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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE
EAST, REPORTING ON UNSCR 2334 (2016)

19 December 2023

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I am devoting my regular briefing on the situation in the Middle East to the twenty-eighth report on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016). The Secretary-General's written report covers the period between 19 September and 7 December 2023.

As the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza rages on, 2023 ends as one of the deadliest in the history of this conflict, with the situation deteriorating on nearly all fronts.

Mister President,

Since the end of the written reporting period, hostilities have continued inside Gaza as Israeli forces advanced further into Khan Younis in the southern part of the Strip and intensified operations in reported Hamas strongholds in the north, in Jabaliya refugee camp and Shujaiya neighborhood, as well as at the Kamal Adwan hospital. Intensive Israeli airstrikes continued across the Strip.

Over a thousand more fatalities – overwhelmingly Palestinian - have taken place. The toll on civilians, including women and children, remains unbearable.

With more than one hundred Israeli hostages still held by Hamas, the Israeli Army announced it had retrieved the bodies of three hostages, two from a tunnel in the Jabaliya refugee camp and one woman. On 15 December, the IDF said that Israeli soldiers had mistakenly shot and killed three hostages in Shujaiya.

Hamas and other militant factions have also continued to indiscriminately fire rockets at areas in southern and central Israel, including a barrage aimed at Jerusalem on 15 December.

The delivery of humanitarian aid in the Strip continues to face nearly insurmountable challenges. Amid displacement of an unimaginable scale and active hostilities, the humanitarian response system is on the brink. Limited steps by Israel, including allowing entry of more fuel, food and cooking gas, and opening Kerem Shalom/Karem abu Salem for the entry of humanitarian supplies, are positive, but fall far short of what is needed to address the human catastrophe on the ground.

The northern part of the Strip remains mostly inaccessible to humanitarian actors due to insecurity, as well as access restrictions imposed by Israel.

Mr. President,

In our focus on Gaza, let us not forget that our attention during the first nine months of the year was on a West Bank in crisis, with mounting pressures from settlement activity – which I note more than doubled to reach a new annual record since 2017 - settler violence, increased

Palestinian armed attacks, Israeli security forces operations, a rapidly deteriorating fiscal and economic situation, and a Palestinian Authority struggling to face these challenges. Most of these trends have continued and intensified.

On 8 December, Israeli forces killed six Palestinians, including a 14-year-old child and a local commander in the Fatah-affiliated Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, during an operation in Al Far'a Refugee Camp, which led to exchanges of fire with armed Palestinians.

Over 12-14 and 16-17 December, two large-scale Israeli operations took place in Jenin refugee camp and in Tulkarem, respectively. The operations included exchanges of fire with armed Palestinians, Israeli drone strikes, and search operations. In Tulkarem there was extensive infrastructure damage from IDF bulldozers. Seventeen Palestinians were killed and dozens were arrested.

The Palestinian Authority's fiscal situation continues to be extremely precarious amidst broader economic concerns across the West Bank. Some 150,000 Palestinian workers have been unable to reach their jobs since Israel imposed strict entry restrictions following the 7 October attacks.

Mister President,

I remain concerned about the wider impacts of the war in Gaza and the risk for escalation in the region.

Daily exchanges of fire across the Blue Line have continued with the risk of miscalculation and escalation posing a grave threat to regional stability. It is imperative that Lebanon not be dragged into a regional conflagration and that the parties return to a cessation of hostilities under the framework of resolution 1701 (2006).

Meanwhile, in the Red Sea, the Houthis in Yemen have targeted numerous vessels by boarding parties, as well as by armed drones and missiles. Strikes have damaged a number of ships, with others interdicted by U.S. and other naval forces in the area, raising concerns over the safety of shipping through this vital trade artery. Four major shipping companies have reportedly directed their vessels not to transit through the Red Sea; while Israel's Eilat port has reported an 80 per cent drop in revenues since attacks began.

Mister President,

I will now turn to several observations regarding the implementation of the provisions of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016) during the reporting period.

The violence that has been taking place since 7 October in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory - particularly in and around Gaza, has shaken the region, and most tragically, the lives of millions of Palestinians and Israelis.

I strongly condemn the abhorrent armed attacks by Hamas and others in Israel. Nothing can justify the acts of terror that were committed and the deliberate killing, maiming and abduction of civilians and other protected persons. Accounts of the attacks reveal acts of brutality that are impossible to accept or comprehend. I am appalled by the reports of sexual violence during the attacks; these must be vigorously investigated and prosecuted.

The indiscriminate firing of rockets towards Israeli population centers, which continues to this day, is a violation of international humanitarian law and must cease completely.

I welcome the release of 110 Israeli and foreign hostages and reiterate that all remaining hostages must be immediately and unconditionally released, in line with UNSCR 2712.

The magnitude of hostilities between Israel and Hamas and the scope of death and destruction in Gaza have been unprecedented and unbearable to witness. I unequivocally condemn the killing of civilians in Gaza –including women and children. I mourn the loss of every civilian, including 131 United Nations colleagues, the single largest loss of life in the history of the organization.

I remain gravely concerned by the impact of the ongoing hostilities on the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The current conditions are making it impossible for meaningful humanitarian operations to be conducted.

I am also deeply concerned by escalating tensions in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Intensified armed exchanges between Palestinians and Israeli security forces, predominantly in the context of Israeli operations, have led to exceedingly high levels of fatalities and arrests. I reiterate that security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when it is strictly unavoidable to protect life.

I am alarmed by the lethal attacks carried out by Israeli settlers against Palestinians and by Palestinians against Israelis in the occupied West Bank and Israel. All perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.

I am appalled at the numerous instances of officials glorifying violence and encouraging the killing of civilians. Such rhetoric is abhorrent and must be clearly rejected by leaders on all sides. Leaders have an obligation to clearly and explicitly condemn acts of terror and violence directed against civilians.

I remain deeply troubled by the relentless expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, that is impeding access by Palestinians to their land and resources, and threatening the viability of a future independent Palestinian State. I reiterate that Israeli settlements constitute a flagrant violation of United Nations resolutions and international law and call on the Government of Israel to cease the advancement of all settlement activity immediately.

Mr. President,

This war has, once again, served as a devastating and tragic reminder that there is no substitute for a legitimate political process that will resolve the core issues driving the conflict. It is critical at this important junction to enable the parties to re-engage on the long-delayed political path to a two-State solution. I urge Israelis, Palestinians, the States of the region and the broader international community to work together towards this goal. The UN efforts to support this objective has already begun through active consultations in the region. Our work must continue.

The United Nations remains committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis in ending the occupation and resolving the conflict in line with international law, relevant United Nations resolutions and bilateral agreements in pursuit of two States – Israel and an independent, democratic, viable and sovereign Palestinian State, of which Gaza is an integral part – living side by side in peace and security within secure and recognized borders, on the basis of the 1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.