

"Gaza is a hotbed of human rights violations"

Interview with Philippe Lazzarini (UNRWA) conducted by Guy Mettan***



Guy Mettan.
(Picture ma)

On Friday, 22 August, the United Nations declared a state of famine in Gaza, where more than half a million people are in a "catastrophic" situation. The helpless majority of the world's population is outraged, while the West remains inactive.

Trapped in their guilt over the Holocaust, Western powers remain passive in the face of Israeli attacks, even though a new genocide is underway and a confidential report by the Israeli army confirms that 83% of the 62,000 people killed in Gaza are innocent civilians.



Swiss national Philippe Lazzarini has been head of the UNRWA aid organisation since 2020. (Picture UN Photo)

Philippe Lazzarini, who will remain head of UNRWA for another seven months, has been leading the UN organisation responsible for distributing aid to the Palestinians for ten years. The Swiss national, born in La Chaux-de-Fonds to an Italian father and a Swiss-German mother, lives with his family in Geneva. He has no intention of remaining silent or inactive during his remaining time in office. He reflects on this humanitarian cata-

strophe and its consequences for the inhabitants of Gaza, but also for the future of humanitarian law and human rights.

* * *

Guy Mettan: You are very critical of the "Gaza Humanitarian Foundation" set up by the Americans to help the inhabitants of Gaza. You have described the employees of this foundation, which was briefly registered in the Geneva commercial register, as mercenaries. Isn't that a bit exaggerated?

Philippe Lazzarini: They make no secret of it! The employees of the "Gaza Humanitarian Foundation" (GHF) are highly paid former military personnel who come to Gaza to carry out so-called humanitarian work without knowing what humanitarian aid means. The aim of this organisation was to force the Palestinian population in the north and centre of the Gaza Strip to move to the south in order to feed themselves. The number of local distribution centres was reduced from 400 to just a few, forcing the most vulnerable to move. How can one speak of humanitarian aid when the wounded, the disabled, the sick, children and mothers are forced to walk for miles to find food? Moreover, for most people, this has become a deadly trap. Since this measure was introduced in May last year, more than 1,500 people have been killed while searching for food because these centres are located right next to Israeli military positions and the army fires on the crowds at the slightest opportunity.

The Israeli army's goal, under the pretext of preventing any redirection of aid to Hamas, is to get rid of the aid organisation set up and supported by the entire international community and re-

* born 1964) is a Swiss national with 40 years of professional experience, including senior positions at the United Nations, in the private sector and at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). He has extensive experience in humanitarian aid and international coordination in conflict and post-conflict areas at senior level. On 18 March 2020, Philippe Lazzarini was appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, as Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Commissioner-General of the Uni-

ted Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). His term of office ends in March 2026.

**Guy Mettan (1956) is a political scientist, freelance journalist and author. He began his journalistic career in 1980 at the Tribune de Genève, where he was director and editor-in-chief from 1992 to 1998. From 1997 to 2020, he was director of the «Swiss Press Club» in Geneva. He has been a member of the Grand Council of Geneva for 25 years.

place it with a private company founded by them with American support. This focus on Hamas is quite surprising, as this argument suddenly emerged even though it had never been raised by the Israeli authorities with the UN or the American authorities before this spring. One gets the impression that this is a fig leaf intended to conceal Israel's political and military objectives.

Furthermore, since the replacement of UNRWA by the GHF, the population in northern Gaza has been facing famine, as the UN has just declared. According to international standards, there are five stages before the state of famine is reached. This final stage has now been reached in the north and is likely to be reached in September in the centre and south, where most of the population lives.

This is the result of the FHG and its policies, even though it is one of the easiest famines to combat, as a simple political decision is enough to combat it by allowing the thousands of trucks carrying food that have gathered at the gates of the enclave to enter. The starving population of Gaza is less than 30 minutes away from hundreds of well-stocked shops and food centres.

The LinkedIn profile of GHF Director General John Acree shows that he has in fact spent his entire career at USAID working with the US military. Have you met him?

No, I don't know him. The GHF is run by two men. The second, the executive chairman, is Pastor Johnnie Moore, an American businessman and reverend who is messianic and blindly pro-Israel.

"A terrible and cynical joke"

By declaring a famine, isn't the UN running the risk of playing into the hands of the GHF, which could use this to justify evacuating the Palestinians in order to better distribute its food?

Famine is not eliminated by evacuating people, as the southern Gaza Strip also suffers from food shortages. Since the beginning of the war, Israel has been continuously moving the population back and forth. Since October 2023, every resident of Gaza has been relocated an average of two to three times.

Furthermore, it is a terrible and cynical joke to pretend to want to settle Palestinians in South Sudan, when this country is one of the poorest in the world, ravaged by war, underdeveloped due to decades of underinvestment, and culturally unsuitable, as its population is Christian or an-



UNRWA in Gaza. (Picture UNRWA)

imist. The same applies to Libya, whose name has also been mentioned. How would hundreds of thousands of Muslim Palestinians be integrated into South Sudan? Would people be arrested and deported thousands of kilometres from their homes? This cannot be taken seriously; it is complete dystopia.

How do you explain this passivity on the part of the West, and Europe in particular, even though Europe has already witnessed genocide without expressing outrage, and even though it repeatedly proclaims human rights as its new gospel?

Human rights should be our benchmark. The order created after the Second World War, the multilateral system, the *Geneva Conventions* – all of this is being called into question by a policy that is perceived outside Europe as a double standard. The Global South now tends to view human rights and international law as the result of the law of the strongest. In its eyes, these do not apply equally to all, or not at all in Palestine, where we have seen cycles of impunity that have only led to a renewed increase in systematic and flagrant violations of these rights.

"A concentration of all possible human rights violations"

In Gaza, we have seen everything: the military use of hunger, forced displacement, the destruction of the health system, the destruction of the education system and various places of worship – in other words, a concentration of all possible human rights violations. And all this has happened and continues to happen before our very eyes, without interruption. No one can say they didn't know.

It is also a context in which narratives clash. There is a climate of propaganda, but also of absolute censorship, as all international media have been banned in Gaza since day one. This makes it possible, if something does not suit the occupier, to say that the information has been

distorted, without anyone being able to contradict this, as access to the area is prohibited. We ourselves have been the subject of all kinds of accusations. But one would only have to let the media into Gaza to see the terrible reality and the futility of the accusations against us.

How can you prove that UNRWA is not in cahoots with Hamas, as you are so often accused of being?

Since the beginning of the war, the message has been that Gaza is synonymous with Hamas. The entire population is Hamas. All deaths in Gaza are justified by the fact that the victims were members of Hamas. We saw this two weeks ago with the murder of the famous *Al Jazeera* journalist *Anas al-Sharif*, who was allegedly working for Hamas. [Meanwhile, on Monday, 25 August, five more journalists were killed for the same reasons, *editor's note*] Everything is justified under the label of Hamas.

Our agency has been accused of hiring employees who are members of Hamas, and that some were even involved in the brutal attack on Israel on 7 October. However, we conducted an independent investigation into each of these allegations, the results of which were published in July last year.

Of the 19 individuals accused – that is 19 out of 13,000 employees – 10 were cleared, while 9 others, several of whom were killed, were found to have potentially warranted investigation had the information concerning them been accessible. These individuals' contracts were terminated. All our donors and most of the UN Member States accepted these conclusions and resumed their support for UNRWA.

As a result, we were systematically accused of being infiltrated by Hamas. Israel named 500 names, then 1,000 names, then 3,000 names. Each time, these names were on lists, and Israel claimed to have evidence of their affiliation with Hamas. But it is not enough to put a name on a list to have evidence against that person. We have repeatedly asked the Israeli authorities and anyone who may have information whether they have any evidence that would justify an investigation. Each time, the answer has been negative.

No criminal investigation has ever been launched by the Israelis. For more than twenty years, UNRWA has been handing over the list of its employees to the host country, namely the

Palestinian State, and to the Israeli authorities. Neither of these two bodies has ever raised any concerns. I have reminded the Israeli Foreign Minister of this but have never received a reply. We remain available and are ready, both as the United Nations and as UNRWA, to launch an investigation as soon as a suspected case is reported to us.

Other UN agencies such as OCHA (*Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*) have also been targeted. Again, without evidence. The label "Hamas" is constantly used to discredit them. UNRWA is targeted because our organisation is a symbol of Palestine and its history and embodies the creation of a future Palestinian state. It also symbolises the right of return, which is crucial for Israel. For this reason, many Israeli politicians believe that our organisation must disappear.

In his film about UNRWA, Swiss filmmaker *Nicolas Wadimoff* expresses this issue very well. He interviewed a former Israeli politician from the extreme right who is leading a crusade to destroy our organisation. She explains her motives very well, which have nothing to do with Hamas, but with the right of Palestinians to return to their land.

And we must not forget that Hamas was supported at the time by the same Israeli government and the same extreme right wing that wanted to discredit and weaken the Palestinian Authority and the PLO to ensure that Israel had no credible partner for peace negotiations and thus prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. Netanyahu has said this publicly in speeches to his own party.

Genocidal behaviour

However, you refrain from using the word "genocide". Why?

I spoke of genocidal behaviour because the word genocide is a legal term that has not yet been confirmed by the *International Criminal Court* (ICC). There are all the signs that a genocide process is underway, as we have seen. The ICC has already taken preliminary measures, but it still has to examine the evidence, and we must wait for its verdict before the term genocide is legally valid and can be used to describe current events.

Incidentally, in addition to *Amnesty* and *Human Rights Watch*, ever more voices in Israel are speaking out about a genocide situation, such

as *B'Tselem*. For me, it is important to describe and record the suffering of the Palestinian people as accurately as possible. As our staff say: "We are neither alive nor dead, we are just walking corpses!" The cruel reality of life in Gaza cannot be described with an abstract legal term.

Rescuing the UNRWA archives

You mentioned the adventurous rescue of the UNRWA archives. Why was it so important to preserve them?

These archives represent the entire history, memory and identity of two million Palestinians, their families, their family trees, their expulsions since the Nakba, the catastrophe of 1946–1948. They are part of the future national heritage of the future Palestinian state.

Fortunately, they had not attracted any attention. We were able to get them out of Gaza at the beginning of the war in November 2023, when we had to evacuate our headquarters. And that was thanks to some of our staff who had made it their mission and vowed not to die before they had done so. We were able to store them in Rafah, where they were safe until the Israeli army attacked the city. I then wanted to negotiate with the Egyptians, but I thought that would take too long, so we decided to evacuate them box by box, hiding them in our armoured vehicles, which at that time were still allowed to travel to Jerusalem and from there to our new headquarters in Amman. Within a few weeks, they had been completely removed. Since then, they have been digitised and can no longer be destroyed.

Protecting the spirit of the law and the Geneva Conventions

Coming back to Switzerland, you said that Switzerland could do more. How?

Of course, Switzerland could do more. Many parliamentarians have taken at face value the propaganda of the pro-Israeli lobbies, which is the result of the extreme polarisation that this conflict is causing far beyond its region of origin. I am glad that Switzerland has maintained part of its subsidies and that the debates have been less dogmatic lately. Initially, the debate was not rational and did not reflect the humanitarian, im-

partial and independent Switzerland we are accustomed to.

Following the failure of the conference of the parties called for by the UN General Assembly, Switzerland could get back to work and ask the Assembly for a new mandate. It would be worthwhile, because there is so much at stake! The *Geneva Conventions* must apply everywhere, not just in Gaza. On the other hand, Gaza cannot be viewed as an isolated case, separate from the rest of the world. What is tolerated in Gaza sets a precedent that others will quickly claim for themselves.

We must prevent Gaza from becoming the new norm. That is the real challenge. I believe that a country like Switzerland, which has always seen itself as a guarantor of international law and humanitarian law, should be deeply concerned and take initiatives to protect the spirit of this law and the *Geneva Conventions*. In this sense, it could and should do more.

Now that there is talk of famine, I hope that Switzerland will reconsider its position and realise that tolerating an obvious famine will be seen as an indelible stain. I hope that UNRWA and other private and public organisations will once again be allowed to resume the delivery of food and medical aid without restrictions and that the necessary resources will be made available to them again.

No to "Hunger Games"!

Complimentary to the GHF?

If you consider the GHF to be an organisation that contributes to humanitarian aid and the distribution of essential goods, why not? We have always believed that we must work together and that no single organisation can solve all the problems of the Palestinians on its own. We need this complementarity. But we cannot work hand in hand with an organisation that cooperates with the military and allows people seeking its help to be shot down like rabbits. This man-hunt is tolerated, openly practised and encouraged by the GHF. When the GHF brings food, that's fine. But not when it plays Hunger Games in the process!

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")