

James Elder, UNICEF's global spokesperson, was interviewed on RN Breakfast about the impact that Israel's war on Gaza is having on children. Below is a transcript of this interview.

PK - Patricia Karvelas; JE - James Elder

PK – James Elder, welcome to the program.

JE – Patricia, thanks.

PK – The IDF has announced what it is calling a tactical pause in part of southern Gaza, from 8.00am to 7.00pm local time. Will that bring a real increase in humanitarian aid?

JE – If it comes about, if it's real, it will help without a doubt.

I think, first and foremost Patricia, is that any pause in bombardments anywhere on the Gaza Strip is good for children. The last three, four nights here have been utterly relentless. I thought I had gotten use to the sound of bombardments and ... the intensity when they are nearby is pots and pans banging next to your head.

This is now 250 days of this. So when I walk into hospitals and I see children still scattered on the floor – on the floor with the wounds of war - such is the devastation to the health system ... then yes, any reduction in bombardments is helpful.

But of course, we'll need to see what happens to this – we'll need to see how it plays out. If it really does mean that we can bring in more aid and then deliver it safely on the ground – I think that's such a key element.

Gazans have had their hopes dashed many, many times, so we're going to have to see how and when this will be implemented on the ground. Are we going to get faster, smoother, safer access. That all remains to be seen.

PK – It is aimed at allowing aid trucks to reach the nearby Israel controlled Kerem Shalom crossing. How vital has that particular crossing become?

JE – Disproportionately so be honest. The whole point that the United Nations has made for months and months and months, is that we need maximum aid to come into the Gaza Strip and that means maximum crossings.

Rather than expanding them, they keep being reduced. And its land crossings - land crossings are obviously where you can really, really get that quantity – the amount of food, the water and medicine, because they are all being deprived.

We have seen weeks and weeks with none of those coming in. Now the wharf is no longer for the moment. The Rafah crossing in the south of Gaza, Patricia, was the lifeline. And then of course in May when that “limited” offensive began ... that meant a million

people, a million more people had to leave their tents and rubble to go somewhere else. That hasn't allowed anymore aid to come in. So Kerem Shalom is key, but there is too much of an emphasis on (that crossing) because there are so many other crossing points that could be used and should be used.

PK – You were recently on a lorry in an aid convoy to northern Gaza and were denied entry. Just describe the journey for us and what actually happened.

JE – I was going from the middle of Gaza. It was Wednesday. Every piece of aid is critical here because we have seen children slide into a physical and psychological state that I've not really seen before – not in a place like this. So we had medical supplies and nutritional supplies for 10,000 children going north. That's absolutely life saving.

It's about a 40km round trip. It took us 13 hours. Now that was about 8 hours at military checkpoints nearby. There were arguments over paper work, saying that it was not meant to be an enclosed truck, should have been a van. None-the-less, another full inspection was done.

We waited, waited, waited and after many hours that truck was denied. That truck was unable to get to the north. That critical aid. Now we will go again to get that aid there, but it's not so simple as going the next day, because this is such dangerous work. We need armoured vehicles every time and UNICEF also does water and tents and everything else, so we can't drop everything another day.

More so, Patricia, or at least on top of this and adding to the darkness of things here - as I was waiting on the coastal road there, I was just watching fishermen - very well aware that the fishing industry, agriculture has been devastated. And I was watching about eight men standing in knee high water, each with a single net fishing.

They were probably accountants and lawyers before this horror show started and suddenly there was a commotion. I saw a tank coming down the road. Of course we were getting in our cars, our armoured vehicles. There was firing from the direction of the military checkpoint. Two fishermen were shot.

We immediately radioed the authorities, because we had a paramedic from World Health Organisation with us, to see if we could approach those fishermen to offer some kind of support not knowing what their physical state was. That was denied. It was denied that we offer them assistance.

PK – You weren't able to help them at all?

JE – We weren't allowed to help them at all. No. In international law, you must be able to help combatants, much less fishermen. We were not. And Patricia, eventually the other fishermen who were family and friends, I don't know – we just got so frustrated and wanted to go – we had body bags in our armoured vehicles – they brought them up. I saw

the injuries. One had a fishing net around his foot. One had been shot on the back and one had been shot in the neck.

PK – That’s a pretty heavy story. Are you going to try and make that journey again?

JE – Absolutely. We have to. We’ve got colleagues tomorrow going north to Jabalia (refugee camp). We’ve got partners there waiting for nutritional supplies. We got about 3,000 children that UNICEF has managed to get into stabilisation centres, that is those children with the most worrying forms of malnutrition that can spill into death, particularly if they catch a disease. Everything here is rife with disease given the lethal lack of water.

We had 3,000 children getting services. Again with this Rafah offensive, that’s been completely decimated. So we’re trying to start again. This is a consistent battle in the Gaza Strip - get services going, and then a new offensive, a new front line starts again. We have partners waiting. More importantly, we have malnourished children waiting.

PK – You were carrying malnutrition and medical supplies for 10,000 children. You’ve already talked about this a couple of times in the interview, but I just want to ... zero in on it if I can. What are the levels of malnutrition you’re seeing at the moment?

JE – They’re severe. They’re much worse in the north where people are trapped.

One way of looking at this as well is UNICEF is training some partners and medical staff in the treatment of malnutrition, because malnutrition – the severest kind – was not an issue - less than 1% of children in Gaza – so it has not been something on anybody’s radar.

Now in a survey several months ago, it was 1 in 3 children had malnutrition in the north. So again, evidence on the ground speaks of the desperate need to (deliver) more and more food, more of these services.

It’s not just medicine; it’s getting hospitals functioning again. There’s been a systematic devastation of them. When I was in a hospital, there were children on the floor. That’s not just because of the ferocity of attacks. It’s because the vast majority of hospitals are inoperable.

All of this of course, as much as we talk of so-called strategic pauses and more aid, it all comes, Patricia, to a ceasefire. I know how exhausted most people must be in hearing that. Trust me, no one is more exhausted hearing promises made and being literally blown up than Gazans.

But it seems that those people with the power, the decision-makers, those holding the pen on the ceasefire, just seem so woefully disconnected to the suffering of the Gazans.

PK – This is your third trip to Gaza since this war began – just give us a sense about how things have changed since those earlier trips.

JE – The most daunting way is in the psychological shift which is hard to convey but part of my privileged role is to speak with so many people in camps, in hospitals and so on everyday, because physically things of course have gotten worse. They will only possibly get worse ... Tomorrow will be worse than today. (Gazans) are consistently facing less aid, more heat, more bombardment. But it is the psychological element, I think Patricia, that I've been most stunned by.

People still have hope ... I'll always have someone explain to me literally in these words: "I have lost my husband, I have had a child killed, I've lost my home, I've lost the ability to feed my surviving children regularly. All I have left is hope."

But I've also had a disconcerting number of people, particularly young people, more than a handful, who have said words to the effect: "I want this over, I want a missile to hit me tonight, I'm done."

And that is horrifying, but in the context of what people are holding onto here, in the context of what they've been pushed into - where they were living a normal middle class existence, so many of them - now they are living in a hellscape of tension, with bombardments that do not stop, watching family members killed.

Today, at least here, Sunday, Eid al-Adha, was a day of family. So many people have said that they will never have another Eid al-Adha like this one, because they don't have the family to share it with.

PK – You've consistently emphasised the need for a ceasefire to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza James, what's your message to the parties who have the power to stop the war?

JE – A ceasefire is everything – it's hostages – it's ending this torment of families which must be unbearable. It allows the aid to flow across the Gaza Strip.

They know all about it ... I just wish they had the ability to see, as I did a few days ago, a father and his 11-year-old after his home was bombed. He sat with her in tears until she had a glimmer of being awake. Doctors came and had a look, only to tell him that chances are that they wouldn't be able to operate because it seemed the shrapnel was too close to her brain.

I wish they could see the little boy, Omar, who used to tell me that he'd close his eyes to try and remember his mum and dad and twin brother who were all blown up when the family home was hit. I saw him again a couple of days ago and he can no longer picture his parents ... I wish they would understand that level of suffering ...

There's a human spirit here that keeps trying to rebuild, but mostly Patricia, I wish that they would just be able to see the futile nature of this. No matter what their military aims, at no point does it make any sense whatsoever that the killing of so many children and the destruction of Gaza, can possibly bring peace to this region.

PK – James, thank you very much for joining us.

JE – Pleasure – thanks Patricia.

PK – James Elder is UNICEF's global spokesperson. He's currently in Gaza.

Monday, June 17, 2024