PRESS BRIEFING NOTES | OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Gaza: Report from the ground

19 January 2024

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FROM

Head of UN Human Rights Office Occupied Palestinian Territory Ajith Sunghay

LOCATION

Rafah

We are reaching yet another staggering milestone in Gaza – nearly 25,000 people reported killed, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. Seventy per cent of them women and children. Another 61,500 – at least – have been injured. Several thousands more are under the rubble, many presumed dead.

I've been in Gaza since Monday – so far only in Rafah. I will share with you what I have witnessed and observed.

People continue to arrive in Rafah from various places in their thousands, in desperate situations, setting up makeshift shelters with any material they can get their hands on. I've seen men and children digging for bricks to be able to hold in place tents made with plastic bags. This is a massive human rights crisis. And a major, human-made, humanitarian disaster. Gaza needs urgent scaling up of humanitarian aid, including of the protection response.

It is a pressure cooker environment here, in the midst of utter chaos, given the terrible humanitarian situation, shortages, and pervasive fear and anger. The communications blackout has continued for a sixth consecutive day, adding to the confusion and fear, and preventing Gazans from accessing services and information on areas to evacuate.

Heavy bombardment of Middle Gaza and Khan Younis is clearly visible and audible from Rafah – especially at night, I hear bombing, sometimes

several times an hour. Night-time is clearly the most terrifying time for the people, even in Rafah. And I also think of the over 100 civilians held hostage in Gaza, unseen, who most certainly hear the same sounds and feel the same fear.

During my time here, I have managed to meet a number of released detainees. These are men who were detained by Israeli Security Forces in unknown locations for between 30 to 55 days. They described being beaten, humiliated, subjected to ill-treatment, and to what may amount to torture. They reported being blindfolded for long periods – some of them for several consecutive days. One man said he had access to a shower only once during his 55 days in detention. There are reports of men who were subsequently released – but only in diapers, without any adequate clothing in this cold weather.

What they told me was consistent with reports our Office has been gathering of the detention of Palestinians on a broad scale, including many civilians, held in secrecy, often subject to ill-treatment, with no access to their families, lawyers or effective judicial protection. The families of detainees – believed to number in the thousands – have not been provided with information on the fate or location of their loved ones.

Israel must take urgent steps to ensure that all those arrested or detained are treated in line with international human rights and international humanitarian law norms and standards, notably with full respect for their due process rights.

Unless Israel can demonstrate imperative security grounds for each person remaining in detention, they must be charged or released. Israeli authorities must ensure that families have access to information about their loved ones. All instances of ill-treatment or torture of people arrested or detained must be fully and transparently investigated, and, if found to have taken place, action must be taken to ensure accountability and to prevent recurrence. Victims and their families have the right to truth, justice, and reparations.

I have to end with a resounding plea from Gaza, above all, for an immediate ceasefire, for human rights and humanitarian reasons, and for all hostages to be released. These horrors must not become normalized.

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