



WHO Director-General's remarks at the Informal Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly – 17 November 2023

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Mr President, Excellencies, dear colleagues,

Thank you, Mr President, for convening this meeting.

On Tuesday of this week, I met for the second time with families of Israeli hostages being held in Gaza.

I heard and felt their pain and heartache.

WHO continues to call for those hostages who are still alive to be released, without condition.

We are deeply concerned for their health and well-being, just as we are concerned for the health and well-being of the people of Gaza, which is becoming more precarious every hour.

So far this week, WHO has not received updates on the number of deaths or injuries in Gaza, which makes it harder for us to evaluate the functioning of the health system.

What is clear is that the health needs of the people of Gaza are growing all the time, and the health system is near collapse.

Only 10 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are still functioning, with just 1,400 hospital beds.

Many health workers have been displaced, forced to flee with their families.

Here's what that means:

More and more casualties, and fewer and fewer beds, health workers, medicines and supplies;

Premature babies dying as life-support systems shut down;

More than 2000 patients with cancer, 1000 with kidney disease, 50,000 with cardiovascular disease and 60,000 with diabetes, all at risk as their treatment is interrupted;

Up to 200 women giving birth every day in the worst imaginable conditions;

An estimated 20,000 people and counting in need of specialized mental health services;

Among displaced populations in overcrowded shelters, we are seeing increasing numbers of respiratory and skin infections;

Cases of acute watery diarrhea as the sewage system breaks down and people are forced to defecate in the open;

Increasing malnutrition;

I could go on and on.

There are no words to describe the horror.

The people of Gaza need our support – your support – now.

The best way to support Gaza's health workers and the people they serve is by giving them the tools they need – medicines, medical equipment, clean water, food, power and protection.

Field hospitals and emergency medical teams can complement and support existing hospitals and health workers in Gaza, but they cannot replace them.

Supporting Gaza's health workers is at the heart of WHO's operational response plan.

We need to rapidly resupply the hospitals, reconstitute the health workforce and ensure health services are protected.

But frankly, the amount of aid that has been allowed into Gaza so far is pitiful. It's pathetic.

And even the little aid we can get into Gaza cannot be distributed without fuel.

It's as simple as that: no fuel, no aid.

The small amount of fuel that entered this week has already run out.

We welcome reports that an agreement has been reached for increased supply of fuel to Gaza. We look forward to seeing the details of those reports, and to their fulfilment.

But it's not just fuel.

Electricity is also needed to power desalination plants, water and sewage treatment plants, hospitals and other essential services.

We welcome the Security Council's adoption on Wednesday of a resolution on urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors in Gaza.

It doesn't go far enough – we need a ceasefire – but it's a start.

We call for the immediate implementation of the resolution, and we call on all parties to abide by it.

Most of all, we need attacks on health care to stop.

The Geneva conventions were adopted and ratified to establish what is acceptable and what is not in conflict.

Violating the neutrality of health care is not acceptable. Attacks on health care must stop.

But so far, WHO has verified 152 attacks on health care in Gaza, 170 in the West Bank, and 33 in Israel – attacks on hospitals, clinics, ambulances, health workers, and patients.

Al-Shifa hospital must be enabled to function as a hospital.

There are reportedly up to 300 health workers and 650 patients inside the hospital.

Even if Hamas has used the hospital for military purposes, the hospital, and indeed all health care facilities, are never without protection under humanitarian law.

Furthermore, the proposal for a so-called “safe zone” at Al-Mawasi is a recipe for disaster.

Attempting to cram so many people into such a small area with such little infrastructure or services will significantly increase risks to health for people who are already on the brink.

WHO will not participate in the establishment of any so-called “safe zone” in Gaza without broad agreement, and unless fundamental conditions are in place to ensure safety and other essential needs are met, and a mechanism is in place to supervise its implementation, as Martin Griffiths said earlier.

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Let me be clear.

The attacks by Hamas and other armed groups on Israel, the killing of 1200 people, and the taking of more than 200 hostages were totally unjustifiable.

But with at least 11,500 Gazans killed, 70% of them women and children;

With 1.7 million people displaced;

With two-thirds of Gaza’s hospitals out of action;

With no electricity, no fuel, no clean water, no food;

With every bomb that kills or maims a child;

With every family buried beneath the rubble of its own home;

The scale of Israel’s response appears increasingly unjustifiable.

WHO, like the rest of the United Nations system, is impartial. We are not on one side or the other. We are on the side of humanity.

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Mr President, Excellencies,

We are witnessing the destruction of life and property on a horrific scale.

But we are also witnessing the destruction of civility, the rules-based system, and trust between countries.

This crisis is an acid test for the United Nations, and for you, its Member States.

This organization was established to foster peace in our world.

If you, as Member States of the United Nations, will not or cannot stop this bloodshed, then we must ask: what is the United Nations for?

The crisis in Gaza is a crisis for the UN, and a crisis for humanity.

Talk is not enough. Resolutions are not enough. Statements are not enough.

You must act, and you must act now.

We call on you to ensure unfettered access to deliver humanitarian aid to the civilians of Gaza;

We call on Hamas to release the hostages;

We call on Israel to restore supplies of water, electricity and fuel;

We call on both sides to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law;

We call for attacks on health care to stop, and for patients, health facilities, health infrastructure and health workers – as well as aid workers – to be protected.

And we continue to call for an end to this conflict, to prevent further deaths of civilians and further damage to Gaza's hospitals and health facilities.

Mr President, thank you once again for inviting me.