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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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[As Delivered]

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

Allow me at the outset to acknowledge the killing of revered Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh as she covered events in Jenin on 11 May.

Her death brought Palestinians, and countless others around the world, together in grief and anger, while serving as another reminder of the devastating human cost of this conflict.

I send my deepest condolences to her family and reiterate the Secretary-General's condemnation of all attacks against journalists and his call for relevant authorities to carry out an independent and transparent investigation. Those responsible must be held to account.

Madam President,

Regrettably, recent weeks have been filled with the familiar pattern of daily violence, including armed clashes, settlement expansion, evictions, demolitions and seizures of Palestinian structures, as well as a deadly terrorist attack in Israel.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority's financial situation – compounded by the constraints of the occupation, the absence of serious Palestinian reforms and unclear prospects for donor support – is dire and requires urgent attention. Without meaningful policy steps on the part of Israel, bold reforms on the part of the PA and increased donor support, these economic challenges will continue.

In Gaza, efforts by the United Nations and international partners to improve Palestinian lives and measures by Israel to ease pressure and facilitate more economic activity have enabled the fragile ceasefire to continue. Keeping the calm, however, is neither enough nor sustainable – more needs to be done to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and lift Israeli closures, in line with UNSCR 1860 (2009).

The persistence of these conflict drivers, and the absence of real political will to change course, has empowered extremists and is eroding the perception among Palestinians and Israelis that a resolution of the conflict is achievable. These dynamics – combined with the financial crisis – are dangerously converging and intensifying.

While immediate steps to reverse negative trends and support the Palestinian people are essential, a better coordinated and strategic approach by the parties and the international community is needed. Economic relief must be expanded and made more sustainable. An agreed and updated regulatory framework for the Israeli - Palestinian economic relationship is not only

vital to bringing about meaningful economic dividends for the Palestinians but would add a tangible political perspective to these economic steps.

This approach, however, must be combined with political and security steps that address core conflict drivers and ultimately lead us towards an end to the occupation and the achievement of a negotiated two-State solution.

Madam President,

Daily violence continued throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

During the reporting period, ten Palestinians, including one woman and three children, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) during demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged attacks against Israelis, and other incidents, and 346 Palestinians, including five children, were injured. Israeli settlers and other civilians perpetrated 57 attacks against Palestinians resulting in one Palestinian child killed and 24 injuries and/or damage to Palestinian property.

In all, four Israeli civilians and one Israeli security personnel were killed and 22 civilians were injured, including five women and three children, and 20 ISF were injured by Palestinians in shooting and stabbing attacks, clashes, the throwing of stones or Molotov cocktails, and other incidents during the reporting period. In total, Palestinians perpetrated 80 attacks against Israeli civilians that caused injuries and/or damage to Israeli property.

On 29 April and 5 May, violent confrontations between ISF and Palestinians took place at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem, with ISF using physical force to disperse Palestinians. Some 44 Palestinians were injured.

On 29 April, armed Palestinians shot and killed an Israeli civilian guard in the settlement of Ariel. Israeli forces arrested two suspects on 30 April.

On 5 May, two Palestinians from the Jenin area, killed three Israeli civilians and wounded four others with axes in a terrorist attack in the Israeli city of Elad. ISF arrested the perpetrators on 8 May.

On 8 May, a 17-year-old Palestinian climbed a fence to enter the Israeli settlement of Tekoa, reportedly carrying a knife, and was shot and killed by a resident. Hamas later claimed him as a member.

The same day, ISF shot and killed a Palestinian man attempting to cross the security fence near Tulkarem.

On 11 May, ISF shot and killed a 16-year-old Palestinian in al-Bireh, where, according to eyewitnesses, some 30 Palestinian youths were throwing stones at ISF.

Following terrorist attacks in Israel over the past two months that killed 18 people, ISF have continued intensive search and arrest operations in the occupied West Bank, particularly around Jenin, which have led to clashes, including with armed Palestinian militants, in which many Palestinians were killed and injured.

In this context, on 30 April, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by ISF in the village of Azzun, near Qalqilya. The man reportedly threw a Molotov cocktail at the soldiers and, according to video, was shot in the back while running away.

On 11 May, journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh was shot and killed while covering an ISF operation in Jenin in which Palestinian militants exchanged fire with ISF. Another journalist was shot and injured in the same incident. Both were wearing press vests and helmets.

Scenes of violence during Abu Aqleh's funeral procession, where Israeli police entered the hospital and subsequently beat pallbearers and other mourners with batons, were deeply distressing and offensive, and were widely condemned.

On 15 May, the funeral of an 18-year-old Palestinian, who had died the previous day from injuries suffered on 22 April during clashes with ISF at the Holy Sites, also led to confrontations between Israeli police and Palestinians in East Jerusalem.

On 20 May, during a search operation in Jenin during which there was an exchange of fire, ISF shot and killed a 17-year-old Palestinian reportedly while he was throwing a Molotov cocktail.

On 24 May, ISF shot and killed a 16-year-old Palestinian and injured over 20 others in Nablus during clashes near Joseph's Tomb. ISF said it fired at a Palestinian who had thrown a Molotov cocktail at ISF and Jewish worshippers at the site.

Madam President,

Settler-related violence continued during the reporting period.

On 26 April, Israeli settlers erected a tent on private Palestinian land near the Ma'ale Adumim settlement. When asked to leave, the settlers attacked and injured four Palestinians, including a 68-year-old with multiple fractures.

During the reporting period, in eight separate incidents, Israeli settlers, accompanied by ISF, entered five Palestinian towns resulting in 57 Palestinians injured. In the town of Hares west of Salfit, a young Palestinian was injured by live ammunition, reportedly by one of the settlers, while two others were shot by ISF with rubber-coated metal bullets.

Madam President,

I reiterate that perpetrators of all acts of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.

There is no justification for acts of terrorism or violence against civilians. Such acts must clearly be condemned by all.

I also reiterate that security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Madam President,

On 22 May, the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court cancelled an order by Israeli police temporarily banning from the Holy Sites three Jewish Israelis who performed prayers there. The judge stated that his ruling did not "determine anything regarding freedom of worship" at the Holy Sites. Following an appeal by Israeli police, the Jerusalem District Court overturned the decision on 25 May. In her decision, the judge noted that the right to freedom of worship "is not absolute, and should be superseded by other interests, among them the safeguarding of public order."

In another worrying development, on 12 May, for the first time in some seven months, Israeli authorities advanced plans for over 4,000 housing units in settlements in Area C of the occupied West Bank, approximately one third in outlying locations. These include the retroactive approval of two outposts, illegal also under Israeli law.

On 28 April, Israel's Supreme Court rejected a petition against the construction of 31 settlement housing units in an apartment complex in Hebron. If built, these units would be the first new settlement construction in the city in nearly twenty years.

On 15 May, the Israeli Supreme Court rejected four petitions against a highly controversial plan to construct a cable car between West Jerusalem and the Old City, continuing worrying trends in and around Jerusalem.

I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and remain a substantial obstacle to peace.

I urge Israeli authorities to cease advancement of all settlement activity and refrain from actions that fuel instability and undermine the prospects for the establishment of a viable, contiguous Palestinian State.

Madam President,

Despite a notable reduction during Ramadan, Israeli authorities demolished, seized or forced owners to demolish 40 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 12 in occupied East Jerusalem, as well as two structures in Area A, displacing 98 Palestinians, including 50 children. The demolitions were carried out citing the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 25 April, the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court accepted the appeal of a Palestinian family against their pending eviction in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem, ordering the case to be reconsidered by Israeli authorities while an eviction freeze remains in place.

On 4 May, the Israeli High Court of Justice decided to allow implementation of eviction orders issued to 1,200 Palestinian residents, including 500 children, in Masafer Yatta, in the southern West Bank. In its ruling, the Court said that permanent structures in the area did not exist when it was declared a "firing zone" by the Israeli military in the 1980s – almost 40 years ago. The Palestinian residents dispute this claim.

I am deeply concerned by the potential implications of the High Court's ruling and the humanitarian toll on the communities in question if evictions orders are carried out.

I call on Israeli authorities to end the displacement and eviction of Palestinians in line with Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law and to approve plans that would enable Palestinians to build legally and address their development needs.

Madam President,

On 10 May, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) met in Brussels, with a focus on key economic files – including PA fiscal reforms, enhancing PA revenues and improved trade, water and energy supplies.

Madam President,

Turning to Gaza, the UN continues to deliver vital humanitarian and development assistance, as well as to make efforts towards further easing restrictions on the movement of people and goods into and out of the Strip. Plans are in place to support revitalization of Gaza's fishery sector, including facilitating entry of dual-use items under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism. Success of this initiative should pave the way for a further easing of restrictions, including in agriculture, industry and health sectors. To improve oncology services in Gaza and reduce the debt burden on the PA from medical referrals, the UN is leading preparations for a five-year operational plan for oncology, which will include prevention, treatment and palliative care.

Between 3 and 14 May, Israeli authorities closed the pedestrian Erez Crossing between Gaza and Israel except for humanitarian cases. The decision followed the firing of several rockets from Gaza towards Israel in April as well as incitement by senior Hamas leaders calling on Palestinians to carry out attacks against Israelis.

Madam President,

Turning to the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria continues to be generally maintained in a volatile environment, with continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement by the parties. This includes the 11 May firing by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) across the ceasefire line and the continued presence of Syrian armed forces in the area of separation. The parties must respect their obligations under the Agreement and prevent an escalation of the situation.

In Lebanon, parliamentary elections were held on 15 May. Local and international observers expressed some concern over incidents of vote-buying and electoral violence. The United Nations looks forward to the swift formation of a new Government to implement Lebanon's urgent recovery and reform agenda.

UNIFIL convened a tripartite meeting on 19 May with representatives of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the IDF. Major General Lázaro called on the parties to look forward to practical arrangements, including to mark points along the Blue Line as previously agreed.

Madam President,

In my last briefing to this Council, I raised concerns over the potential for violence during Ramadan but made clear that a serious escalation was avoidable. Owing to efforts by all parties,

a major outbreak of violence in fact was avoided. However, trends in the West Bank have deteriorated. As Jerusalem Day approaches on 29 May - with the planned provocative flag march through the Muslim quarter in the Old City - I again urge authorities to take wise decisions to minimize confrontations and frictions and the risk of more violence and escalation.

I reiterate that the status quo at Jerusalem's Holy Sites must be upheld and respected.

More broadly, Madam President, I am extremely concerned that current dynamics – particularly in the occupied West Bank - could spiral out of control at any time. I encourage leaders on both sides to make difficult, but critical, decisions that will take us back from the brink and help stabilize the situation.

The irresponsible and provocative language and incitement to violence must stop.

Positive Israeli economic measures towards the Palestinians are regularly undermined by parallel negative steps, such as settlement advancement, demolitions and continued violence.

At the same time, the dire fiscal and financial forecast facing the Palestinian Authority looms, amidst a lack of prospects for real institutional reform.

We must push beyond the paradigm of managing the conflict and move towards resolving it. There are tangible, ongoing arrangements that can be regularized and expanded immediately – if there is political will.

I urge, and remain actively engaged with, Israelis, Palestinians, regional States and the broader international community to take action that will lead us back to the path of negotiations, which will end the occupation and establish two States, in line with UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.

Thank you.