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

18 January 2023

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

As a new year begins, a dangerous cycle of violence persists on the ground, amidst increased political tension and a stalled peace process.

The violent trends that dominated the last months of 2022 continue to take a devastating human toll. The violence must stop. Preventing more loss of life and reversing negative trends on the ground must be our collective priority. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the ultimate goal: to end the occupation, resolve the conflict and realize a two-State solution.

Since my last briefing, a new Israeli Government has been sworn in. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Prime Minister Netanyahu, and I look forward to continuing to work closely with the Government of Israel.

Despite the complex challenges, I reiterate the United Nations commitment to supporting Israelis and Palestinians to achieve a sustainable peace. The United Nations and its partners have been, and continue to be, engaged in efforts to improve the situation on the ground.

I urge all sides to reduce tensions and take concrete steps towards establishing a political horizon in line with the priorities I outlined to this Council in November.

Mister President,

In total, between 8 December and 13 January, 14 Palestinians, including five children, were killed and 117 Palestinians, including three women and 18 children, were injured by Israeli security forces during demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged attacks against Israelis, and other incidents. Israeli settlers or other civilians perpetrated 63 attacks against Palestinians resulting in 28 injuries, including six children, and/or damage to Palestinian property.

According to Israeli sources, five Israeli civilians, including three women, and four Israeli security forces personnel were injured by Palestinians in attacks, clashes, the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails, and other incidents. In total, Palestinians perpetrated some 89 attacks against Israeli civilians resulting in injuries and/or damage to Israeli property, 57 of which were stone-throwing incidents.

A high proportion of Palestinian casualties occurred during Israeli search-and-arrest operations, including in Area A of the occupied West Bank – many of which included armed exchanges. In total, such operations resulted in ten Palestinian fatalities, including three children, and 86 injuries, as well as injury to three members of the Israeli security forces during the reporting period.

Casualties remained concentrated in the northern West Bank, particularly in Jenin Governorate. These included three Palestinians killed on 8 December during a search-and-arrest operation that involved an exchange of fire between Palestinians and Israeli security forces; a 15-year-old girl who was killed during a search-and-arrest operation in Jenin Refugee Camp on 11 December; two Palestinians, including a 17-year-old boy, killed in an exchange of fire with Israeli security forces in the context of a punitive demolition in Kafr Dan village, on 2 January; and, finally, on 12 January, two Palestinians killed during a military operation in Qabatiya, in which armed exchanges were reported.

Violence continued to affect children, with a total of five Palestinian children killed during the reporting period. On 8 December, Israeli security forces shot and killed a 16-year-old boy in Aboud community, near Ramallah, as he and four others were apparently preparing to throw stones and paint at Israeli vehicles. On 3 January, a 15-year-old boy was killed by Israeli security forces in ad-Duheisha Refugee Camp in Bethlehem; Palestinians threw stones and Molotov cocktails towards Israeli security forces, and the boy was reportedly lighting a Molotov Cocktail at the time he was shot. On 5 January, Israeli security forces shot and killed a 16-year-old Palestinian during an arrest operation in Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus. The boy was apparently caught in an armed exchange between Israeli security forces and armed Palestinians.

Settler-related violence also continued during the reporting period.

On 16 December, a 16-year-old Palestinian boy was assaulted and injured when a group of settlers, reportedly from Yitzhar settlement, entered Madama village near Nablus and attacked Palestinian houses and vehicles with stones.

On 11 January, an 18-year-old Palestinian stabbed and injured an Israeli civilian near the settlement outpost of Havat Yehuda, in the South Hebron Hills. The Palestinian was subsequently shot and killed by an armed Israeli.

On 13 January, a group of Israeli settlers attacked a group of Palestinians and foreign nationals who were hiking near Jericho, according to eyewitness accounts and video footage from the incident. Two women were reportedly injured.

Mister President,

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

Security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

I am particularly appalled that children continue to be the victims of violence. Children must never be the targets of violence or put in harm's way.

Mister President,

Turning to settlement-related developments, on 2 January, the Israeli Government informed the High Court of Justice that it intends to legalize – under Israeli law – the outpost of Homesh by repealing part of the 2005 Disengagement Law. Built on private Palestinian land, the outpost consists of a religious school and was previously a settlement that was demolished under the 2005 law. On the same day, the Court issued a decision giving the State 90 days to explain why the outpost should not be evacuated and the Palestinian rights holders not allowed to exercise their rights.

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

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned property remain a serious concern. During the reporting period, Israeli authorities demolished, seized or forced owners to demolish 126 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and seven in occupied East Jerusalem, displacing 127 Palestinians, including 60 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

We have also seen additional concerning developments in Jerusalem.

On 27 December, Israeli settlers accompanied by Israeli security forces forcibly took control of a parcel of agricultural land that a Palestinian family has leased from the Greek Orthodox Church since 1931 in the Silwan area of occupied East Jerusalem. Israeli forces arrested at least five Palestinians protesting the takeover. The settlers maintain that they purchased the land from the Greek Orthodox Church, a deal the church rejected as fraudulent.

On 1 January, in a despicable act, some 30 gravestones were desecrated at the Protestant Cemetery on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Jerusalem's Anglican Archbishop called it a "clear hate crime," while Israel's Foreign Ministry called it "an affront to religion." On 6 January, two Israelis, aged 14 and 18, were arrested for the act, and, according to a statement issued by Israeli Police following an investigation, a formal indictment is expected.

As outlined during our 5 January Council briefing, on 3 January, Israel's new Minister of National Security conducted a visit to the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. The visit was condemned by the Palestinian Authority and Jordanian officials, among others, who said it was a provocation and violation of the status quo. Following the visit, senior Israeli officials, including the Prime Minister's Office, reaffirmed that the Government is committed to upholding the status quo and stated that the visit did not represent a deviation from it.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's call for all parties to refrain from steps that could escalate tensions in and around the Holy Sites, and for all to uphold the status quo, in line with the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Mister President,

On 30 December 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled "Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem" containing a request to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for an advisory opinion relating to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.

In response, on 6 January, the Israeli security cabinet approved a series of measures against the Palestinian Authority, including the transfer of some USD 39 million in withheld tax revenues that Israel collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority to families of Israelis killed in Palestinian attacks. On 8 January, the Israeli Finance Minister instructed the Tax Authority to implement the withholding of Palestinian tax funds to pay these damages. I am seriously concerned about the impact of such measures on the PA's financial situation.

Also on 8 January, Israel's National Security Minister issued a directive to the Israeli police to increase enforcement of the removal of Palestinian flags from public spaces in Israel and occupied East Jerusalem.

On 16 January, a statement was issued with 39 Member States as signatories, reconfirming support for the ICJ, international law and multilateralism and noting deep concern regarding the Israeli Government's decision to impose punitive measures following the request by the General Assembly to the ICJ for an advisory opinion.

Mister President,

Turning to the Gaza Strip, the United Nations continued to deliver vital humanitarian and development assistance. I also continue to engage in diplomatic efforts to further ease restrictions on the movement of people and goods into and out of the Strip.

Despite these efforts, the socio-economic situation remains a grave concern, with access restrictions continuing to impact the delivery of assistance. Currently, some 300 staff of the UN and implementing partners have either been denied or not yet received a response to their permit applications.

The reporting period witnessed an increase of nearly 500 economic needs permits – to above 16,000 – while the number of trader and businessmen permits remained largely consistent.

On 30 December, Israel resumed the exit of fish from Gaza to the West Bank. I welcome the resolution of the issue and the lifting of the exit ban that had been in place since 7 November.

While continued progress in these areas is vital, humanitarian or economic support alone will resolve neither the situation in Gaza nor the broader conflict. Political solutions are required – there are no quick fixes.

The ultimate goal remains to fully lift the closures in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009) and reunite Gaza and the occupied West Bank under a single, legitimate Palestinian national authority, as an integral part of a two-State solution.

Mister President,

Turning briefly to the region, in the Golan, the ceasefire between Israel and Syria was generally maintained despite continued violations by both parties of the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement of Forces. It remains important for the parties to respect their obligations under the terms of the Agreement and prevent risks of escalation.

Lebanon remains without a president, and with a caretaker Government. Meanwhile, the situation along the Blue Line remains calm, without major incidents. The UN is following up with Lebanese authorities regarding the incident in December which resulted in the death of one UNIFIL peacekeeper and injuries to three others.

On 9-10 January, senior officials from Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States gathered in Abu Dhabi for the inaugural meeting of the Negev Forum Working Groups. During the gathering, the Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework was released, in

which participants affirmed, *inter alia*, that the regional relationships "can be harnessed to create momentum in Israeli-Palestinian relations, towards a negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Mister President,

At the end, today Israelis and Palestinians remain on a collision course amid escalating political and inflammatory rhetoric as well as heightened violence in the West Bank – both with potentially grave consequences.

Courageous political leadership is urgently required to generate the momentum necessary to transform the current dynamic. It is imperative that both sides refrain from provocations and unilateral steps – including at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem – that undermine stability and the ability to achieve a negotiated peace.

I reiterate my call from November for immediate concrete steps toward reversing negative trends on the ground, strengthening the Palestinian Authority, and improving access and movement for Palestinians, while ensuring the necessary space for Palestinian economic activity.

Absent a collective effort by all, with strong support from the international community, spoilers and extremists will continue to pour more fuel on the fire and we will move still further from a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting an end to the occupation and establishing a two-State solution, with an independent and sovereign Palestinian State based on the 1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States in line with UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.

I thank you, Mr. President.