

**MIROSLAV JENČA, ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL BRIEFING TO THE
SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

18 OCTOBER 2017

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Today's briefing is taking place as important developments unfold to end the more than ten-year long Palestinian divide and return Gaza to the full control of the legitimate Palestinian Authority.

Last month when Hamas dissolved the Administrative Committee, a parallel institution to run governmental affairs in Gaza, it agreed that the Palestinian Government of National Consensus should assume its responsibilities in the Strip.

President Abbas welcomed this crucial step, promising on 20 September at the UN General Assembly that the Government would soon visit Gaza.

The Secretary-General, the Middle East Quartet and several Member States expressed their firm support and encouraged the parties to build on the commendable efforts of Egypt to seize this positive momentum toward Palestinian unity.

On 2nd October, Prime Minister Hamdallah travelled to Gaza with a delegation of some 150 officials, including Ministers, key security agencies and heads of the energy and water authorities. On the following day, the Government held its first meeting in Gaza since 2014.

The United Nations has worked with the Palestinian leadership and the region in support of this process. Special Coordinator Mladenov travelled repeatedly between Ramallah, Gaza and the region in recent weeks to support the reconciliation effort and alleviate the humanitarian crisis. He also led a UN delegation during the Government visit and engaged with the Prime Minister, as well as all Palestinian political factions and civil society to ensure their support for the implementation of the understandings reached between Fatah and Hamas in Cairo on 17 September. These understandings included a three-step process to advance Palestinian unity: the return of

responsibilities in Gaza to the legitimate Palestinian Authority (PA); subsequent bilateral talks between Fatah and Hamas in Cairo, including on public sector employees, security and control of the border crossings; and consultations with all Palestinian factions.

On 12 October, with Egyptian mediation, Fatah and Hamas signed an agreement that enables the Palestinian government to resume its responsibilities in Gaza. According to its provisions, by 1st November, the Palestinian Authority should take control of the crossings of Gaza. Separately a joint committee will be formed to resolve the issue of public sector employees that should complete its work no later than 1st February 2018.

A statement released by Egypt further highlighted that the Government should assume its full responsibilities in the management of the Gaza Strip by 1 December 2017. It was further announced that Egypt has called for a meeting in Cairo on 21st November for all Palestinian factions.

The agreement does not contain any provisions related to elections, the formation of a national unity government, or the disarming of Hamas.

The Secretary-General has spoken to President Abbas and welcomed the signing of this intra-Palestinian agreement. Its timely implementation and concrete efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis will be critical for effectively empowering the Palestinian Government in Gaza. Its implementation should also facilitate the lifting of the closures, while addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns.

The agreement is an important step toward achieving the goal of Palestinian unity under a single, democratic Palestinian national authority on the basis of the PLO platform, the Quartet principles and the rule of law.

The United Nations will continue working with the Palestinian leadership and the region in support of this process, which is critical for reaching a negotiated two-state solution and sustainable peace.

Mr. President,

I would like to take a moment to discuss the acute severity of Gaza's humanitarian crisis and continuing human rights abuses.

In an urgent call to action, during his August visit to the region, the Secretary-General called it "one of the most dramatic humanitarian crises" he has ever seen. Since then, the conditions have only worsened.

For the sixth consecutive month, the two million people living in Gaza have received electricity for a mere four to six hours per day. The lack of energy has had a devastating impact on all aspects of their lives.

It continues to disrupt essential public services including health care, the water supply and sanitation systems. The equivalent of over 40 Olympic-size swimming pools of virtually raw sewage continues to flow daily into the Mediterranean Sea, leaving the whole shoreline contaminated.

Gaza is an unfolding environmental disaster that has no regard for borders.

The quality of health care inside the Strip is deteriorating at an alarming rate. Access to medical care outside Gaza has also become increasingly difficult.

As the Government returns to Gaza, it is critical that urgent measures are taken to reverse these trends.

Meanwhile in other worrying developments, on 26 September Hamas sentenced three men to death by hanging on the charge of murder, accessory to murder and burglary. There are serious doubts as to whether their trials and detention conditions in Gaza meet international standards. As in previous cases, if these executions were to be implemented, they would be done in violation of Palestinian law, which requires the approval of the President.

I urge Hamas not to carry out such executions and I, once again, call on President Abbas to establish a moratorium on the implementation of the death penalty.

Mr. President,

Turning to the broader situation on the ground over the past month violence has remained at low levels, compared to the rest of the region. Four Israelis were killed by a Palestinian attacker, who himself was shot, at the entrance of the Har Adar settlement on 26 September. It is deplorable that Hamas and others once again chose to glorify this attack.

The UN urges all to condemn violence and stand up to terror.

On 4 October, the body of an Israeli man from the settlement of Elkana was found in the Israeli-Arab village of Kafr Kassem with signs of extreme violence. Israeli authorities investigating the death arrested two Palestinians from the West Bank town of Qabatiyah in relation to the incident.

During the reporting period in total 80 Palestinians were injured by Israeli security forces, with five Israelis injured by Palestinians.

On 8 October, a rocket fired from Gaza toward Israel landed inside the Strip. No injuries or damage were reported. In response, the Israel Defense Forces shelled a Hamas post in central Gaza Strip, with no injuries reported.

Mr. President,

Turning to the question of settlements, on 17 and 18 October, the Israeli High Planning Committee met to advance plans for more than 2,000 housing units in Area C of the occupied West Bank. This includes units in the new settlement of Amihai and a new neighborhood in Kochav Yaacov, both designated for settlers evicted by court orders from illegal outposts. Separately, a tender was issued for 296 units in Beit El and building permits for 31 units were conditionally approved in Hebron. Reportedly, the Hebron Municipality is expected to appeal this decision, which would delay the implementation of the building permits.

This week, work began to prepare for the construction of infrastructure in Givat Hamatos, a settlement that, if built, would further disconnect East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank.

I remain concerned about proposed legislation that, if adopted, would expand Jerusalem's municipal jurisdiction by incorporating several West Bank settlements.

The UN reiterates that all settlement activities are illegal under international law and are an impediment to peace.

Mr. President,

2017 has seen a significant decrease in Area C demolitions as compared to the previous year. Against this background some 13 residential, livelihood and public structures in the West Bank and East Jerusalem were demolished in the past month. This brings the total of demolished structures for the year to over 350. Meanwhile the number of demolitions in East Jerusalem is quickly approaching 2016 levels, which were the highest number since 2000.

I am particularly disturbed by reported Israeli plans to evict specific communities, including Bedouin in Khan al Ahmar, adjacent to the E-1 area, and Susiya in the South Hebron Hills. Nearly all structures in Khan al Ahmar now have demolition orders. Many of the structures are donor funded, including a school that serves 170 children.

I urge Israel to cease the practice of demolitions, which has led to the displacement of thousands of people.

Mr. President,

Turning to Lebanon, the situation has remained generally quiet in the UNIFIL Area of Operations and along the Blue Line.

On the occasion of LAF Commander Aoun's visit to UNIFIL, on 22 September, the LAF formally announced the deployment of the 5th Rapid Intervention Regiment to the UNIFIL Area of Operations, fulfilling their earlier commitment to expand LAF's presence south of the Litani river.

The regiment has since deployed, and coordination of activities between UNIFIL and the regiment has commenced. On 19 September, HoM/FC Beary chaired a Tripartite meeting during which the parties discussed the UNIFIL mandate extension under resolution 2373, violations of Security Council Resolution 1701, Blue Line marking and ongoing liaison and coordination matters.

On the Golan, the ceasefire between the State of Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic has been maintained, albeit in a volatile environment attributable to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Both sides have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the full return of UNDOF to the area of separation, conditions permitting.

Mr. President,

In closing, I would like to emphasize that despite the overall negative trajectory that has characterized the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for far too long, there are reasons for cautious optimism.

This past month, thousands of Israeli and Palestinian women united in a two-week march for peace that brought forward participants of all ages and backgrounds. The yearning for peace amongst both peoples remains strong. These grass-roots initiatives by civil society are critical to building the foundation for peace and must be supported.

A key piece of the peace puzzle is to bring Gaza back under the control of the legitimate Palestinian Authority. The lack of Palestinian unity was identified in the July 2016 report of the Middle East Quartet as one of the main obstacles to achieving a two-state solution.

Current Palestinian efforts to return the Government to Gaza must be encouraged; they must be supported; and they must be successful. The parties have taken a crucial first step in this process. They have demonstrated a willingness to engage positively and in good faith. Yet overcoming their deeply entrenched differences will not be easy, it will take time, and there will be many hurdles to overcome along the way.

Success carries with it an enormous opportunity, just as failure carries with it great risks. Palestinians need to decide which path they will take. The international community must ensure that they are given every support and opportunity to reach a positive outcome, and we must ensure that work can move forward on ending the occupation and establishing a viable, sovereign Palestinian state that lives in peace and security with Israel.

Thank you.