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Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett	(Guyana)
 <i>Members:</i>	Algeria	Mr. Bendjama
	China	Mr. Dai Bing
	Ecuador	Mr. De La Gasca
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Japan	Mr. Yamanaka
	Malta	Ms. Gatt
	Mozambique	Mr. Kumanga
	Republic of Korea	Mr. Hwang
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sierra Leone	Mr. Sowa
	Slovenia	Mr. Žbogar
	Switzerland	Mr. Hauri
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Dame Barbara Woodward
	United States of America	Mr. Wood

Agenda

Protection of civilians in armed conflict

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Protection of civilians in armed conflict

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of Israel, Pakistan and Tunisia to participate in this meeting.

I propose that the Council invite the observer of the Observer State of Palestine to participate in the meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Ramesh Rajasingham, Director of Coordination, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; Mr. Maurizio Martina, Deputy Director-General, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; and Mr. Carl Skau, Deputy Executive Director, United Nations World Food Programme.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Rajasingham.

Mr. Rajasingham: In resolution 2417 (2018), the Security Council requested that the Secretary-General report to the Council swiftly when the risk of conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity occurred in armed conflict. I am here to report on a grave situation in Gaza.

Our discussion today will come as no surprise. Since the start of the current hostilities following the horrific Hamas attacks in Israel on 7 October, the United Nations has warned about the potentially deleterious impact on food insecurity in Gaza, particularly for a population already experiencing high levels of structural poverty after 16 years of blockade.

In December, it was projected that the entire population of 2.2 million people in Gaza would face high levels of acute food insecurity by February 2024 — the highest share of people facing that level of food insecurity ever recorded worldwide. And here we

are, at the end of February, with at least 576,000 people in Gaza — one quarter of the population — one step away from famine; with 1 in 6 children under 2 years of age in northern Gaza suffering from acute malnutrition and wasting and practically the entire population of Gaza left to rely on woefully inadequate humanitarian food assistance to survive.

Unfortunately, as grim as the picture we see today is, there is every possibility for further deterioration. Military operations, insecurity and extensive restrictions on the entry and delivery of essential goods have decimated food production and agriculture. Food security experts warn of complete agricultural collapse in northern Gaza by May if conditions persist, with fields and productive assets damaged, destroyed or inaccessible. Many have had little choice but to abandon productive farmland owing to evacuation orders and repeated displacement.

The hostilities and shortages of essential supplies, including electricity, fuel and water, have left food production at a virtual standstill. The five mills operating in Gaza prior to 7 October ceased operations as far back as November. Heavy damage to water infrastructure from fighting and the severing of power and fuel supplies in October have significantly affected access to water that is essential for food production and the prevention of malnutrition and illness.

Fishing, long an important source of nutrition and income in Gaza, has been a practical impossibility since 7 October, when sea access for boats was entirely prohibited. A lack of fodder and water, along with the fighting, have also claimed the lives of livestock, removing yet another important source of food and income. And the commercial sector, a key part of the food distribution network prior to 7 October, has been crippled by the lack of local produce and extensive restrictions on commercial imports. Commodities such as wheat flour, eggs and dairy have been almost entirely depleted in parts of Gaza. Meanwhile, the scarcity of available products has sent prices soaring to prohibitive levels, at a time when livelihoods have been wiped out by the conflict.

Hunger and the risk of famine are exacerbated by factors that go beyond just the availability of food. Inadequate water, sanitation and health services create a cycle of vulnerability, where malnourished people — especially among the tens of thousands of people who are injured — become more susceptible

to disease that further depletes the body's nutritional reserves. A steep rise in malnutrition among children and pregnant and breastfeeding women in the Gaza Strip is a particularly grave concern. And adding chronic overcrowding, exposure to the cold and an absence of adequate shelter to that lack of nutrition creates the conditions for massive disease epidemics. My colleagues from the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization will address those issues in more detail.

With people in Gaza unable to rely on markets and other usual sources of food, humanitarian food assistance is now nearly the sole source of subsistence. Yet, as we have reported to the Council on numerous occasions, the humanitarian community is facing overwhelming obstacles just to get a bare minimum of supplies into Gaza, let alone mounting the multisectoral response that would be required to avert a famine. Our efforts continue to be beset by crossing closures, serious movement restrictions, access denials, onerous vetting procedures, incidents involving desperate civilians, protests and a breakdown in law and order, restrictions on communications and protective equipment and supply routes rendered impassable by damaged roads and unexploded ordnance.

Security risks remain a significant obstacle. The shelling on 20 February of the Médecins sans frontières guesthouse in Al-Mawasi highlights the weak implementation of precautions that all parties are required to take, and of the humanitarian notification system that aims to maximize those precautions. That has left operations extremely dangerous for humanitarian workers, and we cannot forget the 161 humanitarian workers killed in the hostilities to date.

And the suspension of funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) challenges our capacity to mount an effective response. An estimated 1.7 million people, more than three quarters of the population of Gaza, reside in UNRWA-run and other public emergency shelters. Last week, the Commissioner-General informed the General Assembly that the Agency's ability to fulfil its mandate is now seriously threatened and that its operations in the region will be severely compromised from March.

Nevertheless, we continue ceaselessly to plan, search and call for solutions to overcome the hurdles that would allow us to scale up food delivery and health

services. In the immediate term, that includes clearer security guarantees, a better humanitarian notification system to minimize risks, fewer restrictions on telecommunications equipment, the removal of unexploded ordnance and the use of all possible entry points.

The stark reality, however, is that a response at the level required will be impossible without immediate and concerted action by the parties, the Security Council, other Member States and the wider international community. The white note submitted to the Council sets out recommendations for that action. It includes ensuring respect for international humanitarian law; the resumption of entry of essential food, electricity, fuel and cooking gas, including by the private sector; the protection and restoration of vital infrastructure and services, including cross-border water pipelines, the lifting of restrictions on fishing activity, access to farmland and the entry of agricultural goods; urgently facilitating greater humanitarian access into and within Gaza, including opening up additional crossing points; and finally, concerted efforts towards ending the conflict altogether.

But without a doubt, at this stage, very little will be possible while hostilities continue and while there is a risk that they will spread into the overcrowded areas in the south of Gaza. We therefore reiterate our call for a ceasefire. If nothing is done, we fear that widespread famine in Gaza is almost inevitable, and the conflict, which since October has claimed the lives of nearly 30,000 people and injured more than 70,000, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, will have many more victims.

We put this before the Council as a matter of urgency.

The President: I thank Mr. Rajasingham for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Martina.

Mr. Martina: The people of Gaza are experiencing catastrophic levels of conflict-induced food insecurity and a high risk of conflict-induced famine. That risk is increasing by the day. The main factors driving the risk are the intensifying hostilities, the further reduction in access to food, basic services and life-saving assistance and the extreme concentration or isolation of people in inadequate facilities or areas without basic services.

An Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis was released that detailed the levels of acute food insecurity in Gaza. The key findings are extremely troubling: 378,000 people were estimated to be experiencing IPC phase 5, classified as “Catastrophe”, the most severe phase of acute food insecurity. The entire population of about 2.2 million people in the Gaza Strip is estimated to be in IPC phase 3, classified as “Crisis”, or at a worse level. That is highest percentage of people experiencing such acute food insecurity that the IPC has ever classified. About 50 per cent of the population is projected to be in IPC phase 4, classified as “Emergency”, and at least one in four households is said to now be in catastrophic or famine-like conditions — IPC phase 5.

Allow me to elaborate more specifically on the impact of the conflict on agrifood systems. Civilian infrastructure, including that essential for the production, processing and distribution of food, has been severely damaged, destroyed or made inaccessible. Since 9 October, the Government of Israel’s reinforced blockade has included stopping or restricting food, electricity and fuel supplies, as well as commercial goods.

The entire food supply chain has been affected in different ways. Severe restrictions on fuel shipments are crippling the functioning of water infrastructure and desalination plants and the production and delivery of key food commodities. Electricity blackouts are severely disrupting agricultural activities and water infrastructure. The only electricity available in the Gaza Strip comes from solar panels and generators. Shortages of safe water persist. The water supply is at only 7 per cent of pre-October levels, with sources restricted to water-trucking, one functional desalination plant and one of the three main water-supply lines, the latter of which was only restored on 30 December. Around 97 per cent of the ground water is reportedly unfit for human consumption.

The commercial sector has been decimated due to the near-complete lack of imports of essential items, including food. The lack of imports means that food stocks have been depleted. Bakeries’ capacity to produce bread has been seriously hampered. Before the current conflict, Gaza’s food production allowed self-sufficiency in most fruits and vegetables, for example, and the conflict has severely disrupted that. In the most likely scenario, agricultural production will have collapsed in the northern Gaza Strip by May. We are

already seeing that collapse. Satellite data analysis from December 2023 shows a significant decline in the health and density of crops when compared to the preceding six seasons.

As of 15 February, 46.2 per cent of all cropland was assessed to be damaged. Within the governorate of Gaza specifically, 54.8 per cent of crop lands have been damaged. Likewise, agricultural infrastructure has been devastated, with the highest levels of destruction to animal shelters, sheep farms, dairy farms, home farms and broiler farms. More than one quarter of wells have been destroyed, with the destruction most significant in the North Gaza governorate and Gaza city. A total of 339 hectares of greenhouses have been destroyed, most severely in Gaza city, North Gaza and Khan Younis. Moreover, the harvest of olives and citrus fruits, which provides an important source of income, has been heavily affected by the hostilities.

Lack of access to fodder and damage from air strikes have taken a toll on livestock owners, with many breeders reporting substantial losses. By the end of January, all broiler poultry are assumed to have been slaughtered or died due to lack of water and fodder. The mortality rate of calves is assumed to be between 50 and 65 per cent, and approximately 70 per cent of beef cattle and 50 per cent of small ruminants are estimated to be dead. Gaza’s fishing sector, indirectly providing livelihoods for 100,000 people, has come to a standstill. In addition, heavy restrictions on humanitarian assistance, including food and the fuel required to distribute it, have rendered impossible any meaningful humanitarian operations. The current levels of assistance are completely disproportionate to the overwhelming needs.

The cessation of hostilities and restoration of the humanitarian space to deliver assistance and restore services are essential first steps in eliminating a risk of famine. A critical priority is to restore safe humanitarian access throughout the Gaza Strip and to all those in need of life-saving assistance. Border crossings should be reopened, including for commercial traffic. Essential commodities must be allowed to move into and throughout Gaza. Immediate, multi-sectoral humanitarian assistance must be provided to the entire population, with priority given to the most vulnerable. Basic services must be restored. That includes restoring cross-border water pipelines, resuming electricity distribution and restoring health facilities, water infrastructure, food production, financial facilities and telecommunications, among others.

I thank the Council again for its attention to the food security situation in Gaza. The Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has joined the Secretary-General in calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. All parties must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law and protect civilians. An immediate ceasefire and peace are a prerequisite for food security, and the right to food is a basic human right.

The President: I thank Mr. Martina for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Skau.

Mr. Skau: I thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to brief the members of the Security Council on the current food security crisis in Gaza, together with my colleagues from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

As members have already heard, the Famine Review Committee of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification has warned of a real prospect of famine by May, with more than 500,000 people at risk, if the threat is allowed to materialize. Even before October 2023, two thirds of the people in Gaza were supported with food assistance. Today food aid is required by almost the entire population of 2.2 million people. Gaza is seeing the worst level of child malnutrition anywhere in the world. One out of every six children under the age of 2 is acutely malnourished. The World Food Programme (WFP) is ready to swiftly expand and scale up its operations if there is a ceasefire agreement. But, in the meantime, the risk of famine is being fuelled by the inability to bring critical food supplies into Gaza in sufficient quantities and the almost impossible operating conditions faced by our staff on the ground. Conditions in northern Gaza are particularly dire. On Sunday, 18 February, we resumed deliveries to the north for the first time in three weeks. Our intention was to send 10 trucks per day, for seven days, to address immediate needs and provide some reassurance to people living there that sufficient food would be brought in.

However, on both 18 and 19 February, our convoys faced significant problems. There were delays at checkpoints. They faced gunfire and other violence. Food was looted along the way. And, at their destination, they were overwhelmed by desperately hungry people. As a result, we have been forced to pause deliveries of food to the north until conditions are in place that allow for safe distributions, both for our staff and for the people

receiving our assistance. That is not a decision that WFP took lightly. As we know, it means that the conditions will worsen and that more people will be at risk of dying from hunger-related causes. But the breakdown in civil order driven, by sheer desperation, is preventing the safe distribution of aid. We are now urgently exploring all viable delivery options to allow for the resumption of operations in northern Gaza as soon as possible. That is an absolute humanitarian imperative. The staff members in our convoys have witnessed catastrophic conditions in the north. Food and clean water are scarce, malnutrition is soaring and disease is rife.

Immediate action is required to enable a huge increase in the volume of food and other humanitarian supplies going into northern Gaza. That is the only way to calm tensions and restore some semblance of civil order. For that to happen, we need a functioning operating environment. We need the port of Ashdod and the Karni crossing to open so that we can import food and other essential supplies swiftly and at scale. And we need a working humanitarian notification system and stable communications network to keep humanitarian staff safe. If nothing changes, a famine is imminent in northern Gaza. We must all double down and live up to our responsibilities to ensure that it does not happen on our watch.

Meanwhile, in the south of Gaza, WFP and partners are on the ground, delivering food as it comes to shelters, to make-shift camps and to shops. But we are unable to provide regular or sufficient food to people who badly need it. Most food is distributed in Rafah — the hub of WFP's current operations in Gaza — and very little assistance reaches people elsewhere. WFP has made efforts to support the re-establishment of local food systems wherever possible. That has included expanding distribution points to include local shops, supporting bakeries by providing them with wheat flour and other necessary resources to operate and supplying community-run kitchens that provide hot meals every day. But the fact remains that, without safe and greatly expanded access, aid workers cannot mount a relief operation at the scale required to reverse the severe humanitarian crisis now gripping Gaza. It is essential that we avert a famine, which requires much more than just food supplies. Basic services must also be restored, including health services, electricity networks and water and sanitation pipelines. In that, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is indispensable.

In 2018, the Council adopted resolution 2417 (2018), which reaffirms international humanitarian law and the need to break the vicious cycle of armed conflict and food insecurity. Today we call on the Council to uphold its commitments under the resolution.

The President: I thank Mr. Skau for his briefing.

I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Guyana.

I would like to thank Deputy Director-General Martina, Deputy Executive Director Skau and Director Rajasingham for their briefings. I also thank them for their contributions to the white note that is under consideration.

It is deeply concerning to Guyana that everyone in Gaza is food insecure, but even more so is the number of persons who are on the brink of famine. As we know, an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) 5 famine represents the highest level of food insecurity on the IPC scale. It means that at least 20 per cent of the entire population faces extreme food shortages and that more than 30 per cent faces acute malnutrition. Starvation, death, destitution and extremely acute malnutrition levels are key features. Two out of every 10,000 persons die from starvation on a daily basis in a famine situation. With 576,000 persons on the brink of famine in Gaza, we could expect at least 115 deaths a day from starvation or disease, should their state of food insecurity progress to famine.

I repeat the meaning of the famine classification and other statistics both to reiterate the sheer magnitude of the food security crisis in Gaza and to stress that human beings like us are the ones who are subjected to those degrading and undignified circumstances: men, women, boys, girls, pregnant and nursing women, disabled children, babies and the elderly. This is a catastrophe. That is not my word, but how famine is defined on the IPC scale. This catastrophe is on the Council's doorstep and requires our urgent action. The circumstances that have led to the current situation are pegged to one factor — the continued blatant disregard for international law and all obligations stemming therefrom. Violations include the bombing of civilian infrastructure, the destruction or restriction of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, the refusal to allow adequate humanitarian access, the blockade and siege and the disregard for the principles of humanity, proportionality and distinction.

Some of the consequences of the persistent violations are detailed in the white note and either existed before, or were engendered and accelerated, by the events of 7 October. Key among them are the high levels of structural poverty in Gaza, the economic challenges resulting from the restrictions on movements imposed by the occupier, the near decimation of productive capacity in the agrifood sector and the damage to livelihoods, markets and supply. In the immediate term, all of that has translated into a high mortality risk due to hunger, malnutrition and disease. As we know, hunger and malnutrition can create physical and cognitive challenges that have serious implications for an entire generation. As such, the capacity of an entire generation in Gaza to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development could be hindered. Bombing, shelling and the overall military operations have already affected the health of 18 per cent of all arable land in Gaza and have decimated agriculture production and infrastructure, as our briefers just indicated. The planned military ground operation in the south, including in Rafah, will further worsen an already-desperate situation, given the substantial portion of arable land that is located in the south. Those realities all emphasize one thing — the Security Council must intervene to stop the blatant violations of international law being committed by a Member State of our United Nations. I would not repeat the number of casualties in what is now an ever-increasing arithmetic of misery. But it must be underscored that those violations are being translated into suffering for hundreds of thousands of people in Gaza, and silence is not an acceptable response.

Guyana fully supports the seven recommendations contained in the white note. We emphasize that there must be respect for international law, including international humanitarian law, and an immediate and lasting ceasefire. Guyana is prepared to be part of efforts to realize those goals. Starvation as a method of warfare is illegal, and Guyana condemns those who are deliberately using this as a tool against the population in Gaza. We call on those with influence on the perpetrators to urge their full compliance with international law and their Charter obligations.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Hauri (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I thank the representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme for their briefings.

Switzerland thanks all the humanitarian actors for their efforts in response to the alarming level of food insecurity and the risk of famine in the Gaza Strip. Switzerland, as the Council's co-focal point for the issue of conflict and hunger, together with Guyana, is grateful for the white note and its recommendations. We call on the Security Council and the parties to the conflict to fully assume their responsibilities under international law, as reflected in resolution 2417 (2018). In adopting that resolution, the Council recognized the link between armed conflict, food insecurity and the risk of famine. In doing so, it also reiterated the duty of all parties to conflicts to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, in particular those that have an impact on food security.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is catastrophic. The escalation of hostilities is the main cause for the acute food insecurity. It has aggravated an already worrisome situation of structural poverty resulting from the restrictions on movement and access imposed as part of the closure of the Gaza Strip for the last 16 years. We call on all parties to respect international humanitarian law and international human rights law so as not to exacerbate a situation that has already been critical for a long time.

The ongoing hostilities have led to massive displacement in that restricted and closed-off area, and are having a major impact on water supplies, agriculture and food production. The note therefore warns that one in four people in the Gaza Strip is affected by catastrophic levels of starvation. Children, pregnant and lactating women, persons with disabilities and the elderly face a particularly high risk of mortality due to inadequate nutrition. This acute food insecurity is aggravated by the substantial limitations imposed on the delivery of humanitarian food supplies into and within the Gaza Strip. In its order from 26 January, the International Court of Justice made it clear: Israel must take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Switzerland reminds Israel that it must comply

with the said Court order and take the necessary steps to do so. Given this situation, and in line with the recommendations contained in the note, Switzerland would like to highlight the following points.

First, Switzerland calls on all parties to take concrete measures to spare and protect the civilian population and to respect international humanitarian law, including the prohibition on the use of starvation as a method of warfare against the civilian population, the prohibition on attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, and the obligation to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian aid to civilians in need.

Secondly, all parties must ensure rapid, safe and unimpeded access to all areas, including the northern Gaza Strip, and through all possible crossings and routes. Commercial food supplies must also be guaranteed so that local markets can be re-established. Humanitarian aid alone cannot meet the needs of more than 2 million people. Access to the necessary fuel and cash must also be facilitated.

Thirdly, children, women and vulnerable groups must be protected and their specific needs met.

Finally, Switzerland calls for good coordination among all actors to ensure that humanitarian workers can carry out their mission in complete safety throughout the country, with access by land prioritized.

Our action is decisive. We, the members of the Council, must use our influence and take urgent action to prevent famine and save lives. Political solutions are urgently needed. There must be an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. We stand ready to work with all members of the Council and beyond to find a solution that can end human suffering and revive the prospects for peace.

Mr. Bendjama (Algeria): I want to thank Guyana for its strong leadership during its presidency and for convening this meeting. My gratitude goes also to the representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme (WFP) for their informative briefings.

The situation in Gaza is deeply distressing, and the treatment of the Palestinian people by the occupying Power is plainly inhumane. As President Abdelmadjid Tebboune wisely said, you lose dignity when you

lose your food security. In December 2023, estimates from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification indicated that by the end of February 2024, all 2.2 million people in Gaza would face alarming levels of acute food insecurity, the highest ever globally. Regrettably, the efforts of the humanitarian community and the rare decisions of the Security Council have not improved the situation, because there has been no ceasefire.

Nutrition screenings in the north of Gaza revealed that more than 15 per cent of children under 2 years of age are acutely malnourished. It is likely that the situation will worsen in the January and February data, especially in the north, which is inaccessible at this time. Currently, 90 per cent of children under age 5 are dealing with one or more diseases while enduring extremely poor diets. Moreover, children, pregnant women, lactating mothers and the elderly are at a significantly heightened risk of mortality owing to insufficient nutrition. Of a total of 97 bakeries, only 17 are operational. Those are not functioning at full capacity, and there are none at all functioning north of Wadi Gaza. There will very soon be no bakeries operating in the entire Gaza Strip. Anas Al-Sharif, a journalist from Gaza, has said sadly,

“I woke up to children screaming because of the hunger that was consuming their bodies. We may tolerate hunger, but children cannot. Their screams tore at our hearts”.

Deplorably, people in Gaza are succumbing to hunger. Those are not mere words but a harsh reality. The people of Gaza are facing a harrowing dilemma. They are being forced to decide between the immediate threat of perishing in bombings or enduring an agonizing death by starvation.

Faced with this appalling tragedy, the humanitarian community finds itself helpless and hopeless, as well as having to deal with a misinformation campaign. The current aid flow is falling far short of the required levels, and commercial activities remain at a standstill. WFP has suspended deliveries to northern Gaza due to safety concerns for both distributors and recipients. Mothers are struggling to find anything to satisfy their children’s hunger and have been resorting to giving them animal fodder. Today, while the entire population of Gaza is relying on humanitarian assistance, the Israeli occupying Power is using starvation as a means of war. The deliberate use of starvation as a policy is a blatant violation of international law, intended to strip the people of Gaza of hope and dignity and push them towards violence and a breakdown of law and order.

Let us be candid. Resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023) are proving ineffective on the ground, or are having a very limited impact. Without a cessation of hostilities, ensuring adequate humanitarian assistance remains unattainable. The ongoing attack on Gaza is not a war against Hamas. It is a collective punishment for Palestinian civilians. Our silence grants Israel a licence to kill and starve the Palestinian population. The Council must urgently demand a ceasefire, because our inaction equals complicity in this crime.

Mr. Žbogar (Slovenia): I would like to thank the briefers from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme (WFP) for their presentations and their sobering alert to the Security Council.

Your country, Madam President, chose a very good topic for the open debate two weeks ago (see S/PV.9547). It is a tragic coincidence that just a couple of weeks later, we are being confronted with a live example of food insecurity and famine owing to armed conflict. Let me summarize the briefings and the white note.

Gaza has become uninhabitable. The entire population of Gaza is facing high levels of acute food insecurity — the highest share ever classified worldwide. Famine is looming for people in Gaza. Vulnerable groups are significantly more susceptible to mortality, due to a steep rise in malnutrition. Who are we talking about? Mohammed, 11 years old, became the primary food gatherer for his six-member family, including his mother, who has cancer. Leen, two years old, has been diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition, drastic weight loss and muscle atrophy. Her weight is only half of what is normal for her age. Mahmoud, two months old, died of starvation.

The Council has had several powerful briefings recently, including a chilling one by the Secretary General of Médecins sans frontières on the health situation (see S/PV.9556) and a duty-of-care briefing by Under-Secretary-General Michaud on the safety or lack of safety of United Nations personnel. We have heard briefings by Special Representatives of the Secretary-General and Special Envoys on Iraq (see S/PV.9543), Syria (see S/PV.9559) and Yemen (see S/PV.9548), all of them telling us of the spillover effects of the crisis in the region into their areas of responsibility. Now we have today’s white note on looming famine. Which of these briefings will be the straw that breaks the camel’s

back? The situation has been crystal clear for some time. We should all have been convinced by now that our action is needed — and indeed has been needed for a long time.

Slovenia is deeply disturbed by the distressing evidence for conflict-induced hunger and risk of famine outlined in the white note, and we fully support all of its recommendations. We once again repeat our call for full respect for international humanitarian law and human rights law. Slovenia reiterates that international humanitarian law prohibits attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. It also strictly prohibits starvation as a method of warfare.

We call for continued, safe, secure and unhindered humanitarian access across the entire Gaza Strip, including by opening additional crossing points and simplifying the entry procedures for humanitarian aid. We call for the restoration of an adequate and safe water supply. We regret that WFP was forced to suspend its deliveries in northern Gaza. We reiterate our position that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East is the lifeline for the Palestinian people and the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza.

The remainder of the white note recommendations is — to restore services for food systems and food production, to restore livelihoods and food production, to resume the entry of essential food, water, electricity, fuel and cooking gas and to scale up funding for humanitarian assistance.

For all those recommendations to be implemented, we need a final, seventh recommendation — a ceasefire and a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Only a ceasefire that is respected by all parties to the conflict can guarantee the delivery of humanitarian aid without interruption, ensuring adequate, timely assistance.

The white note and the stories of Mohammed, Leen and Mahmoud are the most recent call to the Council to change its course of action. As one of the briefers put it, “it is a matter of urgency”. The main driver of hunger in Gaza is evident, and the starvation of people in Gaza is preventable. Only an immediate and permanent ceasefire can avert the risk of famine. That is the only way to ensure full compliance with resolution 2417 (2018), on conflict and hunger.

There are times when we need to make choices and prioritize. Slovenia is choosing a ceasefire in order to prevent famine in Gaza, provide relief to the Palestinian people and bring about the release of the hostages.

I listened carefully to our statements in the Chamber. With each meeting, we feel the growing burden of responsibility. Our statements are increasingly emotional, but also clearer and more determined with regard to what needs to be done. A draft resolution is being circulated. Let us engage seriously to see if we can square the circle, to see if our red lines can be aligned into a document that would silence the skies above Gaza and Israel and bring food to the starving Palestinians.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I thank Director Rajasingham, Deputy Director-General Martina and Deputy Executive Director Skau for their briefings today.

Our hearts go out to the thousands of families in Gaza who cannot meet their basic needs. In that context, we welcome today’s discussion, under resolution 2417 (2018). Promoting food security is a long-standing United States priority, and the situation in Gaza is no exception. We urge Israel to keep border crossings open for humanitarian aid to enter Gaza, to facilitate the opening of additional crossings to meet humanitarian needs at scale and to support the rapid, safe delivery of relief items to vulnerable people in all of Gaza. Simply put, Israel must do more.

I also share their profound concern for the well-being of the more than 1 million Palestinian civilians in Rafah. It is unconscionable that Hamas fighters continue to embed themselves among civilians and civilian infrastructure, including in hospitals and schools. We caution that a major ground offensive should not proceed in Rafah under the current circumstances. We also reiterate our calls for all parties to uphold international humanitarian law. United States Administrator Samantha Power is in the region this week to deliver that message directly.

The United States has worked tirelessly since October to reduce barriers to getting humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza and will continue to do so. We worked with Egypt and Israel to open the crossing at Rafah so that trucks with food and humanitarian supplies could enter Gaza. We pressed to open Kerem Shalom to facilitate additional humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza. We have provided over \$180 million to humanitarian organizations to deliver

assistance, including food, to the people in Gaza and the West Bank. We have consistently called for the protection of United Nations and humanitarian workers as they fulfil their critical role of ensuring that food and humanitarian supplies do not just cross into Gaza, but reach civilians in need throughout Gaza. We continue to call on Israel to improve deconfliction procedures so as to ensure that aid can move safely and securely. We also recognize the fearless efforts of United Nations humanitarian workers, who work under great personal danger to meet the humanitarian needs of those inside Gaza. We wholeheartedly support the efforts of Ms. Kaag, Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, to scale up humanitarian deliveries. It is essential that Senior Coordinator Kaag has the resources and personnel necessary to get the job done.

Let me conclude with a note on our efforts to secure the release of the hostages. It is unconscionable that Hamas and other terrorist groups continue to further this conflict, while at the same time holding more than 130 hostages. We will continue to engage in intensive diplomacy with the parties to reach a hostage deal that would enable a significant temporary ceasefire, which would alleviate the suffering of the people in the Gaza Strip.

Mr. Dai Bing (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Algeria, Guyana, Slovenia and Switzerland for the initiative to convene today's meeting. I also thank the three briefers for their briefings. The United Nations and humanitarian agencies have played an important role in alleviating the humanitarian disaster in Gaza. China fully recognizes and supports that role.

More than four months after the eruption of the conflict in Gaza, nearly 30,000 civilians have been killed and Gaza has sunk into an unprecedented humanitarian disaster. Millions of Gazans are either grieving the death of their loved ones or are being forced to relocate repeatedly without finding safe shelter. They lack basic security and subsistence supplies and are constantly facing the threats of death, hunger and disease. Women and children are living in fear and despair every day. What is happening in Gaza is a grave violation of international law and international humanitarian law and goes beyond the bottom line of human morality and conscience. The international community must take action to protect civilians, save lives and make every effort to prevent an even greater humanitarian disaster.

Humanitarian assistance is what the people of Gaza rely on and is their hope for survival. With a view to protecting civilians and expanding humanitarian access, the Security Council adopted resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023). However, due to artificial obstacles, the entry of humanitarian supplies into Gaza has faced many difficulties. For nearly a month now, the humanitarian supplies received in Gaza have been far below the average of previous periods, and northern Gaza has not received any humanitarian aid. We call on Israel, as the occupying Power, to earnestly fulfil its obligations under the Geneva Conventions, fully cooperate in the implementation of Security Council resolutions, open all land, sea and air access routes and ensure the safe, rapid and unimpeded entry of humanitarian supplies.

At the same time, Israel should strictly comply with the requirements of the deconfliction mechanism, effectively guarantee the safety of humanitarian agencies and personnel and provide necessary facilitation for humanitarian agencies to lend assistance in Gaza. The order on provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice requires Israel to take all measures to prevent genocide and provide the population of Gaza with urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance. That order must be effectively implemented.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the lifeline for the people in Gaza. Its role is indispensable and irreplaceable. We support the United Nations in conducting an independent and impartial investigation into the allegations against UNRWA staff. Israel should support and cooperate with the United Nations investigation. Meanwhile, the international community should continue to support UNRWA and other humanitarian agencies in their work. We call upon the international community, and on major donors in particular, to promptly resume their funding of UNRWA.

Secretary-General Guterres has pointed out on multiple occasions that, with Gaza under gunfire, conditions make the delivery of humanitarian aid impossible. An immediate ceasefire is the necessary precondition for protecting civilians, delivering assistance and alleviating the humanitarian disaster. That is currently the overwhelming call of the international community and the overwhelming consensus among Council members. We hope that the relevant country

will adopt a responsible and constructive attitude and support the Council in taking action to request an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. China will continue to work with the international community in the actions to restore peace and save lives and in the tireless efforts to end the fighting in Gaza, implement the two-State solution and achieve lasting peace in the Middle East.

Mr. De La Gasca (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank the presidency for convening this important meeting. I also thank the briefers and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for drafting the white note, which is an important early-warning mechanism provided for in resolution 2417 (2018) on the threat of conflict-induced famine.

After reviewing the note and listening to the briefings, is there any remaining doubt as to the seriousness of the food insecurity faced by the population in Gaza? The escalation of hostilities has affected every aspect of food security, including the collapse of local production, severe restrictions on water supply, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and the paralysis of the trade sector. That explains why the entire population is at the highest levels of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a state of affairs that representatives of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations have described as unprecedented.

Most serious of all is the fact that those who are suffering the greatest effects of food insecurity are the most vulnerable groups. Screening in shelters and health centres has revealed that nearly 16 per cent of children under 2 years of age suffer from acute malnutrition and that 3 per cent of that subset of children suffer from the most severe form of malnutrition, placing them at greater risk of death if they do not receive urgent treatment.

Behind those alarming statistics are men, women and children who are ever closer to starvation because of the conflict. Ecuador therefore welcomes the recommendations contained in the white note, which highlight the link between hunger and conflict and the collective responsibility we have in the Council to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe, and wishes to focus its comments on three points.

First, the interruption of food distribution in northern Gaza, blockades and continued hostilities restrict the work of humanitarian personnel. It is therefore urgent to allow humanitarian access, ensure the financing

thereof and fully implement resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023), to which end a humanitarian ceasefire is indispensable.

Secondly, in order to prevent famine and food crises, parties must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the principles of humanity, distinction and proportionality and the prohibition on using starvation as a method of warfare and on attacking civilian infrastructure, as established in resolutions 2417 (2018) and 2573 (2021).

Thirdly, while measures to address the humanitarian needs of the population are essential and urgent, peace is the only sustainable way to address the risk of hunger. My country will therefore continue to support initiatives to reach a peaceful, negotiated, lasting and just solution to the conflict, with two States — Palestine and Israel — on the basis of the 1967 borders and the relevant resolutions.

Mr. De La Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Rajasingham, Mr. Marina and Mr. Skau for their briefings.

The situation in Gaza is intolerable. Hunger and infectious diseases are spreading. The food supply chain has virtually ground to a halt. Water, electricity and fuel are in short supply. This situation is unacceptable.

We meet today in implementation of resolution 2417 (2018). That resolution was the first to condemn the use of starvation as a method of warfare, the denial of humanitarian access and depriving civilians of objects indispensable to their survival. The resolution must be implemented fully. Everyone, including Israel, must comply with international humanitarian law. It is imperative to be able to deliver aid on a massive scale to the entire Gaza Strip, including the north. Israel must open the Ashdod port, a direct land route from Jordan and all required crossing points. The protection of civilians, humanitarian workers, United Nations sites and other civilian infrastructure is an absolute imperative.

France will continue to contribute to the humanitarian response in Gaza. Yesterday, together with Jordan, it carried out a new airdrop of aid and a new shipment of cargo to help Egyptian hospitals treat the wounded. President Macron has made it clear that it is urgent to reach an agreement on a ceasefire that will guarantee the protection of all civilians and the massive delivery of emergency assistance. France is

firmly opposed to a ground offensive in Rafah, which would only exacerbate the humanitarian catastrophe that is already unfolding.

While calling for a ceasefire, France demands that all hostages be released immediately and unconditionally. The Council must also condemn the terrorist attacks and sexual violence committed by Hamas and other terrorist groups on 7 October. Last but not least, it must contribute immediately to relaunching the effort to build a political two-State solution.

Dame Barbara Woodward (United Kingdom): I thank the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for the white note, and I also thank our briefers from OCHA, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme.

We are witnesses to a desperate situation in Gaza that is worsening day by day. In Rafah and the south, people are crammed into tents — if they are lucky — but without sufficient food, water or hygiene. In north Gaza, as we heard from the World Food Programme, humanitarian organizations cannot get aid to people who desperately need it. Hunger is at catastrophic levels. As ever, the most devastating impact falls on the most vulnerable: women and children. To address that, three things need to happen.

First, we call on all parties to stop fighting immediately. That is crucial to get aid in and hostages out, and then progress towards a sustainable and permanent ceasefire. That is the only way to alleviate catastrophic hunger and suffering in Gaza.

Secondly, we urge Israel to allow more aid into Gaza and to facilitate distribution throughout the Strip. Thousands of trucks are stuck in Egypt and Jordan, containing food, shelter and other essentials. We need more crossings to be opened for longer, including Kerem Shalom. We need unencumbered access for aid coming in from Jordan. We need the full opening of the Ashdod port. Key to that, too, is increasing the speed and capacity of aid screening operations, including at Kerem Shalom and Nitzana, to allow that life-saving aid to reach those who need it as soon as possible. We are particularly concerned that the World Food Programme has had to suspend deliveries into northern Gaza owing to the breakdown of law and order. Airdrops cannot substitute for land-based delivery. Humanitarians need safe and unhindered access to the north through the Erez crossing now. We urge Israel to resume water

and electricity supplies, which are critical for food production and safe drinking water. Commercial activity must also restart.

Thirdly, the United Nations and humanitarian partners need greater protection and access to the tools needed to accomplish their mission. That includes armoured vehicles, communications equipment, personal protective equipment and visas. They need functioning deconfliction mechanisms and safety guarantees for locations and convoys.

Conflict in Gaza is driving hunger. Hunger is driving a breakdown in law and order, making it impossible for aid agencies to deliver aid safely. This white note makes clear that we must act now. The United Kingdom calls for an immediate pause in fighting, then progress towards a sustainable ceasefire. That is the only way to avert famine and alleviate the suffering.

Mr. Hwang (Republic of Korea): I thank the briefers for their timely and heartfelt briefings on the horrific food security situation in Gaza.

I feel more devastated as I realize that, while we gather today in this Chamber and hear the harsh statistics attached to the current situation, sheer numbers cannot fully describe the stark reality on the ground. Since the outbreak of the current crisis, the Security Council has adopted two resolutions (resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023)). Both clearly demand the full, rapid, safe and unhindered provision of humanitarian assistance, including food, to those in desperate need in Gaza. But tragically, the humanitarian situation on the ground is getting worse day by day. Ensuring the provision of essential goods, such as food, to civilians is one of the most important rules under international humanitarian law.

However, today's reality is staggering and almost beyond belief. Ninety per cent of children under the age of 2 and 95 per cent of pregnant and breastfeeding women in Gaza face severe food poverty, which almost always results in life-threatening undernutrition. The extreme difficulty in providing humanitarian assistance is not the only factor exacerbating food insecurity in Gaza. Resolution 2417 (2018), adopted in 2018 by the Council, urges all parties to a conflict to ensure the proper functioning of food production and distribution systems. However, the infrastructure to that end has been severely damaged and destroyed. Food security in Gaza has collapsed. To make the situation worse, civil order has completely evaporated. Under these

circumstances, only 98 aid trucks entered Gaza daily in February, according to the situation report of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) published yesterday, which is half as many as in January.

If the current situation continues, the devastating outcomes will not end in this generation. Intergenerational consequences of food insecurity in Gaza are inevitable. Therefore, decisive measures must be taken as soon as possible. Above all, we must ensure the consistent and expanded entry of food aid through all available crossing points as well as through a maritime corridor. Delivery of commercial goods into Gaza should also be ensured. Any hindrance to the delivery of life-saving assistance, such as the Israeli protesters at the Kerem Shalom crossing, is unacceptable.

Once again, we express our sincere support for the work of the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator, Ms. Sigrid Kaag. We hope that her work will lead to tangible outcomes, including utilizing all the possible humanitarian routes into Gaza. There is also an increasing need to scale up funding for humanitarian aid. To participate in the international efforts to support food security in armed conflicts, the Republic of Korea has decided to increase its contribution this year to the Central Emergency Response Fund threefold. Korea also maintains its contribution to UNRWA. Given UNRWA's crucial role and the gravity of the current situation, we appreciate the efforts of the Secretary-General in appointing the independent review group and hope that the results of its review will come out soon.

Humanitarian workers and agencies must be respected and protected by all parties, and the provision of food must be ensured in occupied territories under international humanitarian law. In addition, all parties must fully respect humanitarian notification procedures and the deconfliction mechanism to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers, most notably UNRWA staff. Humanitarian workers must be equipped with the necessary items, including telecommunications equipment and armoured vehicles.

In conclusion, we once again call for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. That is the only viable way to ensure safe and unimpeded access to food for those who so desperately need it. At the same time, it is the first step towards a brighter future of coexistence based on a two-State solution.

Mr. Yamanaka (Japan): I would like to start by thanking Mr. Rajasingham, Mr. Martina and Mr. Skau for providing detailed and sobering briefings.

The update on food security risks in Gaza delivers nothing but extremely alarming facts. It is deeply distressing to discover that the entire population of 2.2 million people in Gaza will face high levels of acute food insecurity by the end of this month and that 1.1 million children in Gaza are now facing starvation. An aid worker for Save the Children on the ground saw people eating, out of desperation, bird and animal food and tree leaves and scavenging food that had already been eaten by rats. As indicated in the briefing, this is one of the worst food insecurity situations that we have ever witnessed. To address the grave situation in Gaza, the Government of Japan has announced today an additional \$32 million in emergency grant aid to provide assistance in the fields of food and health, among others.

I wish to underscore three points that are most critical to preventing conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity in Gaza.

First, all parties to the conflict must respect international humanitarian law. International humanitarian law clearly prohibits attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects that are indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. These include food stuffs, agricultural areas, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works. International humanitarian law also requires parties to the conflict to allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian assistance for civilians. This message has been repeated numerous times inside and outside of this Chamber, but we will continue to repeat this call until we see that these rules are being followed.

Secondly, more humanitarian aid coordination between relevant parties is needed to meet the enormous humanitarian requirements on the ground. The World Food Programme recently announced that it had been forced to pause food distribution in northern Gaza, and many other humanitarian organizations are echoing the difficulties in delivering aid. It is vital to allow more trucks and fuel to reach Gaza, and we urge Israel to open additional border crossings and secure humanitarian corridors so that humanitarian actors can safely carry out their work. We also strongly support the efforts of Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, Ms. Sigrid Kaag, to overcome the many impediments to reaching those in need.

Finally, even as we demand the remedy of the humanitarian situation, we must continue our efforts to address the cause of that catastrophe. In that vein, Japan once again unequivocally condemns the heinous acts of terror by Hamas and others on 7 October, which has led to a series of tragedies. We demand the immediate and unconditional release of all remaining hostages held by Hamas and other groups.

At the same time, Japan also reiterates that a humanitarian ceasefire needs to be realized promptly to ensure a conducive environment for sufficient humanitarian assistance activities, as well as to lead to the release of the remaining hostages, therefore resulting in the realization of a sustainable ceasefire. Based on that position, Japan calls on all the parties concerned to act immediately from a humanitarian viewpoint.

The humanitarian catastrophe must be immediately stopped. Japan will continue to work with other Council members and the international community to alleviate the plight of the people in Gaza.

Mr. Sowa (Sierra Leone): I thank you, Madam President, for convening this meeting on this very critical topic. I also thank Mr. Rajasingham, Mr. Martina and Mr. Skau for their briefings and the context provided.

The recent updates on the harsh realities of life in the Gaza Strip are deeply distressing. The persistent hostilities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are having far-reaching consequences for the innocent civilian population who were already impacted by structural economic deprivation and economic challenges resulting from the 16-year blockade and the restriction of Israel on the occupied Palestine territory.

In line with resolution 2417 (2018) and in a genuine effort to protect civilians, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has brought to the attention of the Council the imminent risk of conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity due to the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, in their December 2023 special brief, also highlighted the magnitude of acute food insecurity that has in reality currently exposed almost 2.2 million Palestinians to severe hunger, the highest level ever classified worldwide.

We remain deeply concerned that the ongoing violence is hindering an effective humanitarian response to civilians in need and, therefore, a major cause of the current risk of mortality owing to inadequate nutrition

by vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant and lactating women, persons with disabilities, the aged and so forth.

We fully subscribe to the view that the situation has been driven by the direct impact of the military operations in Gaza resulting in the decline in the health and density of arable land; the destruction of agricultural infrastructure; diminishing food production, markets and supply chains; and hindering the entry and delivery of humanitarian and commercial food supplies into and within the Gaza Strip.

The 1.7 million internally displaced persons who cannot access or cultivate their land are deprived of enough food and water, desperately needed for their survival. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, children in southern Gaza could access only 1.5 to 2 litres of water per day, a portion way below the standard requirement for survival. With the collapse of the health system in the entire Gaza Strip, health conditions, exacerbated by a lack of enough water and food, could not be treated in time or appropriately. The sight of children dying in the Gaza strip because of hunger is harrowing at best, and the Council cannot afford for the situation to continue without using the myriad of tools available to address it.

Given the above instances and in an effort to fully implement the provisions of resolution 2417 (2018), Sierra Leone therefore strongly calls for the following actions.

First, to eliminate the risk of famine and disease and the high mortality rate in the Gaza Strip and the entire territory of Palestine, Sierra Leone reiterates its call for the parties to conflict to comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, which prohibits the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and the destruction of civilian objects necessary for storing and distributing relief assistance indispensable to the survival of the entire population.

Secondly, we reiterate the need for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and reject any attempt to conduct military operations in Rafah, the southern region of Gaza where a greater percentage of the land is arable and could enhance farming, as reported by OCHA.

Thirdly, we call on parties to the conflict to allow for safe and unimpeded access to humanitarian aid, through the opening of all relevant crossings into the

Gaza Strip, especially to northern Gaza. We further call for a functioning humanitarian notification system and a stable communication network that will guarantee the protection of United Nations and other humanitarian personnel and enhance the efficient delivery of essential commodities.

We reiterate the exceptional role played by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and stress that inadequate funding and further restrictions in their operations obstruct efficient service delivery, which is currently below average.

In conclusion, Sierra Leone stresses the need for the requisite support to be granted to Ms. Sigrid Kaag, Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, in her effort to improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip.

Mr. Kumanga (Mozambique): Mozambique commends the Guyana presidency for convening this timely open briefing on the protection of civilians in armed conflicts, with a specific focus on the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

We extend our appreciation to the briefers, Mr. Rajasingham, Director of Coordination of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; Mr. Martina, Deputy Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; and Mr. Carl Skau, Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme, for their insightful information to the Council.

The situation in the Middle East, including in the occupied territories of Palestine remains deeply concerning. It therefore is crucial that the international community continue to address the challenges faced by civilians caught in the midst of armed conflicts.

The intensification and expansion of attacks in the Gaza Strip has been the cause of enormous humanitarian damage, including massive civilian deaths, millions of injuries and forced displacement, as well as the destruction of infrastructure. The catastrophic situation on the ground, coupled with a hunger crisis, calls for urgent and effective measures to minimize the loss human lives and the upholding of values and human dignity in solidarity.

The protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict is a cornerstone of international humanitarian law. In that regard, resolution 2417 (2018), on the

protection of civilians in armed conflict, adopted unanimously on 24 May 2018, reaffirms the primary responsibility of States to protect the population throughout its entire territory. The urgency of the situation in question is highlighted by Israel's military action and its threat of a ground offensive in Rafah, where approximately 1.5 million people are seeking shelter. In that regard, we call for global and effective measures, not only to protect the civilians in Gaza but to enable the provision of the basic services and humanitarian assistance needed to address the adverse living conditions that Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip are facing. An immediate and urgent cessation of hostilities is crucial to that end. Mozambique reiterates its call on the Council to stand united and committed to the implementation of all of the Security Council resolutions and United Nations legal instruments related to ending the violence and protecting the civilians in the Gaza Strip.

Mozambique would like to reaffirm the importance and urgency of establishing a two-State solution for peace and stability in the Middle East, in accordance with international law and the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I am grateful to the delegations of Algeria, Guyana, Slovenia and Switzerland for convening today's meeting. We also thank the representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for their frank assessments of the catastrophic food-security situation in the Gaza Strip. We have carefully read the OCHA white note prepared in accordance with resolution 2417 (2018), and which in our view has been unquestionably late in coming. The alarming outlook for the Gaza Strip was projected as early as December within the framework of the special brief of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). According to the estimates we heard today, the risk of full-on famine is increasing every day. Experience has shown that the issuance of such documents establishes a red line. Should we cross that red line in the context of Gaza without providing an effective response, the members of the Security Council will share full responsibility for Israel's use of starvation as a method of warfare. The data cited in the white note is spine-chilling. There is no other way to describe the tragic statistics, which show that

among the 2.2 million Gazans who are experiencing acute food shortages, at least 600,000, or one in four, are on the verge of starving to death. That is the largest percentage of people facing acute malnutrition in the world ever recorded. It is hard to believe that this is happening not in the Middle Ages but before our eyes in the year 2024.

Gaza is suffering from water shortages. Children in the Strip are receiving only between 1.5 and 2 litres of water a day, far below the level needed to survive. UNICEF estimates that, in addition to malnutrition, at least 90 per cent of the children under the age of five in Gaza are suffering from one or more diseases. As we learned from the OCHA white note, malnutrition has put an entire generation of Gazan children at risk of suffering irreparable physical and mental developmental damage, which is a death blow to the future of Gaza. Do our Western colleagues care about the fate of Palestinian children? It is difficult to avoid asking that question against the backdrop of the insinuations that the West has been working hard to spread about Ukrainian children, whom Russia is actually saving, and the numerous propaganda efforts that Western delegations have continued to put out in that regard. I would like to ask my Western colleagues if any efforts at all have been devoted to the children of Gaza, who, as the conclusions of the United Nations agencies suggest, are effectively doomed. Or do they not care, because that will not score them any propaganda points for vilifying Russia?

We all know perfectly well that there is no problem as such with the availability of aid for the Gaza Strip. We saw that first-hand during the Council's visit to the Gaza border last year. Convoys of loaded trucks are ready to enter Rafah with everything that is needed, but as we know, Israel's strict measures have had the exact opposite effect. Owing to bureaucratic obstacles and outright denials of access, only the southern area of the Strip has received even minimal aid. In the north, the lack of security means that humanitarian workers are unable to deliver aid, including food supplies. We can only guess at the appalling conditions that the people there are living in. In that regard, it is pointless to talk about the possibility of local agriculture, because the conditions for that are non-existent. The serious danger of mines, and the environmental pollution of already-scarce farmland for which there is no water for irrigation, leaves Gazans with no hope of achieving food self-sufficiency.

Let us recall the hopes that were pinned on the adoption of resolution 2720 (2023), which at the time we were told was supposed to dramatically turn around the humanitarian supply situation. To that end, the Secretary-General was requested to appoint the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, Sigrid Kaag. However, the weak and ambiguous language concerning hostilities that was included in the text to accommodate Washington's position has only exacerbated the situation, and we warned the Council about that. The sole and vital imperative for preventing famine in Gaza on a massive scale is to immediately establish a ceasefire and ensure Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law. That call has been made repeatedly by both the Secretary-General and OCHA's leadership. However, all such attempts by the Council to take that step have been blocked by the United States, which has used its right of veto four times to that end.

Against a backdrop of tens of thousands of dead and starving people in Gaza, the United States delegation has maintained its cynical argument that a ceasefire would somehow almost be dangerous because it would undermine some sort of "delicate diplomacy" that the Americans are conducting "on the ground". In blocking the international efforts to end the violence in Gaza, Washington bears full responsibility for the unprecedented civilian casualties, which now number 30,000. That is the price of the United States veto within the Security Council for the situation in Gaza. The alternative draft resolution on the Gaza Strip that the United States is proposing in the Council does not call for a ceasefire and is aimed at expanding the United Nations umbrella for Israel's operation. It is no kind of alternative, just one more licence to kill Palestinian civilians that the United States is determined to grant Israel, this time with the Security Council signing off on it. I call on Council members not to support that destructive initiative.

The white note issued by OCHA pursuant to resolution 2417 (2018) leaves the Security Council with no alternative to continuing to push for a ceasefire in order to create the conditions that humanitarian and medical personnel need to operate in, which is what we intend to do. That is especially important for establishing safe and uninterrupted humanitarian corridors, as the representatives of the World Health Organization have repeatedly said. Apart from using them to deliver aid, they are vital to enabling the evacuation of seriously ill

people who are facing imminent death in Gaza owing to a lack of medicines. It is also important not to forget that, under the provisions of resolution 2417 (2018), when it comes to obstructing humanitarian assistance for those in need, the Security Council has the right to consider adopting sanctions. Now is the time to activate that provision.

In conclusion, I must draw attention to the fact that a number of Western delegations, in particular the United States and its closest satellites, were not among the Security Council members that requested this meeting. During their presidency in August 2023, they dedicated an entire meeting to famine and conflict-induced global food insecurity (see S/PV.9392). However, all that Washington was really interested in at that time was maligning Russia by spreading absurd myths about our alleged responsibility for the food supply problems that the international community was facing. Our Western colleagues even came up with the term “using hunger as a weapon”, which they repeated diligently. I call on everyone at this meeting today to note that neither the United States nor the United Kingdom used that term even once to describe what is being done by Israel in Gaza. That speaks for itself.

Another telling thing is the lack of Western delegations under rule 37 at this briefing. Where are all those European ministers who besieged the Security Council Chamber last week (see S/PV.9557), making their way to the “ritual” meeting on the Ukrainian crisis? Is famine in Gaza a less important topic for the European Union, which claims that they are the main humanitarian and human rights advocate in the world? Or are Gazans, like Syrians, Afghans and Yemenis, second-class people whose lives are of no concern to those who inhabit the beautiful European garden? It looks that way.

Another shocking example is the alacrity with which a number of Western donors suspended funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, before the investigation was even conducted and amid the humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip. That means that the Agency is on the brink of collapse. It is difficult to see that as anything other than open, immoral blackmail and a politicization of humanitarian issues. We trust that the Security Council will have an opportunity to discuss this issue separately in the coming days.

Ms. Gatt (Malta): I also thank the representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme for their important briefings.

As has been made clear, Gaza continues to endure devastating food insecurity. Nearly 600,000 people are on the brink of famine. That catastrophic level of food insecurity is the direct result of Israel’s military campaign and Israel’s inability to abide by its legal obligations and facilitate the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance and food aid into the Strip. This is a matter of urgency. We call for the re-opening of the port of Ashdod. Further crossing points must re-open immediately to allow adequate scaling up of aid. An effective humanitarian deconfliction mechanism, respected by all parties, as called for in resolution 2712 (2023), is also fundamental.

The risks of those falling into starvation increase with each day that the intense fighting persists, and humanitarian access remains hampered and restricted. A permanent ceasefire is crucial, now more than ever, to allow for the necessary space for a scaled-up humanitarian intervention, including to address this conflict-induced food insecurity.

Food production capacity in Gaza and the ability of people to access food have been severely hampered. That is also due to restrictions on the delivery of commercial supplies. Vast swathes of crucial arable land have been destroyed as a result of the months-long intense military campaign, and agricultural infrastructure has suffered severe damage. In addition, 1.7 million people have been forcibly displaced, leading to the abandonment or inaccessibility to means of food production. Malta firmly rejects and denounces any forced displacement of Palestinians from their lands or homes, including from and within Gaza. Israel’s electricity blackout on Gaza and restrictions on fuel further impede food production. Water supplies and desalinization plants have also been severely compromised. As outlined in resolution 2417 (2018), parties to armed conflict must refrain from attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless those objects that are indispensable for the survival of the civilian population. Israel must protect and restore vital infrastructure and services needed for food systems and food production. Those include cross-border water pipelines, telecommunications and the resumption of electricity and fuel distribution.

Malta is also greatly disturbed by public statements expressing the intent to deprive civilians in Gaza of food, water and fuel. Starvation cannot be used as a weapon of war. We also reiterate that the presence of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East remains essential to ensure an effective humanitarian response in Gaza. Its role is irreplaceable. As the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza and a stabilizing force in the region, further funding cuts will undermine critical humanitarian action.

Children in Gaza continue to bear the brunt of the suffering. Ninety per cent of the children under the age of 5 are experiencing one or more infectious diseases due to food poverty and lack of access to clean water. One in six children under the age of 2 in northern Gaza are acutely malnourished and experiencing wasting. Thousands have been forced to become the primary food gatherers for their families, putting themselves in the line of fire to feed their loved ones. These conditions threaten an entire generation. Malnutrition in childhood causes irreparable physical and cognitive impairments.

In conclusion, the Council must demand that immediate action be taken by the parties to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law, including resolution 2417 (2018). Accountability for violations of international law must be prioritized. We also call for the immediate implementation of the order on provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice, including those measures related to the provision of humanitarian assistance into the Gaza Strip. Above all, a permanent ceasefire must be agreed as a matter of urgency to allow for the unimpeded delivery of multisectoral humanitarian assistance at scale.

The President: The representative of the United States has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I apologize for taking the floor. I just need to respond to some comments made by the representative of the Russian Federation.

I think my remarks on the horrible situation in Gaza were quite clear. I would just remind everyone in the Chamber that the Russian Federation is a country that does not contribute to resolving humanitarian crises; it creates them. Just look at Ukraine. And do not take my word for it. Ask the Ukrainian people, who have to live under the savage, barbaric bombings and killings

that they have to deal with every single day. Russia is therefore in no position, frankly, to criticize any country while it continues to flagrantly and relentlessly violate the Charter of the United Nations. When I hear Russia speak about its concerns about civilians, civilian infrastructure, et cetera, it is hard to take what it says seriously.

The President: The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I simply wish to respond to what was said by my colleague from the United States. He should be ashamed of comparing the situation in Ukraine to Gaza. They cannot be compared. First, contrary to what he said, the Russian Federation is not bombing the civilian population of Ukraine barbarically. It is impossible to compare the scale of it. Secondly, who is lecturing us about that? It is the country that destroyed Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Yugoslavia and barbarically carpet bombed those countries. Instead of focusing on the speck in my eye, he should see the log in his own.

The President: The representative of the United States has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I apologize again. First and foremost, I was not making a comparison of the two; I was pointing out what Russia has been doing. And so, I just have a quick question for the Russian Permanent Representative. Is he saying that Russia is not conducting any bombings of Ukraine?

The President: The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I will be very brief, Madam President, and I propose that we do not turn the Security Council into a duel between the United States and the Russian Federation. We have spoken repeatedly on this topic and will continue to address the situation in Ukraine. We have spoken on many occasions about what targets are being attacked by the Russian armed forces. They are military targets and military infrastructure targets that enable the Kyiv regime to maintain its military machine. That is the bottom line. I think that we should conclude there, and I suggest that we continue our sparring during the next meeting on Ukraine.

The President: I now give the floor to the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): We thank you, Madam President, for responding to Algeria's request to convene this urgent meeting, and we also thank Guyana, Slovenia and Switzerland for supporting that request in follow-up to the white note on the food insecurity crisis in the Gaza Strip, issued by the Secretary-General, pursuant to resolution 2417 (2018). We also thank the three briefers from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) for their briefings.

In resolution 2417 (2018), the Security Council condemned both the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and the unlawful denial of humanitarian access to civilian populations in urgent need of food and livelihood assistance, and required the Secretary-General to report swiftly to the Council when the risk of conflict-induced famine and widespread food insecurity occurs in situations of armed conflict.

In issuing this white note, the Secretary-General has again acted with the responsibility and seriousness compelled by this grave situation, as he did when he invoked Article 99 of the Charter of the United Nations, imploring the Council to act in the face of the threats to peace and security caused by Israel's war on Gaza. Those actions follow his early and continual calls for a humanitarian ceasefire as an utmost priority to stop the bloodshed and protect Palestinian civilians in Gaza, who have suffered unprecedented losses, with casualties now surpassing 30,000 Palestinians killed and 70,000 people wounded, the majority of them women and children, and many more lives endangered by Israel's weapons and medieval siege on Gaza, which have inflicted massive displacement and the wildfire-like spread of hunger, disease and despair among the population.

In early December 2023, three months into this genocidal war, the World Food Programme reported that 97 per cent of families in northern Gaza were struggling with hunger — 9 of 10 people were enduring a full day and night without food, some for days on end. By early February 2024, a joint WFP and FAO report on food security in Palestine indicated that Gaza's entire population was suffering acute food insecurity — the highest share of people ever classified as such for any given area or country. The Integrated Food Security

Phase Classification estimates are actually deemed conservative, and that should be a matter of alarm for the Council. Food insecurity in Gaza has in fact reached catastrophic levels, with more than half a million people considered to be one step away from famine. In reality, a famine is under way, worsening every day that Israel carries on with this criminal aggression.

An entire population has been stripped of its dignity and means for survival, rendered completely dependent on humanitarian aid, which is tragically not reaching them. That is in spite of the Council's efforts in resolutions 2712 (2023) and 2720 (2023), including the appointment of a Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, Ms. Sigrid Kaag, to ensure the acceleration, scaling-up and distribution of aid. But we all know that without a ceasefire, that has become an impossible mission, as Israel continues to rain down bombs and missiles and to obstruct crossing points and the entry of trucks, leaving millions of people hungry and desperate.

We must stop for a moment to consider what that truly means — what it feels like to be without food for days. Imagine just one day without a morsel of food in your stomach. Imagine two days without even a piece of bread in your stomach. Imagine what the pain of such hunger feels like and the havoc that starvation wreaks on the human body and mind, and no less, in combination with the trauma of having to run from one place to another, forcibly displaced over and over, with nowhere safe for refuge and all the while being hungry and depleted. Imagine what it means to forage for food in the rubble, sand and trash, to eat animal feed or food ravaged by rats in order to survive and the absolute desperation and indignation of doing that. Imagine what it means for mothers and fathers to hear their babies and children cry from hunger day and night when there is no milk, no bread — nothing.

The fact is that children, women and men are being left to starve, wasting away as a result of Israel's calculated, sinister decisions to lay siege to Gaza, its 17-year-long blockade and its savage military aggression. After bombing nearly every bakery and farm, destroying livestock and all means of food production and closing nearly all crossing points, the occupier claims that it is allowing humanitarian aid to enter Gaza and that there is no problem — and we may hear that from them later on too. But we all know the truth: it is only allowing a drip of aid into Gaza, only to deflect international opprobrium and with no

regard whatsoever for the well-being or survival of the population that it has made clear time and again that it wants to get rid of.

Babies have been born — and have died — in the span of these few months, living the entirety of their short lives in the horrors of this genocide, some dying in incubators, side by side with other babies, deprived of sustenance and medical care, some dying of hunger and hypothermia in the arms of their mothers, and some orphaned and left to fend for themselves in this nightmare.

Israel is the architect of this human and humanitarian catastrophe, which it has purposely designed to collectively punish Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians, half of whom are children, in grave breach of international law and all standards of decency or morality. Israeli officials have said it openly — they are going to teach Palestinians in Gaza a lesson, and they are doing so wilfully and wantonly, violating international humanitarian law, international human rights law, Security Council and General Assembly resolutions and the International Court of Justice order of provisional measures in the case brought by South Africa against Israel under the Genocide Convention, with total contempt.

Israel has completely ignored the International Court of Justice order and continues with its appalling genocidal crimes, including the crime of starvation as a method of war. That is not an opinion; it is thoroughly evidenced in reports of United Nations humanitarian agencies and many international humanitarian and human rights organizations, almost unanimously.

That this catastrophic famine and genocide has been allowed to happen at all and allowed to continue for this long brings shame on all of us, not least the Security Council, which continues to fail to demand a ceasefire and ensure respect for international law and for its own resolutions, leaving the Palestinian people at the mercy of the occupying Power, which has zero regard for its obligations, under international humanitarian law, to ensure the safety and well-being of the civilians under its control, choosing instead to terrorize, kill, maim, displace and starve them.

Israel's weaponization of food to punish the Palestinian people is not a secret. It was declared months ago, in October 2023, by the highest-ranking Israeli Government and military officials, some of whom continue bragging about such punitive policies,

with some publicly stating that such policies will hasten the decline of humanitarian conditions and provoke a mass exodus from Gaza or "voluntary migration" of this "demographic threat", as they cynically call our people. Thus, its use of starvation as a weapon goes hand in hand with its policies aimed at the forced transfer of our people from their land, which Israel has pursued by all means since the start of this genocidal war, its threatened invasion of Rafah heightening real fears in that regard.

It is those same officials who continue to incite and collude with Israeli citizens who amass daily to block the entry of aid trucks to Gaza. Some are so depraved that they bring their children with them and offer popcorn, candy and play structures in a festive atmosphere as they knowingly prevent food from reaching a starving population, including more than 1 million Palestinian children.

It is those same officials who, in addition to permitting the targeting and killing of humanitarian personnel by Israeli occupying forces, are waging an all-out assault on United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), as part of Israel's long-running propaganda campaign aimed at libelling UNRWA and undermining donor support, in an attempt to bring it to collapse, in continuation of their efforts to erase the Palestine refugee question.

The fact is that starving UNRWA of funds — on the basis of the alleged, still-unproven acts of a few, among tens of thousands of UNRWA staff members — means starving desperate Palestinian refugees and displaced families in Gaza of life-saving aid and depriving our refugees across the region of the Agency's indispensable assistance, gravely harming them and dangerously destabilizing the host countries and the region, as a whole. Moreover, doing so while simultaneously failing to pursue accountability for Israel's blatant war crimes and crimes against humanity exposes painful double standards. We therefore appeal to donor countries that have suspended funding to reconsider their decision and the massive impact it will have, compounding the collective punishment of the Palestinian people and their already-unbearable suffering.

Israel's use of starvation as a method of warfare has become one of the main tools in its genocidal arsenal against the Palestinian people. This is a fact that cannot be ignored and for which there must be immediate

accountability. What has been sown by Israel's extremist, far-right leaders within Israeli society that foments and enables such dehumanization and such war crimes and crimes against humanity must be stopped. The Council must uphold its responsibilities, in accordance with the Charter and with its resolutions on the Palestine question and on the protection of civilians, including resolution 2417 (2018), which calls upon all States to uphold international humanitarian law in conflict and ensure accountability for mass atrocity crimes.

No one should be complicit in this genocide. Those who know that their actions and omissions will deprive the Palestinian people of the means for survival, including access to food and water and those who fail to act to hold Israel accountable, even as it wages genocide, lose the moral high ground and all credibility.

Rectifying this abhorrent situation therefore requires three immediate steps: first, a ceasefire now — as millions in the streets are repeating every day for politicians in capitals to listen to them — in order to halt the Israeli aggression, stop the invasion of Rafah, stop the bloodshed and stop further displacement of the Palestinian civilian population; secondly, the unimpeded, accelerated delivery of humanitarian aid, at scale, throughout all of Gaza, including the north, and the entry of commercial goods; and thirdly, accountability measures for all the war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by Israel, imperilling the survival of our people and destroying the prospects for a just peace. Those accountability measures should include practical measures and punishment for all who are committing those crimes against the Palestinian people. Also, all Council members should stop sending weapons and ammunition, among other things, to Israel for it to continue committing these crimes against our people — as I said, destroying the prospects for a just peace that leads to the end of occupation and to the independence of the State of Palestine on the borders of 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital. We once again appeal to the Security Council to act, and to act forthwith.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Miller (Israel): I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's debate.

I am certain that there is not a single person in this Chamber that wishes to allow a child to go hungry. Not one of us desires any civilian to lack those basic

needs, and that is precisely Israel's stance. While combating Hamas — a terror group that adheres to no rules, regulations or norms other than their intent to murder and terrorize Jews — Israel is doing all it can to care for civilians, going above and beyond what is expected, let alone required. Israel is committed to improving the humanitarian situation in Gaza, working constantly to ensure the entry of humanitarian aid from numerous countries and United Nations agencies. Israel facilitates the entry of humanitarian aid, including food, water, medical supplies and humanitarian supplies, through both the Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings. Additionally, a humanitarian aid delivery channel via Jordan is operational, and more delivery channels are being formulated and discussed as we sit here today. Since Hamas's barbaric attack on 7 October, and despite that atrocity, Israel has facilitated the delivery of 254,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid, including shelter, equipment, water, medical supplies and 165,000 tons of food.

Israel has been clear in its policies. There is absolutely no limit to the amount of humanitarian aid that can be sent to the civilian population of Gaza. And Israel continues to coordinate the transfer of aid, in accordance with humanitarian organizations' requests and the operational conditions in the field. Since the beginning of 2024, the majority of aid requests were approved, 83 per cent of coordinated movements to facilitate aid were approved and 16 per cent were denied, owing to the imminent security risks that the shipments posed, should they end up in the hands of Hamas terrorists. Of the approved coordinated movements, 18 per cent were either not carried out or cancelled by the coordinating organizations themselves. These are the facts. No one can claim otherwise. Thanks to Israel's efforts, and despite the continued attacks by Hamas, 20 bakeries are fully operational throughout Gaza. That is made possible through the entry of large quantities of flour, daily shipments of cooking gas and the supply of diesel fuel for generators. Those bakeries produce over 2 million pita breads per day.

If we are truly interested in improving the situation and helping those who suffer, we must address what is truly hampering further advancements. The claims made today by some of the briefers neglected to address fully the two true obstacles to both peace and stability and to the prosperity of Gazans themselves. Some of the briefers' claims are intended to divert the focus from an ongoing failure in handling and managing

the distribution of aid to those in need, and serve to propagate Hamas's lies. The limitations on the quantity and pace of aid are dependent on the capacity of the United Nations and other agencies to receive, store and distribute the assistance efficiently. In recent days, more than 508 trucks have been waiting on the Gazan side of the Kerem Shalom and Rafah crossings. It is not Israel that is holding up these trucks. They have already been approved. So where is the United Nations and its aid agencies? How can it be that Israel is libelously held responsible for a situation that is clearly the fault of the United Nations? The conduct of the United Nations in the field must be streamlined, and humanitarian aid must be distributed more effectively. That is the solution.

Israel is committed to improving the humanitarian situation in the northern part of Gaza as well. Accordingly, yesterday, Israel permitted and facilitated the airdrop of 64 Jordanian and French food packages throughout northern Gaza. The United Nations, on the other hand, has refused to deliver aid to that area. The decision by United Nations agencies to suspend the distribution of aid to northern Gaza is not only counterproductive but harmful to the Palestinian civilian population, and it is also used as yet another way to demonize Israel. That is not how to go about improving the humanitarian situation.

Israel calls for the work of the United Nations agencies to be optimized so as to improve the reception and distribution of the aid within the Gaza Strip. That is the only way to ensure the overall improvement of the humanitarian situation. The problem of aid diversion within Gaza must not and cannot be neglected, nor should the theft and looting by Hamas be ignored. Humanitarian corridors, water lines and communications infrastructure have come under attack by Hamas, yet not once are these blatant aggressions addressed in this Council.

For decades, Israel has warned about Hamas's entrenchment in Gaza. Sadly, we have been widely ignored by the international community, and the Council continues to do so now. It is vital and long overdue for the Security Council to speak out and condemn Hamas's use of human shields and its building of tunnels under civilian infrastructure. It is also vital that the Council address Hamas's systematic diversion of humanitarian aid intended for the Palestinian people and act to prevent it. Israel will continue to do everything in its power to ensure that the aid delivered via the Rafah crossing and Kerem Shalom is not seized and exploited for terror.

While humanitarian aid continues to enter Gaza, 134 hostages still have not come out. Hamas continues to hold children, women, men and the elderly in their dark terror tunnels. However, while this Council is so keen to focus solely on the protection of Gazan civilians in this conflict, our hostages are hardly an afterthought. Israel is still waiting for the United Nations to dedicate a meeting to the protection of Israeli hostages in armed conflict. Tragically, knowing the Council, we may be waiting for a very long time. Nevertheless, we will not be silent, nor will we be idle. Israel will continue to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all our hostages, and we call upon the Council to do everything in its power to ensure their safety and well-being.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Tunisia.

Mr. Ladeb (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): I am honoured to deliver this statement on behalf of the Group of Arab States.

At the outset, I would like to thank your delegation, Madam President, and the delegations of Algeria, Switzerland and Slovenia for taking the initiative to convene this important meeting at this critical juncture, as signs of famine engulf the Gaza Strip. I also thank the briefers for their statements, which, unfortunately, reflected the gravity of the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people in Gaza, in particular the state of hunger, which has reached unprecedented levels and threatens to lead to a humanitarian catastrophe.

Regrettably, we meet once again against the backdrop of the continued humanitarian tragedy in Gaza, owing to the international community's inability to establish an immediate ceasefire and the occupation forces' insistence on continuing to carry out their plans and deepen the suffering of the Palestinian people. For five months, Palestinians have been subjected to various forms of aggression, abuse and genocide — not least starvation and the denial of humanitarian assistance, food, medicine and water.

According to the most recent statistics and reports published by the United Nations and humanitarian organizations, hunger and malnutrition are widespread in the Gaza Strip, causing many deaths, especially among children, the sick and the elderly. Moreover, the people there have been compelled to eat animal feed and plants. Meanwhile, hundreds of trucks loaded with humanitarian aid are backed up at the crossings, unable

to enter the Gaza Strip to save the lives of more than 2 million Palestinians, as the occupation forces target those trucks and prevent them from entering the Strip.

Despite that catastrophic situation, officials of the occupying Government continue to repeat their threats of banning humanitarian assistance, tightening the blockade measures that have led to starvation, carrying on a silent genocide against the Palestinian people and depriving them of any means of survival, in flagrant violation of human rights and international humanitarian law. The international community and the Security Council cannot remain silent about the war crimes and crimes of genocide being committed against the Palestinian people by waging relentless destructive war on them and by siege and starvation or forced displacement. All of that is condemned and rejected by Security Council resolutions and international humanitarian law. The people who are the victims — the injured, displaced and threatened — are not mere numbers that we repeat at meeting after meeting. They are lives that are being ended, tragedies that are getting sadder and misery that is growing worse. They are proof of the failure of the international community and specifically of the Security Council.

I will not ask when the Council will take action and assume its responsibility without political considerations, or how many Palestinians have to die, or a number of other questions to which there have so far been no answers. I will say that what is happening before the eyes of the world amid a suspicious silence is a source of unprecedented shame that cannot continue, regardless of any justifications and excuses. It is impossible to accept that the occupying Government can continue to flout standards of international legitimacy and commit systematic genocide against the Palestinian people without accountability.

The Arab Group categorically rejects the ongoing crime and demands that the Security Council assume its responsibility and ensure that adequate humanitarian assistance can enter Gaza unobstructed, in order to save the Palestinian people and end their suffering. In that context, the Group of Arab States reiterates the importance of establishing an immediate ceasefire, preventing the practices and plans that result in forced displacement and providing international protection for the Palestinians throughout the Palestinian occupied territory. We reiterate that the Security Council must address the occupying authority's plan to invade Rafah, which would be a humanitarian disaster for

the more than 1.5 million Palestinians in the southern Gaza Strip. We also reiterate our full support for the efforts of Ms. Sigrid Kaag, the Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza, and all the humanitarian agencies and relief workers. We stress the importance of implementing a humanitarian aid mechanism for Gaza presided over by Ms. Kaag, as mandated in resolution 2720 (2023), in order to increase the humanitarian assistance and alleviate the disastrous situation currently prevailing in the Gaza Strip.

The Group of Arab States emphasizes the pivotal role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). We also reject any attempts to expand Ms. Kaag's mandate to the detriment of the mandate of UNRWA, as defined in General Assembly resolution 302 (IV). In the same context, we condemn all attempts by the occupying authorities to target, dismantle and close UNRWA in the service of its plans for the genocide of the Palestinian people. We call on the donor countries that have suspended their funding for the Agency to rescind their decision and take urgent measures to provide UNRWA with adequate and sustained funding, in order to avert an unprecedented humanitarian disaster for the more than 2 million Palestinians in Gaza who depend on the Agency's assistance for their survival.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Pakistan.

Mr. Jadoon (Pakistan): I thank you, Madam President, along with the delegations of Algeria, Slovenia and Switzerland, for convening this meeting. We also thank the representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for their briefings.

Pakistan's Permanent Representative is currently acting as interim Chair of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Group in the Permanent Representative of Mauritania's absence. While I am making this statement today in my national capacity, our delegation will be coordinating the OIC Group for the next few weeks.

The prevalence of food insecurity worldwide has been severely exacerbated in the wake of the coronavirus disease pandemic and the challenges posed by geopolitical disputes, conflicts and climate change. In Gaza, the monumental food-security risks have reached a point that is unparalleled in recent

history. Israel's ongoing five-month genocidal military campaign in Gaza has killed 30,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and displaced an entire population of 2.3 million. According to United Nations experts, a famine is imminent. Half a million people in Gaza already face starvation, and 2.3 million are experiencing acute food shortages. While levelling Gaza's cities, Israel's forces have also brazenly destroyed agricultural land and Gaza's fishing fleet. The chilling letter last week from the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) noted that

“the Agency has reached breaking point, with Israel's repeated calls to dismantle UNRWA and the freezing of funding by donors at a time of unprecedented humanitarian needs in Gaza”.

Obstructing UNRWA's mandate or defunding its operations will have further disastrous consequences for the traumatized people of Gaza and will contribute to the collective punishment imposed on them by Israel. Israel's indiscriminate killing of civilians, destruction of civilian objects that are indispensable for human survival and use of starvation as a weapon of war are gross violations of international humanitarian law, including, plausibly, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. In open defiance of international law and the collective will of the international community, Israel is now preparing for a ground offensive in Rafah, which will further intensify the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza. It also risks widening the conflict further. Our immediate efforts must therefore focus on the following.

First, we must secure a complete and durable ceasefire without any conditions. The Security Council can no longer defer the demands for a ceasefire in the fragile hope of an agreement from the confidential talks. Israel's planned offensive in Rafah must be stopped.

Secondly, the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice to provide urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance for the people in Gaza, among other things, are binding international obligations, and their implementation can and must be enforced. The demonization of UNRWA and the United Nations must be halted. All the donors that have suspended support to UNRWA should reverse their decisions, and all others should expand their assistance. All of the avenues of aid delivery and supply chains must be open and utilized.

Thirdly, the Security Council must demand that the Israeli occupation forces immediately withdraw from Gaza and lift the 17-year blockade.

Fourthly, we must consider deploying an impartial international mechanism for the protection of Palestinian civilians in Gaza and the West Bank and to ensure unimpeded humanitarian assistance and subsequent reconstruction support for them. The options offered by the Secretary-General should be reviewed in that context.

Pakistan will work through the OIC, in cooperation with the Group of Arab States, to scale up the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza and explore additional options for alleviating the imminent famine situation. The Security Council must play its part in ensuring that the conditions are in place for an unimpeded flow of life-saving supplies, including deliveries of food.

The tragedy that we are witnessing in Gaza is in some measure a consequence of the Security Council's failure to secure the implementation of its own resolutions and uphold the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination. The Security Council must ensure that the legitimate struggle for self-determination and freedom of the Palestinian people, and indeed of all peoples struggling to liberate themselves from foreign occupation, receives the unequivocal support envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

Before adjourning this meeting — and even as we end on this sombre note — as this is the last scheduled meeting of the Security Council for the month of February, I would like to express the sincere appreciation of the delegation of Guyana to the members of the Council and to the Secretariat for all the support they have given us.

It has indeed been a busy month, and one in which we rallied to achieve a consensus on several important issues within our purview. We could not have done it without the hard work, support and positive contributions of every delegation and the representatives of the Secretariat, including the technical support team, the conference service officers, interpreters, verbatim reporters and security staff.

As we end our presidency, I know I speak on behalf of the Council in wishing the delegation of Japan all the best in the month of March.

The meeting rose at 5.30 p.m.