

Middle East

ICRC: “We are on the brink of collapse”

Further escalation in Gaza will claim incredible human toll

Interview with ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric Egger conducted by Gordana Mijuk (NZZ am Sonntag)



Mirjana Spoljaric Egger.
(Photo www.icrc.org)

NZZ am Sonntag: Israel has begun its ground offensive in Gaza. What does this mean for the civilian population?

Mirjana Spoljaric Egger: More than two million civilians are trapped and suffering

in Gaza. They are not safe anywhere, receive little humanitarian aid and the fighting is getting closer and closer. Hundreds of thousands are still in the northern part of the Gaza Strip. There have been calls for evacuation, but the attacking forces must do everything they can to avoid the loss of civilian lives and property. We know from experience that in urban fighting, the civilian population and civilian infrastructure bear the brunt of the conflict. The parties must put humanity first and prevent Gaza from becoming a single field of rubble. The population of Gaza must be protected. The hostages in the hands of the groups in Gaza must be released and treated with humanity until then.

Have you been in contact with your staff in Gaza since the start of the offensive?

We are currently struggling to reach our team in Gaza and are very concerned for their safety and the safety of all civilians in the area where hostilities continue. Without information, people don't know where to go for safety. Power cuts and communications blackouts are preventing humanitarian and medical personnel from working safely and effectively.

The fight against Hamas is likely to take a long time. The population should remain in the south for all that time. How is that supposed to work?



6 November 2023. Rafah, on the southern border of the Gaza Strip. Palestinian children in front of the destroyed house of the Barhoum family after an Israeli bombardment.
(Photo KEYSTONE/DPA/Abed Rahim Khatib)

The Israeli authorities' order to evacuate the north of the Gaza Strip without ensuring basic supplies of shelter, food, water, and medical care. This jeopardises the lives of over a million people. The ongoing siege is making large-scale humanitarian operations, including those of the ICRC, almost impossible. My colleagues on the ground tell me that families, children, women, elderly people are walking dozens of kilometres to reach “safe” areas, as they have been instructed to do. Many families are now living on the streets, without a roof over their heads, without access to water. No toilets, no blankets, no mattresses, no hygiene kits. And without access to information about what is happening.

Will the ground offensive jeopardise the liberation and the lives of the hostages?

When cities become battlefields, the civilian population in Gaza, including the hostages, suffers the most from the conflict.

What needs to be done?

* *Mirjana Spoljaric Egger*, Swiss diplomat, 51, took over the presidency of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in October 2022. Since 2018, she has been Deputy Secretary General and Deputy Administrator at the UN Development Programme, where she was

responsible for Europe. She previously held various positions at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Spoljaric Egger studied philosophy, economics and International Law in Basel and Geneva. She is married and mother of two children.

Firstly, all parties must abide by *International Humanitarian Law*. We urgently need to be able to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza in an organised way. And we urgently need – I cannot emphasise this enough – the necessary security guarantees and the necessary space for our teams so that we can reach the people. At present, this is only the case to a limited extent.

This week, the UN Security Council failed to decide on so-called humanitarian pauses. You are on the ground in New York. How did you experience this?

Yes, I've been here for a few days. I've known the UN for several decades. I've followed many debates like this, but I've rarely felt as dejected as I do now. It's terrible. If the situation continues to escalate, the human toll will be incredible. On all sides. I hope the international community is not prepared to accept these victims.

Israel is defending itself with its bombing raids, but it is also killing thousands of civilians. Is Israel breaking International Law?

International Law protects civilians, protects infrastructure. Hospitals are particularly protected because people who are uninvolved seek refuge there. Cutting off the civilian population from food, drinking water, electricity and petrol is not compatible with International Law, and the high casualty figures and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure raise serious questions. But it is equally incompatible for civilians to be attacked and taken hostage.

The conflict is spiralling out of control.

If both sides do not respect International Humanitarian Law, enmity on both sides increases. And with each passing day, the possibility of finding a way back to dialogue and a political solution dwindles. At the ICRC, we try to remind everyone to minimise civilian casualties. But we must try not only to minimise human suffering, but also to preserve a minimal space in which an agreement can be reached, not by military means, but through political talks. We must not accept absolute enmity or even dehumanisation of the other side. Respect for the humanity of others and the preservation of International Humanitarian Law can pave the way for sustainable peace.

On Friday [27 October], the Israeli military declared that Hamas is misusing hospitals



5 November 2023, Gaza, Palestine. In this video picture, people search through the debris of residential buildings after an Israeli attack. (Picture KEYSTONE/SPUTNIK)

and the bunkers beneath them as command centres.

We have no information about this. Our position is that hospitals should be places of refuge for the sick and wounded, never places of military activity. Death and destruction in medical facilities are abhorrent.

How is the ICRC organised on the ground in Gaza?

We were able to send an additional team of war surgeons and specialists in water and weapons contamination to Gaza on Friday. They will support our people on the ground who have been there before and have stayed the whole time. Together they are about 140 people.

What are your priorities?

We are focussing on the hospitals first. We were able to bring in a large number of war surgery kits on Friday night. Each kit allows the doctors to operate on several hundred people. But what the hospitals urgently need now is electricity and clean water. Otherwise, the healthcare system will collapse for good. We are already on the brink of collapse. Without electricity and water, these institutions will no longer be able to function.

And it doesn't look like diesel is coming into the country.

No. We need fuel now to ensure that the thousands of injured people don't die because they can't be treated.

You were in contact with your people on the ground until Friday. What are they saying?

The situation in Gaza is unbearably bad. There are unprecedented numbers of victims in such a short space of time. A massive destruction of in-

infrastructure. It is becoming increasingly impossible for the population to get to safety, to find food, to find water. The water system has collapsed, the sewage system no longer works. This could lead to new disasters such as cholera. We are indescribably worried. And it is hard to bear for ICRC representatives, because we could help more extensively. However, for various reasons, such as the intensity of the fighting, this is not fully possible.

You are talking to Hamas. The ICRC always talks to all sides in a conflict. But by doing so, you are putting all sides on the same level. Representatives of democratically elected countries and terrorists. Isn't that problematic?

We talk to around 300 armed groups of all kinds and formations worldwide. We talk to all states and other actors that can have an influence on armed groups or belligerent states. Our neutrality is guided by the *International Humanitarian Law*, and this is our compass. The *Geneva Convention* protects all victims of war, regardless of which side of the front they are on. Our role is to remind all warring parties who have an impact on the well-being of victims of their legal obligations. International Humanitarian Law is explicit in that its obligations do not grant political recognition to the parties. We are independent of political considerations. We try to protect civilian victims in the best possible way, we are committed to ensuring that prisoners are treated appropriately. But we cannot demand enforcement. This means that we are always dependent on the parties around us being able to reach an agreement.

They often don't.

We always maintain a dialogue when it seems hopeless. In other words, there is always a minimum guarantee of humanitarian aid. And all parties need this guarantee sooner or later. Every peace dialogue necessarily begins with humanitarian steps. The first step is always a humanitarian ceasefire.

This conflict is extremely charged. Antonio Guterres also had to learn that this week. He said in a speech that the Hamas attack did not happen in a vacuum. Israel's UN ambassador immediately demanded his resignation. What does this episode reflect?

I am in close dialogue with the UN Secretary-General, and we agree on one thing. We are do-

ing what is in our respective power and part of our respective mandates to achieve humanitarian access for the population that is now suffering incredible hardship.

You recently wrote in an opinion piece in the New York Times that neutrality, including that of the ICRC, is under pressure. Is it still possible to be neutral today?

It is part of the most natural reflex to take sides in a conflict. And because the international community recognises these reflexes, the ICRC was founded. An organisation that never takes sides under any circumstances. We are regularly criticised for this neutrality, but without this neutrality we would not be the ICRC and would not be able to do the things that this neutrality enables us to do.

Why is this conflict so polarising?

It's a long-lasting conflict, it's been going on since 1948, its roots go back even further. It's a situation that doesn't seem to be resolvable by political means. At the same time, we are now seeing once again in this escalation that a solution by military means is also very expensive, if not impossible. If International Law is not respected and human suffering is generated, it becomes more difficult to reach a political solution or return to the negotiating table. The traumas become less and less surmountable the longer division prevails. But we cannot give up.

The political process for peace has been dead for years. Could the catastrophic events trigger new negotiations?

The more the parties honour their obligations under International Humanitarian Law, the greater the likelihood that they will want to return to the negotiating table. We have an important task to fulfil here: to remind the parties every day of what their obligations are. Now, it's about being able to support the release of the hostages, that we get access to the prisoners on the Israeli side and that we can provide humanitarian aid.

The ICRC was involved in the release of the four hostages. What was its role?

When such hostage-takings happen, we immediately contact all parties. Including with the party of the hostage-takers. We demand humanitarian access to the hostages and their unconditional

release. We are also in contact with the parties who are negotiating when and where hostages can be released. Once these negotiations have reached the point where the hostages are released, we are usually involved. The handover must be carried out by a neutral organisation that has the trust of all sides and is completely confidential.

Does the ICRC have direct access to the hostages?

We are demanding direct access and are in contact with Hamas. But unfortunately, there has been no breakthrough yet.

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