Israel demands UN chief resign after he says Hamas attacks ‘did not occur in vacuum’

October 24, 2023

The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-livid-after-un-chief-says-hamas-attacks-did-not-occur-in-vacuum/>

Israeli officials railed at UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Tuesday after he appeared to suggest the impetus for the Hamas terror group’s devastating October 7 attack on Israel was the Jewish state’s continued control of Palestinian territories, with the Israeli Ambassador to the UN demanding that he resign.

‘It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum,’ Guterres said at a UN Security Council meeting on the Israel-Hamas war, which erupted when the terror group ravaged Israeli border communities, killing some 1,400 people, the vast majority of them civilians.

‘The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing,’ Guterres said.

Israel evacuated all settlements and military forces from the Gaza Strip under the 2005 Disengagement. It has maintained a tight blockade of the territory since Hamas took control in 2007, as has Egypt, with Jerusalem saying it must do so to limit the terror group’s ability to arm itself for attacks. In the West Bank, settlements have expanded under consecutive governments with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly arguing the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority is not a partner for peace, having rejected several offers in the past.

Guterres added that ‘the grievances of the Palestinian people cannot justify the appalling attacks by Hamas. And those appalling attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people,’ an apparent reference to Israel’s ongoing campaign of airstrikes in the Gaza Strip that Hamas officials say has killed thousands.

Israel was outraged by Guterres’s comments. UN envoy Gilad Erdan called them ‘shocking,’ and demanded that the secretary general resign. Foreign Minister Eli Cohen canceled a meeting with Guterres, and Minister Benny Gantz labeled the UN chief a ‘terror apologist.’

‘The UN Secretary-General, who shows understanding for the campaign of mass murder of children, women, and the elderly, is not fit to lead the UN. I call on him to resign immediately,’ Erdan posted on X. ‘There is no justification or point in talking to those who show compassion for the most terrible atrocities committed against the citizens of Israel and the Jewish people. There are simply no words.’

Erdan said the remarks were ‘horrible,’ and ‘completely disconnected from the reality in our region.’

‘It’s sad that a person with such views is the head of an organization that arose after the Holocaust,’ he said. ’It’s really unfathomable.’

Foreign Minister Cohen, who had traveled to New York to take part in the meetings on the war, posted to X (formerly Twitter) that he was canceling a planned meeting with Guterres. After what happened on October 7, he wrote, ‘there is no place for an even-handed approach. Hamas needs to be wiped off the face of the earth.’

Gantz, who recently joined the government as a member of the narrow war cabinet overseeing the war effort, also had harsh words, posting to X: ‘Dark are the days when the United Nations Secretary-General condones terror.’

‘Absolutely nothing can justify the slaughter of innocent civilians,’ he wrote. ‘Now is the time to stand on the right side of history, or be judged by it. Terror apologists cannot speak on behalf of the world.’

On October 7, Hamas abruptly bombarded Israel with thousands of rockets while over 2,500 gunmen breached the border with the Gaza Strip. The terrorists rampaged murderously through southern areas slaughtering those they found, butchering entire families in some communities and also killing 260 at an outdoor music festival. Some victims were mutilated, raped, and tortured. Dozens of babies were killed. Before the IDF could counter the invasion, over 220 people of all ages were abducted and dragged back to Gaza as captives. Four have since been released.

Israel has responded to the Hamas assault by vowing to destroy the terror group and launching intensive strikes in Gaza, saying it is hitting terror targets while trying to avoid civilian casualties. It has told over one million Gaza residents to evacuate the northern part of the Strip ahead of an expected ground incursion.

The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry says the strikes have killed over 5,700 Palestinians so far. Those numbers cannot be independently verified and are believed to include Hamas’s own members, as well as civilians killed by misfired Palestinian rockets.

The Security Council session brought together top diplomats including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who has previously rejected calls for a ceasefire, saying it would only allow Hamas to regroup.

Guterres said he was ‘deeply concerned about the clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing in Gaza. Let me be clear: No party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law.’

‘The relentless bombardment of Gaza by Israeli forces, the level of civilian casualties, and the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods continue to mount and are deeply alarming,’ he said.

Noting that he had previously ‘condemned unequivocally the horrifying and unprecedented… acts of terror by Hamas,’ Guterres called for all the hostages to be treated humanely and ‘released immediately and without conditions.’

Along with its military campaign, Israel has also imposed a near-total blockade of Gaza, though some humanitarian aid has been permitted to enter from Egypt in recent days under a US-brokered deal.

‘But [that] is a drop of aid in an ocean of need,’ Guterres said and cautioned that if Gaza runs out of fuel it will be a ‘disaster.’

He warned the conflict ‘risks spiraling throughout the region’ and appealed for ‘an immediate humanitarian ceasefire’ while urging an eventual two-state solution that would see a Palestinian state created alongside Israel.

Cohen, the foreign minister, also attended the Security Council meeting, bringing with him family members of some of those held captive in Gaza.

Addressing the forum, he warned that if the UN does not back the drive to eradicate Hamas, it will face its ‘darkest hour’ on Guterres’s watch.

Meanwhile, the UN on Tuesday called for improved coordination among humanitarian groups to make sure the small amount of aid now moving into the Strip contained only the most needed items.

UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, said that some of the food delivered into Gaza so far, such as rice and lentils, had been impractical given the dwindling availability of fresh water and fuel.

‘An additional challenge in a very limited flow of supplies is that we are not really receiving the most needed supplies for Gaza, or the most relevant,’ UNRWA spokeswoman Tamara Alrifai said.

‘In one of the shipments over the last couple of days, we received boxes of rice and lentils,’ she told journalists at the UN in Geneva via video link from the Jordanian capital Amman, where UNRWA has its headquarters.

‘But for people to cook lentils and rice, they need water and gas. And therefore these kinds of supplies — while very generous and well-intended — are not very usable right now,’ she said.

Alrifai added that before October 7, around 500 trucks a day were entering Gaza from Israel and Egypt, with a mixture of commercial goods, food, aid and fuel.

But only a few dozen trucks carrying food, medicine, and water have entered Gaza via the southern border with Egypt since a deal entered into effect on Saturday.

‘We will need to get better as a consortium of humanitarians in sending very explicit lists of what is most needed,’ Alrifai said.

**Fuel concerns**

The UN has warned that more hospitals and other vital services in the Palestinian territory risked shutting down without fuel deliveries.

Israel worries that Hamas would use fuel brought into Gaza to manufacture weapons and explosives. The IDF also [said Tuesday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-gaza-photos-show-half-million-liters-of-fuel-held-by-hamas/) that Hamas is holding at least half a million liters of fuel for its military purposes, withholding it from hospitals.

Alrifai said fuel crossings into Gaza could be logistically handled by UNRWA, which was obliged to report any misuse.

‘When we at UNRWA receive fuel or any other equipment, we are accountable for its handling. A couple of close donors, close countries did raise the security question… we are obligated to report to them any misuse that we see, or any risk,’ she said.

Alrifai said UNRWA had in place a ‘very sturdy diligence system to make sure that everything we receive is only used for humanitarian purposes.’

Israel has often accused UNRWA of failing to report Hamas misdeeds, essentially enabling the terror group to operate freely within Gaza’s civilian population.

**Medical aid**

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) said it had been unable to distribute any life-saving health supplies from the truck convoys to major hospitals in northern Gaza, because of a lack of security guarantees.

It said the main Al-Shifa hospital in the north now had three patients for every two beds.

‘In addition to the hospitals that have had to close due to damage and attacks, six hospitals across the Gaza Strip have already shut down due to lack of fuel,’ the WHO said in a statement.

Medical supplies have been delivered to four hospitals in southern Gaza and medics ‘took boxes of supplies off the trucks and straight into operating theaters, where doctors have been performing surgeries without anesthesia or other basic surgical supplies,’ the agency said.