

La Tempête de l'UNRWA 3/3

Philippe Lazzarini: «Les mécanismes actuels ne devraient plus permettre que les règles soient contournées»

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Philippe Lazzarini: "UNRWA's current mechanisms should no longer allow the rules to be circumvented"

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UNRWA's Commissioner-General answers questions on the organisation's current challenges, the situation in Gaza and the reforms undertaken following the departure of the former management team.

Philippe Lazzarini, the current Commissioner General of UNRWA, returned a few days ago from Gaza, where he met a population traumatised by the eleven days of Israeli bombardments that preceded the ceasefire on 20 May. He talks about the feeling of the Gazans of having lived "hell on earth", but also about the reforms undertaken by UNRWA to overcome the "management crisis" experienced in 2019. Reforms aiming, among other things, to improve the transparency of decision-making processes and the role of supervisors.

Le Temps: You have just returned from Gaza, where Israeli bombing has killed over 200 people. What did you see?

Philippe Lazzarini: I saw a traumatised population, which is once again questioning the reasons for this cycle of violence. People who have lived with this feeling of fear in their stomachs and who described to me "hell on earth". People who, when they haven't lost a loved one, have felt as if they were constantly close to death. Like the story of the mothers who tell me that every day their family members wondered what was better: to sleep together or apart, to be killed together or not? This sense of fear and terror seems to have been omnipresent. And coming back from Gaza, I think there is an invisible pandemic that is hitting the population, this pandemic of trauma.

You mention a feeling of repetition...

In Gaza there is a desire for a normal life but also a very strong resentment of a situation that prevents people from living that life. There is a fear that history will repeat itself. It's clear that at the end of a conflict we talk about a humanitarian truce, and that's very important. UNRWA will try to restore its services as quickly as possible and bring back a semblance of normality. But we are aware that this will not be enough and that it is now time for a different approach. If rehabilitation and reconstruction are to be sustainable, they must be accompanied by a serious political trajectory. These latest events show us that if you don't address the root causes of the occupation, the blockade, etc., you simply set up a new cycle of violence.

The other day someone reminded me of the definition of insanity, which is expecting different results by continuing to apply the same recipes. People are exhausted. There have now been fourteen years of blockades, four wars in thirteen years... There is no real prospect of things changing unless there is a real policy to deal with this problem.

Can UNRWA goods and personnel now enter Gaza unhindered?

What is special about this latest conflict is that for eleven days there was no humanitarian truce. Unlike previous episodes, it was impossible to operate with any guarantees on either side. This made the environment much more dangerous. It should also be remembered that the wars in Gaza have the peculiarity that people have nowhere to flee. They can't cross any borders. 58 of our UNRWA schools have taken in up to 70,000 people to provide temporary shelter. UN locations have not been the target of attacks.

This reminder is necessary to understand that no one was able to enter until the ceasefire was declared. Since then, Erez, which is the crossing point for humanitarians and pedestrians, is open. As for the Kerem Shalom crossing, through which goods pass, the situation is different again. Purely humanitarian goods can enter, but the Israelis have revisited the list of other goods to avoid "double use". Overall, the passage is therefore more restrictive than before

Le Temps has just published a series of articles confirming serious internal problems at UNRWA in recent years. Some of its senior staff, including its head, have left the agency. Has UNRWA undertaken any reforms to ensure that this does not happen again?

Firstly, the UN Secretary-General appointed a new Commissioner-General, a new Deputy Commissioner-General, and there is indeed a senior management team in place. All this took time. Already, at the time of the transition crisis, the management crisis, the team in place at the time started to initiate a number of actions aimed at improving transparency and decision making within the agency, as well as improving accountability. For example, we now have an Ombudsman function that has been created, as well as an Ethics function that is completely independent of the agency.

Finally, we have set up a committee which has become the decision-making body for the Commissioner-General. That means that from now on, any new policy or strategy is decided at this level. The decisions are then communicated from that level.

So a whole series of measures have been put in place to address the concerns that were expressed in 2018-2019. I think we can say today that this management initiative phase, in response to the crisis, has come to an end and that the organisation is going to focus more on its modernisation and its efficiency in delivering services.

The rules and procedures seemed to be sound before, but they have been broken or bypassed. Will your reforms be enough to restore donor confidence?

I can say with confidence that donors and member states, who follow us very closely on these issues, have indicated that the agency is meeting their expectations. Today, the mechanisms in place should no longer unknowingly allow these rules to be circumvented, for example.

The five reports resulting from the investigation, which the UN calls "interrelated", have not been made public. Do you advocate their release?

There are good reasons why internal reports should remain internal to the UN system. We should not forget that the mechanisms set up by the UN Secretariat on these issues meet the expectations of UN Member States. I do not believe that a precedent should be set and that making these confidential internal reports public should become the norm in the future.

Relations between Switzerland and UNRWA have not been easy in recent years. Where do we stand?

I would describe the relationship as good. I met with Federal Councillor, Ignazio Cassis, in November. Switzerland has maintained the same level of commitment to the agency, even though it has unfortunately reduced the duration from four to two years. In particular, Switzerland is supporting us in a pilot project to create jobs for young people, and has supported the preparation of an international conference to be held in October. From June, the Confederation will also deploy one of its diplomats to the UNRWA offices. So there is very substantial support, and I will be on an official visit to Bern at the end of June where I will meet Ignazio Cassis again as well as parliamentarians. Members of the Foreign Affairs Committee as well as parliamentarians who are members of various committees, such as the Switzerland-Israel Support Committee or the Switzerland-Palestine Support Committee.

What is the situation of the agency in terms of budget?

This year we are seeing the welcome and necessary return of the United States. But despite this return, the funds still do not meet the needs of UNRWA's critical services. Our budget is not yet [fully] funded, and in this respect our situation continues to be precarious, as other countries have also withdrawn in recent years due to the covid crisis.

In short, we are in a better situation today than we were at this time last year, but we still have a large projected deficit at this stage. I am confident, however, that the US decision will lead other states to take similar decisions, and that we will pass this year.