

International Development Committee

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From Sarah Champion MP, Chair

16 November 2023

Dear Foreign Secretary Cameron,

Humanitarian situation in Gaza

Let me begin by formally welcoming you to your new role. Your commitment to the 0.7% Official Development Assistance target and development as a whole is most welcome.

On Tuesday 14 November, the International Development Committee took oral evidence on the harrowing humanitarian situation in Gaza. We heard from representatives of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the Norwegian Refugee Council, Medical Aid for Palestinians and Human Rights Watch. We pay testament to the workers from all four of those organisations, and the many more operating in Gaza, who are working around the clock to try to provide vital humanitarian assistance to those in need. We especially remember those aid workers who have lost their lives in the pursuit of helping others. This includes 102 UNRWA staff, the highest number of UN fatalities ever recorded in a single conflict.

All four organisations were unanimous that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is worsening not just by the days or weeks, but by the hours and minutes.

The delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza has rightly been at the forefront of international concern. Aid that reaches Gaza's border is held up by lengthy bureaucratic processes and a lack of resources to help it move. Just over 1,000 aid vehicles have passed into Gaza through its southern border since 7 October; the amount of aid that combined convoy could supply would last just two days. Aid vehicles which do manage to gain entry to Gaza are confronted by broken roads and active conflict. Yesterday, UNRWA announced that they received a delivery of 23,000 litres of fuel to Gaza, and while this is a welcome development, we are concerned that imported fuel is still not permitted for use by water or medical facilities.

Two thirds of hospitals in Gaza are no longer functioning. Hospitals that are still operational are rapidly running out of fuel to power essential medical equipment and resources to tend to the wounded and the ill. Hospitals have been hit by strikes from the air and the ground. In some instances, evacuation warnings were provided, but with so many hospitals unable to function, demand for their services far exceeding what is available and there being no assured safe routes for those evacuating, it is unclear where patients are meant to go. At al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza city, six premature babies have already died because the hospital lacks the fuel to function.

Gaza has endured a series of electricity blackouts since 7 October, with the next set to begin today. The organisations we heard from said that they had been informed that this next blackout will not end until Israel enables fuel imports to recommence. Gaza's three major phone network providers have said to them that they will also run out of fuel today. Internet access remains extremely unreliable. Civilians in Gaza are left with phones that they cannot charge, phone networks they cannot use and internet they cannot access. Our witnesses said that they expect to lose total contact with their own staff in the coming days. It is untenable that a humanitarian operation of the scale required could function in such circumstances.

Access to food and water has been a longstanding struggle for a considerable proportion of people in Gaza, but the situation is now critical. None of the twenty-four bakeries in northern Gaza are functioning and the main mill in that region has run out of fuel. Shop shelves are emptying in the south and retailers have no stock to replenish them. For those who are able to find staples like flour, there is simply not enough water or fuel to make bread. Water desalination plants in Rafah and mid-Gaza are no longer operating and we heard that civilians have resorted to roaming the streets with jerry cans in search of water they can drink. Unsafe water, the only type available for many, will bring a massive increase in preventable diseases such as cholera, typhoid and dysentery. It is only a matter of time before we see those diseases taking hold, though we may already be too late to hold those diseases back.

Children make up almost one in three of the estimated civilian deaths in Gaza since 7 October. An incalculable number of more children have endured family loss, displacement and trauma, leaving many in acute need of socio-psychological help. Even before the recent escalation, Save the Children found that 80% of children in Gaza reported living with depression, grief and fear. Women are always disproportionately affected by conflict and as UN Women remarks, women living in Gaza have unique and urgent needs and vulnerabilities. Those with families have watched their loved ones die. Pregnant women, including the over 5,000 women due to deliver their babies by the end of November, worry where they will be able to give birth safely. The elderly and people with disabilities are trapped in the places they live, physically unable to escape conflict because of the barriers in their way and powerless to access the medicines or treatments they rely on to survive.

The number of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Gaza has risen to approximately 1.7 million people, almost three out of every four citizens. Shelters are dangerously overcrowded and despite the best efforts of aid workers, they are becoming hotbeds for the transmission of devastating diseases. However, not even shelters can provide safe havens. Four UNRWA shelters in the so-called evacuation zone south of Wadi Gaza have sustained damage as a result of ongoing conflict. People who cannot reach shelters must seek refuge in homes, but almost half of Gaza's housing stock has already been either destroyed or damaged.

The situation is so grave and hazardous that humanitarian organisations cannot in good conscience allow their staff to operate in Gaza much longer, such is the level of the personal danger they face. The stories we heard describe an unimaginable suffering. Such is the sense of desperation, parents have taken to writing family names on their children's limbs, so should the strikes come, aid workers will know to bury them together.

The evidence we heard, and the stories that continue to come in around the clock, paint an ever-increasing picture of devastation and growing hopelessness. We therefore seek urgent clarity on the matters below.

- The UK Government has committed £30 million to support the humanitarian aid operation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. How much of (and to whom and to what end) that funding has been disbursed to date? How will remaining funding not yet disbursed be allocated? Which organisations will receive that funding? And when will that funding reach the hands of those in Gaza who can apply it best?
- What assessment has the Government made of the categories of humanitarian aid needed most in Gaza? How is that aid being prioritised? And what steps is the Government taking to ensure that its humanitarian response is both tailored to the specific needs of people in Gaza and is complementary to the support being provided by other international donors?
- What specific support will the Government provide to address the needs of (a) children, (b) women, (c) the elderly and (d) people with disabilities in Gaza?
- What (a) bilateral and (b) multilateral steps is the Government taking to use its diplomatic authority to help address the immediate barriers faced by aid agencies, such as the lengthy checks process required of aid convoys at the Rafah border crossing and pursuing the possibility of further border crossings being opened up to help ease the congestion on that existing crossing?
- Will planned Official Development Assistance allocations for the Occupied Palestinian Territories for future financial years be increased in response to the grave humanitarian situation and deepening development need in that region?
- This current conflict may not end any time soon, but regardless of when it does end, the need for rebuilding and recovery is already vast. What is the Government's medium to long term strategy for the reconstruction effort required in Gaza? How will the Government approach supporting humanitarian need in Gaza not just in ten weeks, but in ten months and in ten years?
- It is not only broken roads and damaged buildings that will require reconstruction, but broken minds. Will the Government take specific steps to provide wide-ranging psychosocial support to Gaza that recognises the wide-reaching, all-encompassing impact of this conflict, especially on Gaza's children?

Finally, can I encourage you to read the Committee's report on UK aid for refugee host countries and revisit the Government's response. The Committee has already set out the issues that arise and once this crisis is less acute, and Palestinians are able to leave Gaza, there will be a huge impact on the surrounding countries, many of which are already hosting displaced people from other humanitarian crises in the region.

As UNICEF Director Catherine Russell said, and our witnesses echoed, Gaza has become a graveyard for children. The UK has an historical imperative to play its part in

humanitarian support for those who are in Gaza now, and to plan to support the people of Gaza for the months and years ahead, because this crisis has been a long time building and it will not be resolved quickly.

We would welcome your response to this letter by Thursday 23 November and we will seek to publish that response in the usual way.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S', on a light grey background.

Sarah Champion MP
Chair of the International Development Committee