

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
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REMARKS TO SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE MIDDLE EAST

New York, 17 July 2024

[as delivered by Mr. Courtenay Rattray, Chef de Cabinet]

Mr. President, Excellencies,

I am pleased to deliver the Secretary-General's briefing on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

His remarks are as follows:

Last December, the hostilities in Gaza and Israel -- that have created appalling human suffering, physical destruction, and collective trauma -- led to my exceptional invocation of Article 99 of the United Nations Charter.

Seven months later, the war rages on.

Over 38,000 Palestinians have been reported killed according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza - - with some 87,000 injured and thousands missing -- many of whom are women and children.

Over 1,500 Israelis and foreign nationals have been reported killed according to Israeli sources -- with more than 7,000 injured and 125 hostages still held in Gaza.

The humanitarian support system in Gaza is close to total collapse.

There is a complete breakdown of public order.

And the spectre of further regional spillover is increasing by the day, as exchanges of fire across the Blue Line between Hizbullah and Israel continue.

Nothing can justify the horrific acts of terror committed by Hamas and other armed groups in Israel on 7 October.

And nothing can justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

Mr. President,

In recent weeks, Israeli military operations and fighting intensified across Gaza. Rockets continue to be launched by Palestinian armed groups from Gaza towards Israeli population centres.

Rafah is in ruins – and the Rafah crossing remains closed, further hampering humanitarian operations.

Almost two million people have been displaced– nearly the entire population of Gaza – and many of them multiple times.

Nowhere in Gaza is safe.

Meanwhile, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification partnership reports that almost half a million people face catastrophic levels of food insecurity.

Communicable diseases are on the rise.

Chokeholds on the fuel-supply have severely reduced access to water, sanitation, hygiene and health services.

The United Nations remains committed to delivering lifesaving aid in Gaza. But we face severe challenges and deadly risks.

Humanitarian convoys are frequently unable to collect and distribute lifesaving goods in safety – including from the crucial Karem Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing.

Attacks on humanitarian aid workers and shelters, as well as strikes on or near health and humanitarian facilities, continue.

Lawlessness and criminality are rampant.

The parties must fundamentally and urgently change their conduct to address these challenges.

The humanitarian notification system and other coordination mechanisms are not effective, resulting in delayed and aborted aid missions and the exposure of humanitarians to mortal risk.

The UN still does not have the necessary security equipment in Gaza to manage the extreme risks that our personnel face.

Despite ongoing dialogue with Israeli authorities and some improvements, much more is needed.

The entry of humanitarian aid at scale, and its delivery to all parts of Gaza, are essential to the survival and wellbeing of civilians.

We need consistent access through all crossing points and better access to those in need, wherever they are.

It is long past time for a safe enabling environment for effective humanitarian operations in Gaza, in line with international humanitarian law.

Mr. President,

As much of the world's attention is focused on Gaza, the occupied West Bank -- including East Jerusalem -- faces perilous conditions.

High levels of violence persist – including by Israeli security forces, settlers, and Palestinian armed groups.

Between 7 October 2023 and 17 July 2024, 557 Palestinians – including 138 children – were killed in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem; the vast majority were killed in the context of Israeli security operations, including during subsequent exchanges with Palestinian armed groups; these include 540 killed by Israeli forces, 10 by Israeli settlers, and seven where it remains unknown whether the perpetrators were Israeli forces or settlers.

During the same period, 22 Israelis, including nine members of Israeli forces, were killed by Palestinians in Israel and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Israeli measures are undermining the Palestinian Authority, crippling the Palestinian economy and driving instability.

This month, the Israeli security cabinet approved a series of punitive steps against the Palestinian Authority.

The steps reportedly include the legalization, under Israeli law, of five Israeli outposts in the occupied West Bank, the advancement of thousands of settlement housing units, and demolitions in parts of Area B in the occupied West Bank.

At the same time, the Israeli Finance Minister lifted the suspension of the transfer to the Palestinian Authority of partial clearance revenues. These revenues are collected by Israel on behalf of the Palestinians.

He also renewed, for four months, the letter of indemnity for Israeli correspondent banking with Palestinian banks.

Both of these measures are critical for Palestinian fiscal stability.

But, once again, much more is required.

Mr. President,

Recent developments are driving a stake through the heart of any prospect for a two-State solution.

The geography of the occupied West Bank is steadily being altered through Israeli administrative and legal steps.

The seizure of large land parcels in strategic areas and changes to planning, land management and governance are expected to significantly accelerate settlement expansion.

These changes include the issuance of two military orders at the end of May. These orders transferred powers to, and appointed, a civilian deputy in Israel's Civil Administration, which is alarming.

This move is another significant advance in the ongoing transfer of authority over many aspects of daily life in the occupied West Bank, and a further step towards extending Israeli sovereignty over this occupied territory.

If left unaddressed, these measures risk causing irreparable damage.

Mr. President,

We must change course.

All settlement activity must cease immediately. Israeli settlements are a flagrant violation of international law and a key obstacle to peace.

The violence must end, and the perpetrators of the violence must be swiftly brought to justice.

Israel must ensure the safety and security of the Palestinian population.

Mr. President,

The United Nations is sparing no effort to deliver humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza and to secure the release of all hostages held by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups. Those being held hostage have been suffering along with their families for far too long.

We need an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

With the tireless efforts of Egypt, Qatar and the United States, negotiations to formulate a deal for the release of the hostages and a ceasefire continue with some reported progress.

The parties must reach such a deal now.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is a moral stain on us all.

International humanitarian law must be respected – at all times and by all parties.

We must intensify efforts to increase humanitarian aid delivery. International support to these efforts is critical, particularly for the essential work of UNRWA.

Amid continued reports of serious abuses against Palestinians in Israeli custody, I reiterate that all detainees must be treated humanely and those held without lawful cause must be released.

And this terrible war must end.

We must refocus on finding a political solution that will end the occupation and resolve the conflict in line with international law, and relevant United Nations resolutions.

Ensuring that governance is restored in Gaza under a single, legitimate Palestinian government is essential to that effort.

Support to the Palestinian Authority is critical. Its institutions must be strengthened so that it is prepared to govern and lead recovery and reconstruction efforts in Gaza.

All those with influence must take the urgent steps needed to enable the parties to re-engage on the long-delayed political path towards ending the occupation and resolving the conflict. This must occur in line with international law, relevant UN resolutions and bilateral agreements in pursuit of the vision of two States – Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State – living side by side in peace and security within secure and recognized borders, on the basis of the pre-1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both.

The United Nations will continue to support all such efforts.

Mr. President, this concludes the remarks of the Secretary-General.

Thank you.

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