and the Special Coordinator and their teams, and others. And I ask that we recognize UNRWA staff who, after going through so much, still "keep the door always open".

I also recall the outstanding work, courage and commitment of humanitarian staff around the world from across the NGO and UN community, and our colleagues lost in Iraq in 2003.

those who might abuse it, whether through attacks or through impunity violations, the blue UN flag continues to represent the principles of human rights, of international law, and of humanity for all peoples affected by this terrible conflict, on all sides of borders and walls, and regardless of national, religious, or ethnic origins. At the risk of their lives, our colleagues in Gaza and around the world set this standard every day.

The last message I would share is of an impromptu speech made by our colleague Miranda, a Palestinian senior manager of a large UNRWA-Gaza team. During my last visit into Gaza, I listened as she gathered about 40 staff to stand around her. Ignoring the background sound of explosions, she smiled and spoke as she walked around the room looking at her team, saying "Thank you, for your dedication, for your hard work. We are strong. We are defending our organization that is our family. We will absorb the anger of our community. We are here. We will not leave our IDPs. We will leave no one behind, even though we are standing alone."

Today, on World Humanitarian Day 2024, all of UNRWA and the humanitarian community in Gaza knows that we are not alone.

Thank you.

Background Information:

UNRWA (https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.unrwa.org%2F&data=05%7C01%7CHQ-PIO%40UNRWA.ORG%7C7edfcbc8399c400e4a6c08dafba2254d%7C262f6a4120e941408d3efdf the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations pending a just and lasting solution to their plight.

UNRWA operates in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, The Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Tens of thousands of Palestine refugees who lost their homes and livelihoods due to the 1948 conflict continue to be displaced and in need of support, nearly 75 years on.

UNRWA helps Palestine Refugees achieve their full potential in human development through quality services it provides in education, health care, relief and social services, protection, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance, and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

Your support is crucial to help us provide emergency aid (https://bit.ly/3rXMZ0P) to displaced families in Gaza (https://bit.ly/3rXMZ0P)



Help send humanitarian aid (https://donate.unrwa.org/b?cid=4&lang=en_EN&utm_source=website&utm_medium=website&utm_campaign=

DONATE (HTTPS://DONATE.UNRWA.ORG/B?CID=4&LANG=EN_EN&UTM_SOURCE=WEBSITE&UTM_MEDIUM=WEE

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