

25 September 2014 - Director of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Operations in Gaza, Robert Turner, was in Brussels on Wednesday to brief the EU Institutions and Member States on the effects of the recent conflict on the population. He stressed the need for continued support and the likelihood of a return to violence within the coming months if a longer term political solution cannot be found.

A Human Tragedy



Mr. Turner described the devastation caused by the violence in Gaza as worse than anything the area had experienced before, saying “it looks more like Grozny [Chechnya] or Haiti after the earthquake than a place that’s been hit by pinpoint bombing”.

The people of Gaza are dealing with a huge societal and personal shock. [UNRWA](#)’s role, with the support of the international community, is to very quickly demonstrate “in the absence of a government- that somebody is responding, that somebody is dealing with this”.

He described the Gazan people as “remarkably engaged and hopeful, they’re an incredibly resilient people. But this has been too much; this is breaking them”. Consequently, there has been an emergence and growth of emigration from the area. Last week scores of Gazans and other migrants drowned when a boat sank off the coast of Malta. This hazardous migration looks set to continue unless an authority is willing to be “present and governing” during the structural and societal rebuild of the area.

The Governance Vacuum

Mr. Turner placed the causes of the conflict within a wider context, lamenting the simplistic media narrative which focused on the kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers in Hebron as the starting point. The conflict has also been misrepresented as one between Hamas and Israel, when in fact it involved all of the various armed groups within Gaza.

Following the overthrow of the Morsi Government in Egypt, the industrial-scale illegal tunnel systems which the de-facto Gazan Government (Hamas) had been taxing were shut off. This led to Hamas being unable to pay government workers and deciding to seek reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority, “who showed little willingness to engage and take over”. Whilst wishing to pass on governing responsibilities, Hamas “had a mixed reaction as to whether or not they were going to hand over power”. Into this already uneasy situation, “Israel did all they could to disrupt and obstruct the new government”.

Before the kidnappings in Hebron, Mr. Turner had warned that the lack of governance meant “a conflict was inevitable if steps to stabilize the situation were not taken”.

Taking into account this lack of governance with the damage to infrastructure and devastating human cost, the status quo is not an option because “there is no status quo to return to”. The situation is likely to continue to constantly evolve whilst the political climate lacks any semblance of stability.

A small window of opportunity

Mr. Turner points out that “what we have now is a ceasefire. We do not have an end to the conflict”. Whilst UNRWA can, with continued support, implement a “transitional shelter strategy” to deal with the immediate humanitarian concerns, this does not provide wider political solutions which need to be addressed “with a sense of urgency”.

If the current climate, of increasingly frustrated and distressed people with a lack of governance or societal infrastructure, continues it will not be “another year and a half or two years, it’s going to be in the next weeks or months” that another conflict occurs.

Ahead of next month's international conference with potential donors, Mr. Turner pointed out that the European community could “play a very practical role” politically and technically in assisting with the implementation of rational civil service reform, given its experience of implementing this in former Soviet bloc countries. However, he stated that lasting peace would only come about if a governing force was willing to take on the considerable risks of heading the rebuild effort in Gaza. Without the national consensus government in place in Gaza to lead the reconstruction, either Israel may decide to assume physical administrative control of the region; or the chaotic situation is likely to spiral to the extent that "we will all pay for years- the Gazan people the most".

UNRWA has started a Thunderclap social media initiative to show solidarity with the Gazan people and demand an end to the blockade.

Read more [here](#) and follow @UNRWA for updates.

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Read UNRIC’s backgrounder on Gaza [here](#) .