



Foreign Affairs Committee

From the Chair
Alicia Kearns MP

Rt Hon Lord David Cameron
Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell
Rt Hon Lord Tariq Ahmad
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
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[by email]

09 March 2024

Dear Foreign Secretary,

Urgent: Humanitarian Aid Access to Gaza.

The Committee has just returned from Al Arish, the staging point for humanitarian aid into Gaza, which you have also visited. We received detailed briefings on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, restrictions on humanitarian aid being let into the strip, as well as the significant issues around rejection of humanitarian aid, including British Government deliveries and medical items such as neonatal resuscitation devices, sleeping bags, reproductive health kits, educational boxes and more.

The effort to open a maritime corridor is welcome, and I would welcome a briefing for my committee by your officials on this at the earliest opportunity next week.

Israeli Government Offer to facilitate an additional 100 trucks a day into Gaza

On 8th March Eylon Levy, official spokesperson of the Israeli Government, on X (formerly known as twitter) in response to a post I made regarding the need for additional aid routes and deliveries, stated:

"I hope you are also aware there are NO limits on the entry of food, water, medicine, or shelter equipment into Gaza, and in fact the crossings have EXCESS capacity. Test us. Send another 100 trucks a day to Kerem Shalom and we'll get them in."

"Are you aware the Kerem Shalom Crossing is currently closed on Saturdays at the request of the UN because there is so much undistributed aid piling up on the other side? The problem isn't getting aid in, it's getting it around."

Can you please ask our Ambassador at the UN to confirm if any such request has been made by the UN?

I would be grateful if you could urgently contact the Israeli Government and take up this offer made by their official spokesperson to allow an additional 100 trucks into Gaza, starting Monday if not sooner. Should there be any concerns regarding rejection of goods which continues to be inconsistent and delay delivery of vital goods, the UK Government could stipulate that this should be trucks carrying UK aid or allied partner aid if that secures agreement more quickly.

Around 180 trucks managed to reach Gaza each day on March 3rd – 6th. Therefore, the conclusion I reach is that the Israeli Government is stating it will allow in excess of 280 trucks a day to reach Gaza.

As you can see, the Government of Israel is stating there are no issues getting aid into Gaza. This is not the assessment I have reached, nor that of the international aid organisations I have met, nor Governments with whom I have spoken. You have been equally clear in your recent statements and media interviews that Israel can increase the aid deliveries if it chooses to do so.

Given the Israeli Government has also recognised that there are challenges distributing aid within Gaza, I would ask you to reiterate to them in these discussions the need for Israel to approve more visas for UN staff and ensure effective de-confliction and approval of humanitarian access requests.

Preparing for Potential Truce

As Ramadan approaches there is still hope that a deal can be reached to free the hostages and cease hostilities in Gaza. The Government has rightly focused on efforts to bring about a sustainable peace and prevent the spread of the conflict. But the international community must take action now and launch a concerted plan for how to meet the humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza when the fighting stops. It will be critical to surge humanitarian aid and medical aid as quickly as possible. Whilst all of these activities do not need to be conducted by the British Government, it would be very positive to see us coral these efforts and ensure there are no activities left unprepared for in the event of a truce.

A failure to plan for the truce now would permit more preventable and avoidable tragedies to occur.

Destruction of Unexploded Ordnance

The first obstacle to any response is unexploded munitions blocking a surge in aid. Assessments suggest around 20% of munitions remain unexploded, and as the crisis in Rafah heightens, we will likely see a mass exodus of Gazans back to their home villages and towns in the middle and north of the Gaza strip. I have written to you previously requesting Government funding is agreed now to ensure the rapid deployment of disposal teams the moment the fighting stops with the resultant time saved on aid arriving the difference between life and death for thousands. I would be grateful for an update on whether any such initiative has been funded and put in place.

Water

In any 'next day' scenario a supply of sanitised water is vital. We both agree that Israel could switch the water back on and this should be part of any truce agreement.

Current conditions in Gaza will result in further outbreaks of waterborne diseases and with medical facilities already at breaking point many of those affected will not be able to access effective treatment. A lack of sanitation and drinkable water and subsequent rise in disease could act as a wrecking ball, sweeping through an already vulnerable population and overrunning what medical infrastructure remains or can be brought in. Wastewater treatment systems and desalination plants will need to be fixed and clean and safe water distributed rapidly.

I was deeply disappointed to see significant stores of UK Aid-provided water bladders sat at the border having been rejected by the Government of Israel at the border. It is surprising that UK Aid is being rejected.

Medical Facilities

Gaza's health network has been devastated and an accurate assessment is needed as to what still stands, and which can be made operational again and how quickly. Can I ask that you please initiate, now, a mapping exercise with UN and allied partners to ascertain where healthcare

facilities can be stabilised and where new facilities will need to be stood up. I would ask that you involve British medics that have been on the ground, including one I met last week whose military background would make him ideally positioned to assist the British Government in their assessment.

I would be grateful if we can also work with partners now to ensure sufficient Modular Hospitals are moved to Cyprus or Egypt ready to be surged into Gaza.

The UK has long trained medical professionals to operate in extreme conditions such as those in Gaza and a streamlined process should be opened for FCDO accredited doctors to deploy. It is vital that those with the proper training and experience are streamlined, as the type of injuries they will encounter are unlike almost any seen in UK trauma. I ask you to work with the Health Secretary to enable qualified, trained and willing doctors to be put on notice to deploy once a truce seems imminent.

Can I urge you to ensure adequate funding is in place to enable the World Health Organisation to surge its staff to deploy a mass vaccination programme for tetanus, cholera and other preventable health causes.

Shelter

Water and medical facilities will save lives immediately but if Gaza is to be put on to a sustainable footing, we also need to restore electricity, communications and provide shelter. Seventy five per cent of Gazans have been displaced and half a million people have no home to return to. The Egyptian Red Crescent has some stores of tents waiting to be deployed into Gaza, but nowhere near enough.

Unaccompanied Minors

There are a horrifying estimated 17,000 unaccompanied children in Gaza, many of whom will have been orphaned. A system urgently needs to be established to reconnect families and to support children who've lost their entire families, directly through UNICEF. I do not have confidence that sufficient work is being done in this space.

Time is of the essence if we are to avoid a catastrophic humanitarian disaster and the UK must lead in ensuring precious days are not wasted on planning when the time for action arrives.

With apologies for the short timeline, given the urgent humanitarian needs it would be helpful to have a response to my questions regarding Israel's offer to increase aid deliveries by Tuesday 12th and preparations for any cessation of hostilities by Friday 15th March. I intend to publish this letter immediately and our further correspondence.

Yours,



ALICIA KEARNS